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Devin J. Vartija, *The Color of Equality: Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. 312 pp. Notes, index, and table. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0812253191.

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In his monumental *Systema Naturae* (1735), Swedish physician and naturalist Carl Linnaeus set out to study and categorize the natural world and everything that existed within it. In the introduction he explained his reasoning for classifying humans within the order of nature: “the first step of wisdom is to know these bodies; and be able, by those marks imprinted on them by nature, to distinguish them from each other, and to affix to every object its proper name.”[1] By situating the study of man within the realm of natural history, Linnaeus introduced a paradoxical way of envisioning humankind that simultaneously proposed a unified species, while subdividing it based on diverse traits. Just over a decade later, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, would publish the first volume of his *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi* (1749) in which he proposed a monogenetic origin of the species with factors such as climate, food, and cultural traditions influencing physical appearance and, most notably, skin color. Important scientific works such as these shaped not only how philosophers thought about the natural world, but also how they thought about the place of humans in it, and the relations between humans in societies. Works such as these were often promoted as proof of a common humanity that demanded a natural equality, and yet these were also the works that built the systems of racial classification that would be used to justify slavery and colonization.

Devin J. Vartija’s book seizes upon this crucial contradiction of the Enlightenment. How, it asks, can Enlightenment philosophy promote an equality among all men while simultaneously contributing to racial classification practices that many have come to understand as instrumental to the invention of modern racism?[2] The answer, Vartija suggests, is incredibly complicated. He argues that while it would be wrong to declare the Enlightenment as an unending source of human progress and all that upholds democracy, it would be equally wrong to single-handedly blame the Enlightenment for all our modern evils, including racism, sexism, and global catastrophe. In fact, while Stephen Pinker bombastically declared in 2018 that “the ideals of reason, science, humanism, and progress need a wholehearted defense” now more than ever, one of the most refreshing aspects of Vartija’s important and timely book is its consistent refusal to do that.[3] Instead, Vartija expertly brings together two philosophical subjects that occupied much of Enlightenment thinking—equality and race—analyzing how human sameness and human difference came to be politicized and linked in Enlightenment thought.

Tension, therefore, becomes the central crux of this book, and Vartija refuses to resolve it, citing this friction as fundamental to the intellectual history of the Enlightenment. To highlight how discord, debate, and disagreement were crucial to Enlightenment thought, the author makes a surprising choice of primary materials. Rather than a wide variety of treatises, pamphlets, essays, and letters, he explores these subjects largely through three Enlightenment-era encyclopedias. Grounding his arguments in Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, and Fortunato Bartolomeo de Felice's *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon* allows him to capture, as he puts it, "three moments in the intellectual history of the Enlightenment: early eighteenth-century England, mid-eighteenth-century France, and mid- to late eighteenth-century Switzerland" (p. 2). By way of explanation for this choice, Vartija writes: "Besides offering a window onto the cultural and social milieu from which they emerged, encyclopedias can be seen as expressions of and contributors to key trends in Enlightenment culture: namely, making knowledge accessible to as broad a public as possible to facilitate debate and conversation across national and social divides" (p. 3). In other words, one of the most important attributes of these texts as cultural and intellectual objects is precisely the tension that adheres within their pages, authored, as they were, by so many distinct philosophers, politicians, doctors, and scientists. Vartija demonstrates that reading contradictory articles with and against one another both reflected and inspired debates among readers. Furthermore, by placing the encyclopedias in chronological order, he shows how each new work engaged with, built upon, and challenged those that came before it. Working from Chambers' example, for instance, Diderot and D'Alembert reimaged the scope and limits of an encyclopedia, and by revising and supplementing the *Encyclopédie*, De Felice and his mostly Protestant contributors called into question some of its more atheistic elements. By examining articles that focused on race and/or equality throughout each of these works and by pointing to the places where they implicitly or explicitly agreed or disagreed with each other, this book walks us through a rocky evolution of certain mentalities within the Enlightenment.

The Color of Equality builds on and extends the work of scholars such as Andrew Curran, Lynn Hunt, Sankar Muthu, and Siep Stuurman by not only examining the construction and politicization of equality and race, but also by considering the many ways in which the two political and philosophical discussions engaged with and shaped one another.[4] As my citations of Linnaeus and Buffon above might suggest, the intersection of these two philosophical categories in Enlightenment Europe, Vartija proposes, was due largely to the introduction of natural history as a new way of understanding the world. When equality becomes uncoupled from religious dogma, then its origins must be explored elsewhere. By placing humans within the order of nature and distinguishing them from one another based on ancient notions of skin color, all while introducing a taxonomy of man, Linnaeus served as a transitional figure from early modern to Enlightenment notions of equality that were imbricated with those of race. Race and equality thus coevolved, with race opening out from kin to species and inequality becoming something that needed scientific justification.

If it seems that the treatment of race as a conceptual category rather than an immanent and material reality is a method of exonerating certain Enlightenment thinkers of their often-aborrent views on race and slavery, this is not the goal of the book. Indeed, Vartija acknowledges the necessity to theoretically disentangle notions of race and (in)equality even when they were thoroughly intertwined in practice, as a way to understand better the plural origins of modern racism as a set of distinct racialized classificatory systems. One of the practical ways he endeavors to understand the specificities of racial discourse in Enlightenment thought

is to devote the last third of chapters three and four (focused on Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* and De Felice's *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon* respectively) to a discussion of the racialization of peoples from three distinct geographic areas: the Americas, Africa (largely centered on Sub-Saharan Africa), and China. Although this stark separation does sometimes preclude what could otherwise be some fruitful discussions about the intersections of racialized discourse in the encyclopedias, it allows the author to examine more closely the ways in which Enlightenment thinkers distinguished race based on certain cultural specificities. This format also allows the author to examine more thoroughly how divisions were drawn between humans based on factors such as indigeneity, skin color, and cultural practices.

After a brief introduction, the book is organized into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter walks the reader through early modern debates on human nature. It explains the competing theories of monogenism and polygenism and demonstrates the importance of debates surrounding sexual difference and equality between men and women in setting the stage for classifications of racial difference. Chapters two through four are each dedicated to a single encyclopedia. Vartija begins with Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* because, he argues, this work served as an inspiration to future encyclopedic endeavors, and it also reified the growing dependence upon natural history for explaining and inventing human equality and racial difference. Equality, which the author argues exists largely as subtext in Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, moved more and more to the forefront in subsequent encyclopedic projects. Chapter three explores the polyphony of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, proposing that this work allows us to think beyond a dichotomy of radical or moderate Enlightenment, to see how a larger shift in worldview took place among many diverse thinkers, especially as sociality became embedded in notions of natural equality. While acknowledging the Eurocentrism and occasional problematic passages in the work, this chapter argues it was "instrumental in mobilizing the secular French antislavery movement" (p. 90). Chapter four introduces a work that will likely be less familiar to most readers, De Felice's *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon*, highlighting in part its attention to the naturalness of inequality. This encyclopedia, which consisted largely of edited and revised articles from Diderot and D'Alembert's encyclopedia, was written mostly by Protestants in Switzerland and brought together debates grounded in atheistic materialism with those emerging from Christian doctrine. Its emphasis on inequality, the author argues, demonstrated just how important a topic equality had become by the second half of the eighteenth century. This chapter also draws together several threads running through the two previous chapters, explaining the complexities of thoughts about race during the Enlightenment and uncovering the way in which these discussions differ from modern notions of race. In fact, it is this third dictionary where readers will find some of the most abhorrent views on race alongside some of the most emphatic abolitionist arguments.

While I find this book compelling overall, I will briefly mention two issues I have regarding its execution. First, given the textual nature of the primary sources, I was surprised at the relative lack of textual evidence in the book. The author's descriptive language takes us through some of the most important articles of these three encyclopedias regarding race and equality, yet we are often left to guess at the actual language of those articles. In fact, the first long quotation of the book does not appear until about halfway through, in an excerpt from Saint-Lambert's article, "Législateur" (from Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*) in chapter three. I felt that more textual evidence could have brought more weight to the author's arguments. This brings me to a larger critique of the work: its occasional refusal to take seriously the power of language itself. While the author skillfully interprets the political significance of the claims of certain authors

and philosophers, he sometimes overlooks the language of the articles, which may undermine the argument. For instance, a passage in chapter four points out that a *Supplément* to the *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon* contains explicit rejections of racist depictions of Native Americans, citing a passage that reads (in part), “the savages who want to apply themselves to learning something of the arts and sciences succeed sufficiently well... When a sage has decided to learn something, he will learn it” (p. 174). While this does indeed present a more generous view of Indigenous peoples than other articles focused on a supposed “ignorance” or “incivility” in the native populations of the Americas, it still actively participates in a Eurocentric system that places value on specific types of knowledge and separates those whose knowledge base differs into “savages” and “sages”. Although attending to the language of the text might complicate the author’s arguments at times, I feel this could have added some interesting nuances and strengthened the author’s claims about philosophical tensions in the Enlightenment.

These critiques aside, this book offers a convincing and important argument. It dives into the murky waters of Enlightenment thought where liberatory discourse mixes with racial prejudices, and where hierarchies of social station are replaced with those of race. Vartija takes us through the evolution of the word *race* as it moves from clans and kin into the natural historical world of species, shifting its focus but continuing to serve as a thing that binds groups together through exclusionary practices. In short, this book adds a much-needed strand to conversations about the invention of race and equality in Enlightenment Europe. Taken separately, each chapter provides a deep dive into one Enlightenment-era encyclopedia, explaining not only the conceptualizations of equality conceived therein, but beyond that, the development of these ideas as mutating, contested, and vibrant entities. Read in succession, these chapters tell the story of the rise and development of equality as a political concept, and moreover, they explain how that concept excluded or enveloped all of humanity. It is an important read and will be of particular use to intellectual and cultural historians, teachers of European History and Enlightenment philosophy, and anyone interested in the intersection of social history and print culture.

NOTES

[1] Carl Linnaeus, “On the System of Nature,” cited in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 13.

[2] See George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*; and Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew Curran, *Who’s Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

[3] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 4.

[4] See Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in World History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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