

# From Kandiaronk to the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of the Indigenous Critique of Europe.

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In 1703 Louis Armand de Lom de'Arce, Baron de Lahontan published volumes 1 and 2 of his memoir *New Voyages to North America*<sup>1</sup>. These memoirs chronicle not only Lahontans' experience with the powerful Wyandot nation Chief and Orator, Kandiaronk, they articulate the distinct critiques propounded against the French ideals and the political mastery of Kandiaronk. The result of these volumes has become known as the "Indigenous Critique" and describes the success of Kandiaronks' desire to keep the Haudenosaunee and the English in a constant state of war with the French on the North American front thereby keeping his people, the Wyandot, as a peace keeping nation between the three powers; hoping to secure a peaceful and prosperous existence for his people.<sup>2</sup> Although Kandiaronk has been widely dismissed as a convenient character for Lahontans own thoughts, which itself is based in the absurd belief that Indigenous leaders were unable to comprehend European politics and beliefs or have their own philosophies, the long ranging effects of Kandiaronks critiques and political chess game would lay the necessary ground work to start an intellectual movement and conflict a continent away. The work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau during the Enlightenment period and the French Revolution being the movement and conflict in question.

To begin to understand the impact Kandiaronk had on his French and English counterparts we must first understand his critique of monarchical societies and thereby explaining his world view upon which he executed his political and oratory ascendancy.

Lahontan articulates in *Volume 2 of New Voyages to North America* the Indigenous worldview which, as we will come to know, is orated by Kandiaronk.

They scoff at the arts and sciences and laugh at the different degrees which is observed with us. They brand us for slaves and call us miserable souls, a whole life is not worth having, alleging that we degrade ourselves in the subjecting ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> Baron de Lahontan, "New Voyages to North-America v.2.," HathiTrust, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071156965&seq=28>.

<sup>2</sup> David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York, NY: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 100.

to one man who possesses the power and is bound to no law but his own will. That we continue to jar among ourselves; that our children rebel against their parents, that we imprison one another, and publicly promote our own destruction.<sup>3</sup>

The critique provided by Kandiaronk is an astute observation as to why monarchies in Europe were in the early stages of collapse. The history of the colonised world is often portrayed as European settlers making decisions while Indigenous peoples simply rolled over and allowed colonialization to take over. This cannot be farther from the truth of what took place in North America during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In order to understand the profound effect Kandiaronk and other Indigenous leaders had on the French Revolution it is crucial to begin to re-spatialize and re-evaluate the history as it has been kept.

The concept of “respatialization” as a spatial (geographic) notion as well as a conceptual re-engagement that takes as its point of departure a region little considered by scholars of the French Revolution: Indian Country. As this chapter argues, respatialization offers the potential to move boundaries, literally and figuratively, and allows us to make space for history.<sup>4</sup>

The history that has been kept and accepted as truth about Kandiaronk is told from the French perspective, one that refuses to understand or acknowledge the Iroquoian laws and government structures that the Wendat peoples would have followed. As per the French narrative Kandiaronk and his people were mere lackeys used in their political gain and eventually viewed as treacherous and hostile when it became clear that Kandiaronk was indeed not a pawn in the French chess game but rather was playing his own game. Barbara Mann goes so far as to call this argument “silly”.<sup>5</sup> The allyship between the French leaders and Kandiaronk and thereby the Wyandot, is often overstated.

The accounts of what followed rely on French sources, which tend to be biased, confused, and not a little interested in spin-doctoring the unscrupulous behavior of the French. Using such sources without assessing their credibility, western historians from Pierre de Charlevoix in the eighteenth and Francis Parkman in the nineteenth

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<sup>3</sup> 1. Baron de Lahontan, “New Voyages to North-America v.2.,” HathiTrust, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071156965&seq=29>.

<sup>4</sup> 1. Christian Ayne Crouch, “5. The French Revolution in Indian Country: Reconsidering the Reach and Place of Atlantic Upheaval,” De Gruyter, September 23, 2019, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110619775-005/html>.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Mann, “Native American Speakers of the Eastern Woodlands Selected Speeches and Critical Analyses” (Contributions to the Study of Mass. (Barbara Alice Mann) (z-Lib.Org).Pdf,” Earthen File Server, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://files.earthen.io/s/KntMR82BeW8MwSi>, 44.

to William Eccles in the twentieth century have cast Kandiaronk's actions during this siege as the epitome of redskin treachery. Their unexamined assumption remained the same as Denonville's, that Kandiaronk was a lackey of the French who turned loose cannon, betraying New France.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the accepted narrative of Kandiaronk and all his Indigenous counterparts the argument that an Indigenous thinker could have an intellectual impact that helps carry the French Revolution through its inception to its Bonaparte years, via the 18<sup>th</sup> century thought leader Jean-Jacques Rousseau, seems ludicrous.<sup>7</sup> The task then is to evaluate the extent to which Rousseau was influenced by Kandiaronk via Lahontans' work as well as the impact that the visitation of the Osage Chiefs to France had on the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher.<sup>8</sup>

In 1725 Commandant of Missouri Entienne Veniard Bourgmont left to return to France with several Osage and Missouri Indigenous Peoples with him. This visitation and a later visitation created a swell of curiosity in France, particularly in the salon crowds of intellectuals.<sup>9</sup> The Osage people and the French have had contact since at least the 1600s.<sup>10</sup> Because of European encroachment the Osage people were pushed into constant conflict with the powerful Haudenosaunee and fought alongside the Illinois, ally to the Wendat, against Haudenosaunee expansion. This constant contact led to similar government structures and European critiques between the Osage and the Iroquoian speaking nations that surrounded them.<sup>11</sup> The French used the Osage visit to France as an opportunity to convince the French public that the colony project was successful and to rectify the political and cultural identity crisis that the French was experiencing. They did not, however, expect the public to be so unmoved about the colony effort and enamoured by the intelligence and thoughtfulness of the Osage Chiefs.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the play *Les Indes Galantes* by Rameau. The opera has a central character, a Chief named Adario – the very

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Mann, "Native American Speakers of the Eastern Woodlands Selected Speeches and Critical Analyses, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon H McNeil, "The Cult of Rousseau and the French Revolution," JSTOR, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2707363>, 210.

<sup>8</sup> Louis F Burns, "Relationships with Euro-Americans," essay, in *A History of the Osage People* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Louis F Burns, "Relationships with Euro-Americans," essay, in *A History of the Osage People*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Louis F Burns, "Relationships with Euro-Americans," essay, in *A History of the Osage People*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> Louis F Burns, "Relationships with Euro-Americans," essay, in *A History of the Osage People*, 95-99.

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Capmartin, "A Strange Embassy: Five Native Americans at the Court of Louis XV (Recipient of the S. Eric Molin Prize for Best Paper by a Student, EC-ASECS 2016)," EC-ASECS, April 5, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/38722739/A\\_Strange\\_Embassy\\_Five\\_Native\\_Americans\\_at\\_the\\_Court\\_of\\_Louis\\_XV\\_Recipient\\_of\\_the\\_S\\_Eric\\_Molin\\_Prize\\_for\\_Best\\_Paper\\_by\\_a\\_Student\\_EC\\_ASECS\\_2016\\_](https://www.academia.edu/38722739/A_Strange_Embassy_Five_Native_Americans_at_the_Court_of_Louis_XV_Recipient_of_the_S_Eric_Molin_Prize_for_Best_Paper_by_a_Student_EC_ASECS_2016_).

name given to Kandiaronk in Lahontons' *New Voyages to North America*. Lahontans' dialogues were published twenty years prior to the visit of the Osage Chiefs already having penetrated the minds and considerations of Frances literate and elite thinkers. The name Adario means a great and noble friend and was not a commonly used named in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century thereby making it very unlikely that Rameau, and the French intellectual community, was not under the influence of Lahontans' work.<sup>13</sup> As shown, the Indigenous Critique was weighing heavily throughout France during the most formative years of young Rousseaus' life. Further, during the 1725 visit of the Osage Chiefs to France, Voltaire, a close friend of Rousseau at this time, met with the Osage Chiefs to postulate on the differences between the two cultures and political atmospheres.<sup>14</sup>

Considering that none of the above is concrete evidence that Rousseau was in fact influenced by Kandiaronks' critique it is imperative to compare the critiques put forward by both philosophers. To begin, Kandiaronk and Rousseau both held that the ideals of science and arts are a means that devolves human behaviour and advancement and rather allows authoritative governments to control the population. This is clear when Kandiaronk states:

It must only be learned men that fall in to such disorders and upon that foot I hope you'll find that one had better be a Huron than a Science-Hunter...I am convinced that Brain-Work enfeebles the body extremely and I have often wondered how your constitution comes to be so strong as to keep up against the violent shocks of discontent and fret that you feel when things cross you.<sup>15</sup>

Rousseaus' own thoughts on the matter are strikingly similar as he says in *Discourses on the Sciences and Arts*:

The mind has its needs, as does the body. The needs of the body constitute the foundation of society, those of the mind its ornamentation. While government and law provide for the security and well-being of people in their collective life, the sciences, letters, and arts—less despotic though perhaps more powerful—wrap garlands of flowers around the chains that weigh people down. They stifle the sense of freedom that people once had and for which they sensed that they were born, making them love their own servitude, and turning them into what is called a

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<sup>13</sup> Sophie Capmartin, "A Strange Embassy: Five Native Americans at the Court of Louis XV,"

<sup>14</sup> Sophie Capmartin, *Dissonant sauvages: Representations of louisiana natives in*, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane:122487/datastream/PDF/view, 1>.

<sup>15</sup> Lahontan, "New Voyages to North-America v.2.," 218.

civilized people. Need erected thrones; the sciences and arts consolidated them. Let the Powers that rule the earth cherish all talents and protect those who practice them!<sup>16</sup>

This comparison is vital because in the Enlightenment era scientific, artistic, and social normative behaviour was rapidly progressing without asking the question “what **should** we do?” rather the question was “what **can** we do?” with the exemption of Rousseau who, much like Kandiaronk, was actively speaking against growth for the sake of growth.<sup>17</sup>

Another remarkable similarity that can be found between Rousseau and Kandiaronk outlines how the two philosophers are able to pull back the veil that surrounds French “civility”.

Kandiaronk:

My voyage to Paris, I might have been blinded by the outward appearances of felicity that you set forth. But I know that your Prince, your Duke, your Marshal and your Prelate are far from being happy upon comparison with the Hurons, who know no other happiness than that of Liberty and Tranquility of Mind, for your great Lords hate each other in their hearts...Had not they better throw their Coaches, their Palaces, and their finery in to the river than to spend their life time in a continued state of martyrdom?<sup>18</sup>

Rousseau emphatically echoes Kandiaronks’ thoughts in his writings within Discourse on the Origin of Inequality:

I shall add but one thought: suppose that someone who lives in a faraway land should want to understand our European morals on the basis of the present state of the sciences in our society, on the basis of the perfection of the arts, the propriety of our public entertainments, the politeness of our manners, the affability of our conversation, our constant protestations of goodwill, and those tumultuous gatherings of people of all ages and ranks, who seem, from dawn to dusk, eager

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract / the First and second discourses, accessed March 8, 2024, [https://rtraba.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/rousseau\\_discourses\\_1\\_2\\_socialcontract.pdf](https://rtraba.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/rousseau_discourses_1_2_socialcontract.pdf), 48.

<sup>17</sup> Laura Pfalzer, The contending claims of modern science and morality, January 2, 2017, [https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=msu\\_theses\\_dissertations](https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=msu_theses_dissertations), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Lahontan, New Voyages to North-America v.2., 196.

only to please one another; this foreigner, I maintain, would guess that our morals are exactly the opposite of what they are.<sup>19</sup>

Rousseau also states:

When I behold numbers of naked savages, that despise European pleasures, braving hunger, fire, the sword and death, to preserve nothing but their independence, I feel that it is not for slaves to argue about liberty.<sup>20</sup>

The comparison of Kandiaronks' ideas of "civil society" with Rousseaus are only separated by the language used. It is clear that many of Rousseaus' "radical" ideas are strikingly similar to the Great Orators thoughts that were recorded and published more than 60 years before the works that inspired the French Revolution were in the hands of the French population. Rousseau did not explicitly site the "exotic" or "savages" as part of his major influences. That is precisely because by the time Rousseau began to formulate political ideologies and write his most famous novels "its acculturation so clearly: they use the exotic as a given."<sup>21</sup> However, in most, if not all, of Rousseaus' discourses he mentioned the "savage" man and his noble character and way of life. Most notably with the famous footnote in which Rousseau states "The primitive people of America, who go naked and live off what they hunt, have never been conquered. Indeed, what kind of yoke could be imposed on people who are in need of nothing?"<sup>22</sup>

As explored above, it is a matter of French interest to downplay the significance that Indigenous thinkers and politicians had on French thought throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With a keen eye and understanding of how the Indigenous government and social structures functioned it is absurd to leave the great Indigenous thinkers, such as Kandiaronk, out of the narrative when considering which thought leaders directly or in this case, indirectly, influenced the French Revolution which would irrevocably change the way European society functioned from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to present day.

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the origin of inequality, accessed March 8, 2024, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125494/5019\\_Rousseau\\_Discourse\\_on\\_the\\_Origin\\_of\\_Inequality.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125494/5019_Rousseau_Discourse_on_the_Origin_of_Inequality.pdf), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Renata Wasserman, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Discourse of the Exotic," JSTOR, accessed February 18, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7591/j.ctt207g5v4.6.pdf?acceptTC=true&coverage=false&addFooter=false>, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract / the First and second discourses, accessed March 8, 2024, [https://rtraba.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/rousseau\\_discourses\\_1\\_2\\_socialcontract.pdf](https://rtraba.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/rousseau_discourses_1_2_socialcontract.pdf), 58.

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