

H-France Forum, Volume 7, Issue 4 (Fall 2012), No. 2

Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. xiv + 310 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl) ISBN 978-1-4214-0150-8. \$29.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-1-4214-0965-8 forthcoming.

Review essay by Martin S. Staum, University of Calgary

This remarkably thorough study of the discourse concerning Africans in the eighteenth century offers a balanced assessment of the Enlightenment legacy. The conclusions are ambivalent because there was no single Enlightenment representation of black Africans. While offering ample evidence for the origins of racialized thinking and complacent justification of slavery, there is no hasty condemnation of the entire Enlightenment project as racist or imperialist. Ringing denunciations of slavery and pleas for humanity co-existed with a derogatory natural history of Africans, sometimes within the works of the same author. While there is thus no cause to celebrate the Enlightenment as leading inevitably to the emancipation decree of the French Revolution, there is also no imperative to see, as some critics have charged, the very structure of Enlightenment thought as resting on pro-slavery or racist assumptions.

Looking at a wide variety of primary materials, from the rambling travelogues of the seventeenth century on Africa and the West Indies, through the anatomically precise, if sometimes fanciful, theories of human sameness and difference, Curran details the decisive role of natural history and anatomy in congealing firmly fixed racial categories. But this is not just a study of major philosophes. There is analysis of literary texts, dictionary and encyclopedia articles; indeed all that is necessary to give the present-day reader a feeling for what the eighteenth-century reader could have consulted.

The general thesis about the ambiguous position of so much of the discourse about Africans rests on differentiating contexts of natural law from those of natural history. By the end of the eighteenth century, there was a strong movement toward seeing all humans as equal before natural law. But the same writers, when relating information on African ethnicities or the situation of slaves, would often take their portraits of African inferiority from Caribbean colonial sources that were shaped by the plantation lifestyle and fear of slave revolt.

The first chapter runs through travelogues of Portuguese and other explorers of Africa where difference was sometimes marked by religious intolerance of non-Christians rather than prejudice against blackness. Conflicts might be explained by fear of foreigners rather than in racial terms. By the late seventeenth century there were well-rehearsed justifications for the slave trade—offering conversion to Christianity and salvation along with the economic necessity to replace white indentured servants and Native Americans on colonial plantations. The Dominican priest Jean-Baptiste Labat compiled several travelogues in which he recommended good treatment of slaves as well as helped create the stereotypes of Africans. By the mid-eighteenth-century voyage compilations of abbé Antoine-François Prévost, there were lurid tales of African cannibalism, hypersexuality, dishonesty, and inferior intelligence. Perhaps even without help from the anatomists, similar stereotypes might have prevailed as the slave trade flourished.

The second chapter on human “sameness” begins with the Christian-inspired story of the common ancestry of all human beings, tempered by the alleged Biblical curse of Ham’s son Canaan which could

justify slavery from a theological perspective. But ever since the ancient corpus of Hippocrates a possible explanation that climatic and other environmental influences were responsible for human variety would temper the notion of an indelible curse. In the early eighteenth century, abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos used climate to differentiate types of artistic genius.

The most pivotal figure in the narrative of human sameness was Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon. Some of Curran's most important contributions appear in the contextualization of Buffon's thought. Curran first discusses the Bordeaux Academy of Sciences contest of 1741 on the "origin and significance of blackness." None of the sixteen contestants believed that blacks were a different species. Some saw a Providential correspondence of skin color to climate, while others, like Buffon later, thought blackness would disappear in temperate climates. Still others already had a more physiological explanation—blackness was the product of differences in blood and bodily fluids. As in most natural history writing, there was nothing in these memoirs referring to conditions of blacks in the colonies or slave trade.

The second important context for Buffon was the dispute over the category of the albino, one of whom was brought to Paris in 1744. Here the philosopher and physicist Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis argued that the African albino was not a monster, but testimony to the common ancestry of whites and blacks. The albino seemed to suggest there was vestigial whiteness that could reappear after the hereditary variety of the black had stemmed from a primary white humankind. Buffon's first interpretation of the albino in his work on human varieties in 1749 was as a degenerate, an accidental variety. This view seemed to fit with his general anthropological narrative that whites were the prototype of the species, while Africans and all other groups were degenerate humans affected by climate, diet, and environmental conditions. By 1777, however, Buffon was convinced that albinos were a semi-monstrous fluke of nature. He did not openly avow that this new theory did not fit as well with the narrative of returned whiteness.

The riddle of Buffon—what makes him so hard to classify—is that on the one hand he did not believe in fixed, essentialized races. Given the right conditions, the black might develop again into a white. Yet on the other hand, by the very use of the word degeneration, he set up a kind of human hierarchy. Curran struggles throughout the book with this aspect of Buffon and tends to downplay this latter interpretation. Buffon never explicitly said that degeneration implied intellectual inferiority, but elsewhere he did taint blacks with simple-mindedness.

The chapter on human difference details the new anatomical and physiological research that was creating a portrait of indelible blackness. Jean Riolan *fils* in 1618 believed he had found by a chemical treatment of a skin sample that blackness was a product of the hot sun, and Marcello Malpighi in 1665 found the pigmented *rete mucosum* skin layer allegedly unique to blacks. By 1755 Johann Friedrich Meckel the Elder had dissected African bodies in whom he claimed he found darker brains, while Georges Le Cat, a Rouen naturalist, in 1766 thought he found a fluid from the African brain called *ethiops* that stained the *rete mucosum* and darkened African sperm. The Dutch author Cornelius de Pauw believed that the darker brain, darker blood, and black spermatid fluid were hereditary physiological changes that affected intellectual deficiency. For him, there was no environmental redemption of blacks. Only prolonged race mixing would whiten the African. These physiological interpretations occurred even before there was a strong anti-slavery movement or Revolutionary emancipation decree. They were congruent with the fixed categories of race being established by naturalists such as Linnaeus and later by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.

There is an excellent discussion of the views of major Enlightenment figures on blackness and slavery. Montesquieu is well-known for his ironic moral condemnation of slavery in the *Esprit des lois*. However, the supposedly indolent temperament of peoples in hot climates led him to argue there was a "natural reason" for slavery in some countries. Voltaire was less ambiguously against slavery, but as early as

1734 he argued that the black was an essentially different species. Voltaire contested all climate theories, and in 1768 argued the inferior intelligence of blacks made it understandable that they became slaves.

Diderot's *Encyclopedia* presented a hybrid view of natural history condescending to Africans while including vigorous anti-slavery articles. The articles on African customs and ethnicities were spiked with the usual clichés against Africans. Diderot himself generally endorsed Buffon, but retained the prejudice against African intelligence. Jacques-Christophe Valmont de Bomare's *Dictionnaire raisonné d'histoire naturelle* (first edition 1764) continued to argue that blacks were degenerate, though the editor himself eventually became an abolitionist.

In the fourth chapter on the history of pro-slavery and anti-slavery thought, Curran examines the disconnect between opinions on slavery and opinions about the nature of Africans. Buffon's view of fluid categories was predominant, but Buffon, Meckel, Le Cat, and de Pauw had no thought of the consequences of the new anatomy on justifications of slavery. Polygenists such as Voltaire and later the physician and naturalist Jules-Joseph Virey were not necessarily pro-slavery. The Christian Labat was a monogenist, but thought blacks uncivilizable. De Pauw had fixed blacks in a category of inferiority, but was at least to a degree against slavery. The Chevalier de Jaucourt wrote the "Traite des nègres" article in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* that concluded it were better the colonies be destroyed rather than to do so much wrong. Yet his own geographic or ethnographic articles on West Africa repeated some of the old colonial standbys about limited intelligence or treacherous nature of Africans. Louis-Sébastien Mercier would write a utopia (*L'An 2440*) featuring a monument to a rebellious slave, while during the Revolution after the Saint Domingue revolt he would condemn blacks as perfidious and superstitious.

Some of the most famous diatribes against slavery appeared in the third edition of the *Histoire philosophique et politique du commerce et des établissements européens dans les deux Indes* (1780), nominally by the abbé Guillaume-Thomas-Francois Raynal, but in fact with key passages by Diderot (following the Physiocrat abbé Pierre-Joseph-André Roubaud) and Jean de Pechméja. Yet Raynal in the first two editions had accepted inferiority in intellect for blacks and had labeled them a separate species with a darker brain, darker blood, and black sperm.

Some anti-slavery authors such as the Quaker Anthony Benezet, and Africans themselves such as Olaudah Equiano, clearly adopted a more optimistic view of African potential. While Curran argues that anti-slavery authors also used the new anatomy and natural history for their purposes, he gives few examples.

The final sections of this chapter detail the efforts of the Amis des noirs to achieve citizenship for people of color. One of the only false steps in Curran's otherwise sure-footed account is a mixup on the nomenclature of Estates-General, National Assembly, and Constituent Assembly (pp. 204-5), which seems to suggest that these were three separate bodies. Curran notes that the strategic situation of Saint-Domingue as much as ideology sparked the emancipation decree of 1794. When the Consulate reneged on this decree and attempted to re-establish slavery, there was an upsurge both in pro-slavery writing and a crystallization of an ideology of fixed races.

Authors such as Virey now classified blacks as a separate species, and the renowned Georges Cuvier used Peter Camper's facial angle to rank blacks closest among humans to the apes. To a degree, this natural history may have been prevalent before Napoleon's change of policies, but the ambiance became friendlier to racializing and pro-slavery thought. The abbé Henri Grégoire was left among the few defenders to argue that blacks were equal in potential in all respects to whites.

In the "coda" Curran differentiates himself from those critics of the Enlightenment that would make subjection and domination the very heart of Enlightenment discourse. At the same time he details his

own evidence that the hierarchical natural history strain of much of Enlightenment discourse could eclipse the egalitarian tendency of natural law. The anatomists weighed, measured, and dissected blackness, making it a wedge for racial categorization. Curran concludes by arguing that such representations rationalized the brutality practiced on the bodies of blacks in the slave trade and colonial world.

Curran has clearly given us a major contribution to the study of the uses of natural history, the presence and absence of universalism in the Enlightenment, and the origins of modern racial thought.

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