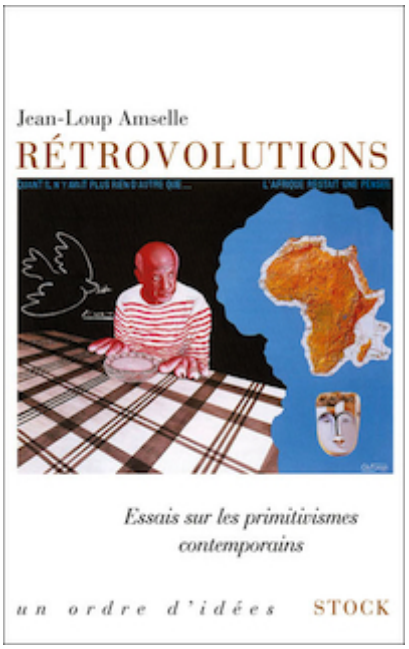
Against culturalism.

Jean-Loup Amselle, Rétrovolutions. Essais sur les primitivismes contemporains, 2010.

Par Pál Nyíri



This new collection of eminent French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle's essays, along with the Comaroffs' *Ethnicity, Inc*., Peter Geschiere's *The Perils of Belonging*, and *Seeing Culture Everywhere* by Joana Breidenbach and this reviewer, fits in a recent surge of books polemicizing against the worldwide tendency to explain almost anything, from genocide to consumer behaviour, through ethnoracially based cultural labelling. It is as though anthropologists are finally striking back against what they see as a dangerous usurpation of the culture concept: in Amselle's own words, the "hateful" label of "world cultures" (p. 229). Hateful because, as he explains, it "locks the individual in a collective 'we,' in a sort of identity prison" (*ibid*.).

Throughout the book, "primitivism" is something of a floating signifier. Mostly, it refers either to group-based identitarianism or to the exotisation of the "authentic:" phenomena that are related but not identical. On some occasions, this makes for conceptual confusion. Amselle gives both "world music" or "world art" and postcolonial theory short shrift, yet by far not all varieties of these are guilty of identitarian labelling. As it becomes clear in the *Conclusion*, what Amselle rejects is ultimately any intellectual construct that reifies the opposition between the West and a non-Western periphery, between a premodern past and a modern present, or between the local and

the global (on this account, he sounds like Frederick Cooper). Even readers sympathetic with this approach may find the conflation of diverse intellectual, political and market phenomena less than satisfactory and the dismissal of postcolonial studies *tout court* as guilty of ahistoricism and an obsession with “native” spokespeople unfair. It is an intriguing idea that Clint Eastwood in *Gran Torino* and Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincialising Europe* may be two facets of the same trend, but one wishes that this conjecture were properly explained.

The essays are divided into three parts, dealing respectively with what he calls political, anthropological, and artistic primitivisms. Most are revised from earlier publications, ranging from the 1970s to the 2000s. This provides a historical perspective — the “primitivisms” seem to have been there all along — but also makes for a certain repetitiveness as Amselle updates each essay in light of more recent French politics (notably President Chirac’s Quai Branly Museum and a speech made by President Sarkozy in Dakar). Some of the shorter articles, initially published in newspapers, are hard to follow without a detailed knowledge of French political debates. Even so, in attempting to trace the intellectual and political trajectories of primitivisms in a specifically French — or Francophone — context, which appears to be one of Amselle’s goals, it may have been a better choice to leave the texts in their original form, as testimony to the debates to which they contributed at the time.

Amselle is an Africanist, and his focus is largely on the politics of representation within the France-Francophone Africa nexus. The first part of the book thus deals with the French politics of ethnicity. Although it addresses various forms of resurgent “primitivisms” on the French Right, Amselle traces their origins to 1968 and the subsequent inability of the “Left and the Extreme Left” (he insists on this composite term) to deal with religious and ethnic difference in historical terms as well as their “wrong use of universalism” (p. 23). It is the “spiritual, libertarian, primitivist and ecological revolution” undergone by the post-1968 left and its rejection of historical materialism — a rejection Amselle associates with the French Maoists and their fascination with the Cultural Revolution — that he calls a “retrovolution” (*ibid*.) The ’68 generation was instrumental, Amselle writes, in turning the backward country bumpkin of the 1950s into the proud carrier of Occitan or Breton culture by the 1970s, prefiguring or accompanying similar reinscriptions of more exotic subjects. He points out that the “bad universalists” of today, including former foreign minister Bernard Kouchner and Sarkozy mentor Bernard-Henri Lévy, are the Maoists of yesterday. But while Amselle rejects the way in which Kouchner and Lévy “impose” their idea of human rights on the world, he is no more satisfied with the cultural relativists whom he sees as having no room for the commonalities of humans around the world. He defends the French republican tradition of strict secularism and blindness to ethnicity and rejects all attempts to identify groups or to

measure their mixing.

The second part of the book deals with anthropology. Amselle sees the anthropological method as being particularly appropriate to a historical materialist approach and thus as having an advantage over sociology, in which leftist thought carries too much of a neopositivist and "theoreticist" burden. He accuses anthropologists, like politicians, of being unable to face fully the historicity of their subjects as against the traditions of both anthropology itself and the other social sciences. He is concerned with what he sees as the culturalisation of anthropology itself — the distinction, in essence, of "native" anthropologies from metropolitan ones — with anthropologists' excessive identification with "the tattooed prisoner" who has, in his view, replaced the "feather-clad savage of the years 1930-1960" (p. 112) and with indigenous activism (so perhaps the prisoner has not replaced the savage after all). (Again, these criticisms of different orders are insufficiently differentiated).

Amselle's criticism of indigenism covers familiar ground, but he does not engage with English-language authors such as Adam Kuper or André Béteille. Instead, he provides a squarely French perspective, pointing his finger at Alfred Métraux and Claude Lévi-Strauss for popularising inside Unesco a view of cultures as isolated and fixed entities to be defended. While Amselle acknowledges that the emergence of "indigenous peoples" as political subjects has ruptured certain traditional forms of domination and forced anthropologists to reflect on their responsibility to situate their knowledge in the context of struggles for self-determination and dignity, his conclusion is unambiguous. Marxism, Amselle writes (without even bothering with "scare quotes"), is the enemy of the savage, who, in his tropical rainforest, knows that "the air-conditioned nightmare is better than having no air conditioning" (p. 123).

The second part also accommodates two essays that are in some ways an uneasy fit: a review of the 1970s debate about the work of Colin Turnbull romanticising Congolese hunter-gatherers and denouncing their sedentarization — a strange choice considering that the book devotes little attention to more recent developments in Anglophone anthropology — and an interesting review of Foucault's *Il faut défendre la société*, in which a largely appreciative Amselle suggests that Foucault may have overestimated the discontinuity between older forms of "disciplinary power" and contemporary "biopower".

For this reviewer, the third and shortest part of the book, devoted to "artistic primitivisms," holds the most interest. The first essay here is a critical review of the Musée du Quai Branly, Jacques Chirac's pet "world art" project, which Amselle reads as a reflection of the collapse of universalistic narratives. The Mqb, for Amselle, is the Museum of the Other, marked by the

absence of both Western art and the historical contexts in which the African, American or Oceanian art displayed was produced and acquired. And though its curators mount exhibitions — for example, on the Tarzan myth — that take a “critical and amused distance” from the main exhibit, this, to Amselle, does not redeem them: on the contrary, it puts them on the “perilous path” of ethnic merchandising. The remaining essays of the book discuss the global politics of African art and literature, which Amselle sees as an extension of clashing Anglo-American and French conceptions of, respectively a hybridised “world art/world literature” and Francophony.

The brief concluding question begins with the rhetorical question: is it wise for an anthropologist to attack so relentlessly the use of the concept of culture upon which, after all, his authority rests? If group cultural differences have so little purchase in explaining what happens around the world, then what does anthropology have to offer? Amselle’s answer is that the job of anthropologists is to critique, not only the West’s gaze on the non-West, but in general any kind of external, objectifying gaze. It is as a practice of domination in general, rather than one of the West over the non-West in general, that anthropology should be held to account. What is therefore needed is the development of “non-invasive, paritarian knowledges” that do not a priori locate their object within any group. This conclusion is rather surprising, not only because of its tentativeness compared to the stridency of the book itself, but because it sounds so much like an endorsement of the “compassionate turn” in anthropology that Amselle roundly criticises for amounting to giving up its analytical independence.

Jean-Loup Amselle, *Rétrovolutions. Essais sur les primitivismes contemporains*, Paris, Stock, 2010.