

Petr Kouba
A View from the Outside

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Prague, December 2023

Note on the Text

Besides new texts this volume contains revised, supplemented, or translated studies that have originally appeared in the following journals and/or collective monographs: *Litteraria Pragensia*, *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, *Phainomena*, *Open Theology*, *Philosophical Journal* [Filosofický časopis].

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Introduction

The primary task of social ontology is to answer the following questions: Who are we as social beings? How do we interact with others? What brings us together? And how do we maintain social cohesion of our communities?

What the studies collected in this book have in common is a belief that we can't recognise ourselves from the inside by some form of social introspection. Rather, in order to realise who we are, we need to view ourselves from the outside. If there is a phenomenological approach to society, it involves an exocentric rather than endocentric view of ourselves.

An endocentric view of ourselves unreflectively leads us to take ourselves for the model of humanity, seeing everything foreign as a deviation from the humanity that we represent. A nation, a church, a social class, a culture, or a gender have a natural tendency to identify themselves with the model of all humanity and to consider everything external as not quite human. After getting mugged on the street by a member of our own ethnicity, we think to ourselves, "people are terrible". After getting mugged by a member of an ethnic minority, we take it as an acknowledgement of how much that minority as a whole falls short of the parameters of humanity. Our own humanity.

The exocentric view, on the contrary, allows us to escape this trap of blindness and stereotypical thinking. It allows us to overcome the illusion of ourselves as representatives of humanity and in turn allows us to view ourselves in our own non-self-evidence. It does not mean giving up ourselves, but looking at ourselves from the outside, with a critical distance that allows us to escape our own captivity. It is a gaze through which we both learn about ourselves and liberate ourselves to new, previously unsuspected possibilities.

The exocentric view works with the differentiation between inside and outside. It crosses this boundary to return again to the inside, which is thereby both recognised and transformed. Only this way can we arrive at a social cohesion that does not mean being trapped in our own collective identity. Only thusly can we create a social bond that is not a chain, one that leaves room for the discovery of new possibilities in that it is always already

open to the outside. Without an exocentric view of ourselves, we remain hopelessly blind to ourselves, but all the more filled with fear of the unknown outside and hatred of everything foreign. Without an exocentric view, our social cohesion will be forever contaminated by an allergy to everything strange. It will be fragile, but all the more rigid.

However, what makes such an exocentric view of ourselves possible is a construction of the outside that allows us to keep a distance from ourselves. The essays collected in this book attempt to demonstrate the various forms of the outside and to examine their efficiency: there are strangers, terrestrial or cosmic voyagers, there are women and other sexual minorities in a patriarchal society, there is boredom and silent insomnia that expel us from the world, there is sacrifice as the ultimate renunciation of life, there is love as capacity for nonviolence and self-sacrifice, and finally there is the event as an outside to all political projects. All these forms of the outside enable and fuel social criticism that uncovers phenomena that remain invisible under normal circumstances. It is a way of thinking about culture and society that highlights such themes as boundaries, cultural differences, and social changes, which can be constructive or destructive, liberating as well as oppressing. All of these themes are addressed in the following texts, which in their diversity are linked and unified by a phenomenological view of social reality. It is a phenomenology of viewing society as it appears in its ever-changing present.

A View from the Outside

There are books that are born of the rigour of thought. There are books that are born out of anger at the injustice of the world. Then there are books that are born of laughter, in which we experience the otherness of others and the non-self-evidence of our own existence. Such laughter echoes at the beginning of Foucault's famous book *Les mots et les choses*, where Western thought meets its limit and its negation in the form of "a certain Chinese encyclopaedia". It is the "exotic charm of a certain thinking" that provokes irresistible laughter.

But a similar laughter is heard at the very beginning of the French Enlightenment when Montesquieu publishes his *Lettres persanes* in 1721. In the figures of the Persian travellers, Western rationality encounters its exterior not to be absorbed by its exoticism, but to better understand itself. It might seem that this is just a subtle strategy to avoid the pitfalls of censorship through the characters of foreigners "full of ignorance and prejudice". However, the contrast "between the real things and the strange, new, and weird way in which they were perceived" has a far greater effect. It is not only a question of getting around dogmas which foreigners find strange but of seeing the links between these dogmas and other truths of European civilisation. It is no coincidence that Persian travellers were, in Montesquieu's opinion, more familiar with the customs and manners of the French than many Germans or Spaniards. For a distant view makes visible what, when seen at close quarters, hides under the cloak of the obvious. Such a view not only reveals, but also frees one from prejudices and mental stereotypes. Laughter allows us to understand better and at the same time to free ourselves from what unnecessarily limits us.

In this sense, the ethos of *Lettres persanes* coincides with the ethos that Foucault associates with the so-called ontology of presence. Foucault attributes the discovery of the ontology of presence to Kant, who in his famous article "Was heißt die Aufklärung?" sets out the programme of the Enlightenment while asking how its own present differs from the past. However, the questioning of the nature of the present and those who experience it can be found a good 60 years before Kant wrote down the project of the

Enlightenment as the task of his present. With all due respect to Foucault's authority, an ontology of the present can already be seen in the *Persian Letters* and on a scale far beyond Kant's imagination.

However, the question remains how Montesquieu could have managed such a comprehensive capture of his own presence. What are the necessary conditions for an ontology of presence to become possible? Such a questioning does not lead us to the task of elaborating a new history of ideas. Rather than a historical study of the French Enlightenment, what is at stake here is a particular phenomenology of the gaze that Western society fixes on itself in order to know itself and at the same time to transcend its own limits. It is a phenomenology of looking at society that reveals but also emancipates. What can be tentatively stated is the specific topology of such a gaze. It is not an endocentric gaze; it is not about cultural introspection. Rather, it is an exocentric view, where Western culture arrives at itself from its outside. In this way, Montesquieu elaborates a unique ontology of presence through the figures of strangers and women. The importance of such an ontology of presence is fully appreciated when we realise that the possibility of critical knowledge of ourselves lies at the heart of an ethnological view of society. Montesquieu may thus emerge as the forerunner of modern ethnology.

Foundations of ethnology

But let us repeat the question: Where does ethnology and its functionalism come from? What are its epistemological conditions of possibility? Ernest Gellner in his book *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowsky and Habsburk Dilemma* for instance claims that a basic source of inspiration for Malinowsky was the German Romanticism.¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his *Anthropologie structurale*, goes a bit further when asserting that the forefather and precursor of ethnology was Jean Jacques Rousseau.²

Yet, it may be necessary to take one more step back in the history and to go to the work of Charles de Montesquieu. His major work is certainly the famous treatise *De l'esprit des lois*, in which he understands laws in the most general sense of the term as the necessary relations that follow from

¹ Ernest Gellner, *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburk Dilemma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologie structurale II* (Paris: Plon, 1973).

the nature of things.³ Accordingly, everything has its laws: there are physical laws, biological laws, human laws, and so on. As for humans, they have not only natural but also positive laws. While natural laws are: 1) relation to the Creator, 2) feeling of one's own weakness and inferiority, 3) the need to satisfy the bodily needs, i.e. to quench hunger and thirst, 4) the need to live in community, the positive laws are projected by the human intellect. One can say that the human existence as such is in Montesquieu defined by its capacity to exceed the natural laws and to create new laws with the help of reason. These new laws, however, should never be in contradiction with the natural conditions of human life, i.e. they must correspond not only to the nature of human existence, but also to the given geographical and climatic conditions, as well as to the historical and religious traditions of the given community.

We could express it in the language of Heideggerian existential analysis and say that the projecting of laws must be in agreement with the facticity of life. The projecting of laws must never go against the reality of life. The rational projecting of laws must never be separated from the factual conditions of human life. If this happens, Montesquieu speaks about a 'tyranny'. In this respect, we must therefore differentiate two types of tyranny: the first one is the despotism in the common sense of the term, while the other appears in any situation where the "existentiality" of laws is disconnected from the "facticity" of life. Such a notion of tyranny can then serve as a perfect critical instrument not only in relation to the colonial practices but also in relation to the totalitarian regimes. For both colonial, and totalitarian regimes try to enforce new laws without any respect for the local conditions of life. The totalitarian state creates a project of a brand new society, where all old traditions and social bonds are rejected, while the colonial regime implements laws and habits in a country that does not have suitable conditions for them. To give an example of such tyranny, we can recall Woody Allen's film *Bananas* where the main character, played by Allen himself, joins the rebel group in a South American republic. When their *coup d'état*, to their own surprise, succeeds and they suddenly get the power, their leader

³ Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, eds. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, 1989). Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois I, II* (Paris: Garnier, 1973).

goes crazy and starts to announce strange edicts, the first of which is that the official language in this South American republic, will be Swedish.

Nevertheless, already such a notion of tyranny can point to the basic dangers that are hidden in the heart of the Enlightenment, which is analysed and criticised by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.⁴ The problem with the Enlightenment is that the call for the autonomous use of reason and for the universality of its laws appears more and more as a way to the establishment of totalitarian regimes and to the enforcement of the same laws across the whole World without any respect for life conditions and traditions of local communities.

However, if *De l'esprit des lois* uncovers a shady side of the Enlightenment, then another Montesquieu work shows how we can evade the inner traps of the Enlightenment. The work we have in mind is, certainly, *Lettres persannes*. Here we find an example of critical thought that is not based on the call for the autonomy of reason and universality of its laws. Quite to the contrary, it is the thought that programmatically accepts its own heteronomy and contingency as a *modus operandi*. This is why we can read *Lettres persannes* as an expression of certain underlying stream of the Enlightenment – let us not forget that Montesquieu was the first from the great French philosophers of the Enlightenment – which can function as an inner corrective of the prevailing tendencies of the Age of Reason. The heteronomy of reason and the contingency of its laws are placed here against the autonomy of reason and the universality of its laws. Yet, how does such a heteronomous and contingent thought operate in *Lettres persannes*? It is based on the confrontation of the French society and culture of the beginning of the 18th century with the view of the Persian voyagers who come to France. It is precisely the view of the Persians who are not familiar with the French society and therefore are necessarily surprised by its laws, morals and habits, what reveals these laws, morals and habits, how could they never appear, if they were observed from the inside of the French social milieu. What is offered here is the view from the outside, the view of a stranger who with a great astonishment observes things that are absolutely normal and self-evident for the members of the given community. This narrative strategy therefore opens a possibility of social, political and cultural critique that can do without proclaimed pretensions to the autonomy of reason and uni-

⁴Theodor, W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Mein: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969).

versality of its laws, and despite this, or rather because of this is capable of very incisive comments and penetrating insights.

As an illustration, we can use one passage that makes an impression, as if it were cut out from Foucault's *Histoire de la folie*:⁵

There is a house here where they place mad people: one would at first expect it to be the largest in the city; but no, the remedy is much too insignificant for the disease. Without a doubt, the French, being held in very slight esteem by their neighbours, shut up some madmen in this house, to create the impression that those who are at large are sane.⁶

In a similar way, the French society and its institutions, various social classes, and their manners are criticised. The same goes for the state capitalism or colonialism, which is criticised not only because of the cruelty of the conquerors (the horrors of the Spanish *conquista* are explicitly denounced here), but also because it exhausts the colonising states themselves, rather than making them stronger.⁷ However, it is obvious that the application of the strategy based on the figures of the Persian voyagers hides in itself a trick: Montesquieu himself certainly cannot become a Persian (his actual knowledge of the Persian culture is based on a few exotic travelogues) and radically escape from the context of the French culture. Rather, he maintains a position at the boarder between the French and Persian culture, and from the perspective of this cultural difference he criticises his own culture, its laws and customs. This strategy, however, allows him to keep a distance from his own cultural environment and at least partially escape from its constraints. With the help of the fictive outsiders, he takes the French culture out of its context, and it is this decontextualisation what makes his critique so sharp. The cultural, political, and social critique in *Lettres Persanes* operates through the decontextualisation of cultural contents and social functions.

However, it appears that such critical strategy is quite novel in the history of European thought. Surely, Montesquieu was not the first one in modern history who came with such an idea (already before him such a strategy was used by Addison in his *The Spectator*, or Marana in his *L'Esploratore turco*, where they described the European society from the per-

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

⁶ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. John Davidson (London: Gibbings & Copany, 1899) letter 78. Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964).

⁷ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, letter 121.

spective of exotic foreigners), but he was certainly the first one who achieved great literary success with such a strategy. However, the radicalism of this narrative technique becomes the most apparent, when we realise how unnatural it is to look at one's own culture from the perspective of a stranger. Yet, *Lettres persannes* offers precisely such a view and in this sense they bring a novelty which has no parallel in the ancient history. This novelty then appears in full light just at the beginning of the epoch we call the Enlightenment. Thus, we can conclude that the epistemological conditions enabling the birth of the ethnological approach to social reality are prepared right in this period and in this literary strategy. For, the ethnological point of view is not given simply by an interest in exotic cultures – this would not have to transgress the horizon of one's own culture, as Edward Said clearly demonstrates it in his *Orientalism*.⁸ Ethnology, so it seems to us, becomes possible only when we are able to exceed our own cultural horizon and regard ourselves, our way of life, and our cultural codes from the perspective of the outside, without identifying ourselves with this outside. Only in this particular decontextualisation of our existence is a specifically ethnological field of research opened, and the ethnological fieldwork is enabled.

The situation of Montesquieu's Persians appears in fact similar to the situation of an ethnologist, who leaves his own cultural environment in order to expose himself to the influence of a different culture. Besides other moments, the similarity remains also in the fact that when leaving his/her own world, the ethnologist loses his/her home, which must be then again created. When the Persian Usbek, during his stay in France, realises that his home is in ruins, for his serial has because of his absence fallen into chaos, he makes a similar experience like Paul Rabinow, who describes his ethnological experience in *Reflections on the Fieldwork in Morocco*.⁹ At the end of his ethnological exploration, Rabinow becomes aware that after many years spent in Morocco he has no place to return, for the situation in the USA has in the meantime changed so much that he cannot feel there at home. Upon returning to the United States, he feels rather like a stranger who comes to a foreign country. In other words, his home has not outlasted his deterritorialisation; it was destroyed and must be created in the process of reterritori-

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

⁹ Paul Rabinow, *Reflexions on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

alisation. If deterritorialisation destroys the original semantic context of existence and shatters the familiar context of possibilities by erasing the difference between possible and impossible, then we may say that ethnological research requires a radical deterritorialisation, in which an ethnological terrain is uncovered, no matter whether it concerns a foreign or one's own culture.

We can, however, progress a bit further and move from the cultural differences to the sexual difference. In *Lettres persanes*, we find a critique of despotic society which enslaves women, in order to preserve its rigid social order. Since women are, according to Montesquieu, a dynamising social factor, despotic society must necessarily prevent them from the social life and keep them in the position of slaves. It can be said that women's freedom is an indicator of the freedom of the whole society. However, Montesquieu's questioning of the rule of men over women does not stop at criticising a despotic society. This questioning goes much further, for it concerns the very principle of male domination over women. In Letter 36, Montesquieu quotes a "gallant philosopher" who argues that male domination of women is against the laws of nature. According to him, women should not be subordinate to men because:

'Nature has never proclaimed such a law; the dominion we hold over them is a veritable tyranny; they only allowed us to establish it because they are much gentler than we are, and consequently more humane and more rational; these advantages, which doubtless should have established their supremacy, had we been rational, caused them to lose that position, because we are not.' Now, if it's true that our power over women is purely tyrannical, it's no less true that women possess a natural advantage over us, that of beauty, which nothing can resist. The power we Persians enjoy does not exist in every country, whereas the power of beauty is universal: therefore why should we be privileged? Is it because we are the stronger sex? But this is a genuine injustice; we employ every kind of resource to break down their courage, but the balance between the sexes would be equal, were women's education equal to ours: let us challenge them in those talents which their education has not impaired, and we shall see if we're so strong.¹⁰

In this beautifully ironic passage we find all the great themes of the Enlightenment (natural law, humanity, rationality, freedom, equality, justice, rejec-

¹⁰ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, letter 36.