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**John C. O'Neal**, *Changing Minds: The Shifting Perception of Culture in Eighteenth-Century France*. Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 2002. 279 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-87413-788-8.

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Judging by how frequently the terms nature and culture are used without reflection in our society, a better history of their relationship is a highly worthy, even urgent, endeavor. For that reason, John O'Neal's book *Changing Minds: The Shifting Perception of Culture in Eighteenth-Century France* merits the interest of intellectual and cultural historians, particularly those who specialize in the French Enlightenment. Although the relationship of nature to culture is by no means a new problem in French intellectual historiography, literary criticism, or social sciences, O'Neal succeeds in generating original insights into how leading Enlightenment authors addressed changes in attitudes towards nature and culture.

O'Neal's approach avoids reproducing the better-known, earlier scholarship on this question. The claim that ideas of nature and culture structure all human societies is most closely associated with the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss; however, structuralist anthropology never considered the historical development of these categories in the eighteenth century or any other period. Lester Crocker's *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* is a classic work of great erudition but which relies nearly entirely on interpretations of canonical authors and texts.[1] More recently, Henry Vyverberg's *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity and the French Enlightenment* is a thematically organized essay about how leading French Enlightenment writers viewed the world beyond Europe and what they concluded about human nature from their study of cultural diversity.[2] Adopting a more theoretical, though still entirely textual rather than contextual approach, the intellectual historian Tzvetan Todorov, in his *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, gives a central position to the Enlightenment in the historical trajectories of the idea of nature as a broad, universal background and of culture as a geographically specific form that distinguishes human societies from each other. Yet Todorov pays little attention to specific instances of Enlightenment thought on nature and culture.[3]

O'Neal takes a different approach from each of these works, looking at this problem not as a static question of etymology or a dilemma in ethical philosophy; instead he seeks to identify an historically specific dynamic of intellectual change to explain an evolution across the eighteenth century in thinking about the relationship between nature and culture. He is interested in the tendency of French Enlightenment authors to transcend an opposition between nature and culture by finding the basis for acculturation and moral development in nature itself. O'Neal thereby offers an original discussion of the question by examining the crucial connection between the French Enlightenment's program for systematic reform and the focus on knowledge and possibility of exhausting every facet of the period's culture (p. 23). His goal is to "demonstrate the perceptual and epistemological roots of French Enlightenment culture in a wide, but representative, variety of ways...." (p. 21).

So, while crediting O'Neal for devising a new approach to an established, but crucial, question, the reader will regret to find that what he describes as a "wide, but representative" (p. 21) body of sources consists almost entirely of seven published treatises, and his approach is primarily one of summary and philological analysis of how the terms nature and culture were used in these selected texts. The result, alas, is a book less original and fulfilling than had been promised in the opening pages. And while O'Neal does not repeat the work of Gossman, Vyverberg, or Tudorov, it is nevertheless disappointing that he does not discuss any of these books, or other previous scholarship on this question, even in passing. Furthermore, O'Neal never addresses his own relationship as an interpreter of the French Enlightenment to the work of others, be they literary critics or social and cultural historians. This book, in short, is a work of classic intellectual history, closest in approach and argument to the Enlightenment historiography of two generations ago.

The book is structured as a series of critical essays, each an intrinsically interesting reading of an Enlightenment text. In several cases, O'Neal has shrewdly chosen little-known texts which he uses to bring to light original observations and associations. Overall, however, the relationship among these essays remains unclear; the theme of culture from nature becomes, over the course of seven chapters, too protean to give an evident form to the book. Moreover, the careful examinations of primary texts in each chapter remain unconcerned to explore larger implications of these texts in the discourse, society and culture of the eighteenth century. Throughout, O'Neal offers almost no discussion of secondary literature from any discipline. In addition to the well-known works cited above, other recent work that O'Neal might have consulted include Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex*, which argues that the human body and central categories of culture such as humanity and sexuality are both natural and culturally constructed; Laqueur uses primarily French sources to locate in the eighteenth century the moment when Western Civilization became aware of its duality as both natural and cultural. [4]

The body of O'Neal's book consists of seven chapters which offer interpretive readings of different Enlightenment intersections of nature and culture. The first chapter is mostly devoted to the *abbé* Dubos as a theorist concerned with the intersection of aesthetic beauty and social morality. The book becomes much more interesting and original in Chapter Three, which addresses the theme of experience as a source of knowledge, meaning sensationalist epistemology, rather than scientific experimentation. Here, and in each of the seven chapters, O'Neal's approach remains largely a reading of primary texts. In addition to the discussions of well-known writers such as Etienne Bonnot, the *abbé* de Condillac, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, count of Buffon, O'Neal offers a highly interesting, extended discussion of Jean-Pierre Boullier's *Essai philosophique sur l'âme des bêtes*. Yet this chapter, as well, proceeds without much discussion of secondary scholarly literature, other than references to O'Neal's own, earlier book on the topic, *Authority of Experience*. [5]

Chapter Four addresses the well-known passages from Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* which posit climate as a formative influence on culture and, more specifically, about how the social, physiological, and psychological consequences of climate inform a society's laws and political institutions. O'Neal has relatively little new to tell us that had not already been said by earlier commentators, from Lévi-Strauss to Gossman to Todorov. Moreover, while his discussion is highly interesting, well-written and rich with references to the text, it is entirely hermetic; it never moves beyond the selected texts to discuss any of the relevant contexts.

Chapter Five on Rousseau's odd play *Narcisse* is an original choice as a work of cultural theory that shows fundamentally "[the] human drama that occurs at the transition from primitive to civilized society and [during which] the characters disclose their affinity with one stage or another in their movement from nature to culture" (p. 125). While quite rightly seeing it as an extension of Rousseau's *Discourse on Origins of Language* and other anthropological writings, O'Neal's analysis is again entirely internal, leaving largely asserted rather than carefully argued his concluding claim that *Narcisse* is a work of delicate political and psychological balance (p. 137).

Chapter Seven is an improvement, because it is not limited to a single author and text but instead addresses the broader theme of the perception and theory of disease. Here O'Neal argues that medical epistemology (p. 167) moved in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from abstraction to the real, physical world, and from conservative, religious thinking to a theory based on mind-body relationship (p. 171). The writer studied here is Jean-Nicolas Corvisart, translator of important work on medical procedure by the Austrian Leopold Auenbrügger and author of manuals for physicians advocating tactile and visual examination of the patient rather than purely speculative theories (p. 173). For O'Neal, Corvisart is a key figure in the transition to modern medicine in the early nineteenth century, though this shift is usually associated with the germ theory of disease and disinfectants that emerged later in that century. As in the earlier chapters, the methodology is primarily a close reading that summarizes Corvisart's writings. The book concludes in an "Afterward" with reflections on the tension that O'Neal perceives arising from a symbolic conflict between Voltaire and Rousseau, with the former representing an ideal of liberty based on culture and the latter an ideal of personal and social liberty based on nature. To transcend this dichotomy, O'Neal proposes that Voltaire and Rousseau--indeed, all advocates of culture and nature--are in fact united by a shared belief in "the supreme importance of language for shaping a culture" (p. 190). He closes by offering this assertion as a fairly implausible solution to the "dialectic between nature and culture" studied in the book, suggesting that contemporary concern with the lack of civility in Western culture indicates an abiding concern to define culture in terms of nature.

Without any historical, or historiographical, context in which to frame his textual readings, O'Neal's study of the transition from nature to culture (p. 23) strains to justify its relevance to contemporary social concerns. For instance, in an otherwise solid explication of Dubos' influential aesthetic ideals expressed in *Réflexions critiques*, O'Neal feels obliged to conclude with the somewhat inexplicable statement that Dubos' greatest influence was not in the area of aesthetics at all but in social theory: "[H]is methodology [led] other Enlightenment thinkers to make great strides, as did Dubos, towards realizing a more equal society than the rigid class structure [sic] of Old Regime France" (p. 45).

A broader, and more unfortunate, consequence of this intellectual tunnel vision is to oversimplify the object of study itself, the French Enlightenment. The book never defines the French Enlightenment or explains what makes this period so important for understanding the relationship of ideas of nature to thoughts about culture. By discussing the broad array of secondary literature on the topic, and the concerns raised therein, O'Neal could have gone much further in one of his most important, and salutary, goals: a re-affirmation of the intrinsic liberalism and modernity of the Enlightenment. In its current form, the book makes this point both implicitly in the choice of texts and in references to the classic, idealist historiography associated with Ernst Cassirer and his more recent disciples, such as Peter Gay. However, without framing this discussion in terms of other approaches to the Enlightenment, and to the problems of nature and culture more broadly, he is constrained to present not merely a liberal, tolerant Enlightenment but one that is also a self-caricature, simultaneously politically dissident, socially egalitarian, and intellectually rationalist and modern. O'Neal's admirable re-assertion of the importance of Enlightenment thought and more specifically of a tolerant, liberal view of culture is, consequently, less effective than it could be, because it largely ignores the criticisms that have been voiced of that view.

With little reference to historical context or the current historiography, O'Neal can only lurch, somewhat desperately, to connect his topic to broader concerns. For instance, seemingly out of nowhere in the middle of a paragraph that begins with Voltaire's view of French culture and is devoted primarily to Louis XIV, we suddenly encounter the recent memory of totalitarian rule in the former Soviet Union [which] makes almost any use of authority repugnant to our modern sensibilities. And then, without defining either the terms or the meaning of his assertion, he moves even more boldly to confront with horror, the barbaric re-feudalization and ethnic and tribal fanaticism, increasing urban decay and violence, and the demise of humanitarianism accompanied by a rise in unabashed self-interest (p.69).

Against this dystopia, O'Neal can only propose that we "profitably return to Voltaire ... for instruction about ways to build culture by cultivating minds" (p. 69). The problem with this passage, salutary and even moving as it might be, is that it is simply not convincing, for if Voltaire had succeeded in fending off these horrors, we would have known that in the eighteenth century, let alone the twenty-first. The book's uncomplicated approach does not help us better understand the complex world we face. Instead, it aids today's infamous enemies of Enlightenment, who are all too ready to exploit such writings as O'Neal's as proof of the political bias of academic scholarship and its failure to contribute to the common good. Despite his great erudition, intelligence, style, and diligence, O'Neal ultimately fails because he naively comes to believe the Enlightenment's own rhetoric about itself as the incarnation of dynamic historical progress. The problem for O'Neal and for his readers is that Enlightenment values of embracing human nature, tolerating cultural diversity, and, above all, appreciating the complexity of economic, social, and political institutions must be upheld without being mystified; otherwise, we are left describing an Enlightenment which, despite its own rhetoric, has never really been lived.

## NOTES

[1] Lester Crocker, *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963).

[2] Henry Vyverberg, *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity and the French Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[3] Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). Originally published as *Nous et les autres. La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

[4] Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also his essay "L'homme, l'humain et la catégorie de l'humain au XVIIIe siècle" in *La fabrication de l'humain dans les cultures*, eds. Claude Calame and Mondher Kilani. (Lausanne: Payot, 1999), pp. 86-96, and other essays in this volume. O'Neal might have also placed his book in the context of contemporary debates over this question, such as those outlined by environmental historians of the contemporary U.S., of which excellent examples may be found in the essays in William Cronon, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995).

[5] *The Authority of Experience: Sensationist Theory in the French Enlightenment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

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