

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC
PREJUDICE IN FRENCH
ENLIGHTENMENT COMMENTARIES ON
HUMAN VARIETY

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In his recent overview of the origins of racism, George M. Fredrickson argues that the influence of Enlightenment thinking on attitudes towards human diversity was ambiguous, a consequence of "the dual character of Enlightenment rationalism—its simultaneous challenge to hierarchies based on faith, superstition and prejudice and the temptation it presented to create new ones allegedly based on reason, science and history".¹ On the one hand, the Enlightenment concern with tolerance, civil rights and liberties, and its critique of existing institutions, created the intellectual climate in which it was possible to reconsider attitudes and practices towards those peoples who were the victims of prejudice, exclusion, or, worse, of conquest and slavery. On the other hand, as the philosophers stripped away religious interpretations of the world, it became possible to understand humankind as belonging not to God but to Nature, and thus to be the object of scientific scrutiny, with its accompanying classifications.² But what was to constitute the basis of classification? What features, which criteria, would be selected for purposes of identification and distinction in the case of human diversity? Would purely scientific criteria be found, able to resist the influence of traditional ideas and the admixture of moral or aesthetic prejudice? I have shown in a previous article on ideas about national difference in the Enlightenment the "temptation" to reproduce traditional prejudice about other nations in new forms.³

A number of recent texts have pointed to the significance of aesthetic criteria in the construction of hierarchies of human variety in the Enlightenment period. Fredrickson argues that the aesthetic aspect of eighteenth century racial attitudes deserves more attention than it has received, for the prevailing monogenic theory assuming a single origin of humankind "did not preclude an aesthetic revulsion against some non-Europeans as ugly, if not monstrous in appearance".⁴ George Mosse writes that in assigning a place to human variety "natural science and the moral and aesthetic ideals of the ancients joined hands".⁵ Similarly, David Bindman in *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* argues that "attitudes towards non-European peoples were almost always linked to some notion of physical beauty or the capacity of an observer for aesthetic response".⁶

Bindman argues in the main from English and German sources and moves fairly quickly to late-eighteenth and nineteenth century texts. For Bindman, the pivotal year in the stabilising of ideas of race around aesthetic prejudice is 1775: that was the year when Kant, Blumenbach and Lavater published key works on the question of race. This article discusses the aesthetic hierarchy that can be discerned in French sources of the mid-eighteenth century, in particular Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, published in the 1750s and 1760s, and Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*. Buffon's massive thirty-eight-volume work was published between 1749 and 1788. The first three volumes, which included the one on Man, were published together in 1749, just before the first volumes of the *Encyclopédie*. In scale it rivalled the *Encyclopédie* and was extremely influential on the *encyclopédistes*, as on eighteenth century thought in general.⁷ The ideas about human variety found in *Histoire Naturelle* and the *Encyclopédie* constitute a relatively coherent system of thought at this mid-point of the century and I have used passages from both sources to highlight the main points and to demonstrate the similarities between them.⁸ The *Encyclopédie* is invaluable because it presents a summary of "enlightened" opinion—indeed its ideas are often plagiarised from contemporary sources, particularly French ones. Moreover—because of its aim to be exhaustive—it has entries upon the full range of issues, such as human variety, slavery, and beauty, that are relevant to the subject of this article.

The term "aesthetic" did not, of course, have its modern meaning in the eighteenth century. Aesthetics as a clearly defined and distinct area of study was a creation of the eighteenth century, the key text often recorded as the publication of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750.

There continued to be a confusion of moral and what we would consider properly aesthetic judgements. The entry "Beau" by Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* puts it thus: "providence has seen to it that for us a thing that is really beautiful is generally good".⁹ This entry, moreover, contains a long discussion in which "le beau littéraire", "le beau naturel", "le beau moral" are listed as forms of beauty: a poem, a landscape, an act could all be beautiful, their beauty recognisable to any observer not distracted by various nefarious influences; in other words, the objective existence of beauty was not in doubt. The same entry explains that beauty is to be found in the proportionate relationship between elements,¹⁰ a definition that will be shown to be relevant to the judgements passed on human appearance. The ideal of beauty conveyed implicitly and explicitly in many entries is exemplified in the plates that illustrate techniques of drawing the human form: the most perfect proportions are represented by Greek statues.

In part inspired by the success of Linnaeus in classifying plants and animals (*Systema Naturae*, 1735), French philosophers sought to extend systematic categorisation to man and even to society. In *De l'esprit des lois*, Montesquieu sought to classify the variety of social and political forms. In *Histoire Naturelle*, Buffon sought to classify the wealth of plant, animal, human and mineral forms. Buffon, sometimes described as the founder of anthropology,¹¹ undertook a far more extensive review and classification of mankind than the early Linnaeus. And unlike Linnaeus's taxonomic system,¹² Buffon argued that classification should correspond to the closeness, utility and so on of plants and animals to man—an openly anthropocentric approach. Much has been written about the divergences between the classifications proposed by Buffon and Linnaeus, and about the internal consistency of Buffon's approach.¹³ Targeting Linnaeus, Buffon criticised the arbitrary nature of classifications that focused on particular structural features to the exclusion of others, and which imposed clear distinctions where nature was composed only of individuals. In his discussion of humankind, however, as I will demonstrate, he does not heed his own caveats but tends to create groupings based on arbitrarily chosen features (hair type, for example) and generalises about the physical, moral and aesthetic qualities supposedly shared by the groups thus identified.

What is apparently progressive in his classification of humans is his almost total abandonment of reference to the traditional theory of the humours. Whereas Linnaeus, in his classification of human

types, uses the distinctive terms *cholericus*, *sanguineus*, *phlegmatic* and *melancholicus*,¹⁴ Buffon almost never uses such terminology. The apparent modernity of his nomenclature may have contributed to his influence on his own and later generations. As we shall see, however, in his description of the Negroes of Africa, synonyms for “phlegmaticus” abound, and in other ways, too, Buffon incorporates traditional elements into his system.

Thus Buffon continued a long tradition of explaining variation in humankind by the influences of the milieu: climate, air, soil, terrain—a view that was widely shared by his contemporaries. The strength of the explanation by climate derived from a number of factors: its origin in the Ancient writers; the importance thus attributed to Nature; the parallels that could be drawn between human, and plant and animal adaptation; the scientific gloss added by Montesquieu’s famous experiments on the tissue of a sheep’s tongue; when cold was applied, the tissues contracted, like muscles gathering for action; with heat, the tissue relaxed.¹⁵ The conclusion that a hot climate led to idleness and passivity in humans seemed inescapable.

Climate gives the philosophers, then, an initial polarisation in discussions of human variety: peoples of the North versus those of the South. Even within Europe, such distinctions were made: in his multiple entries in the *Encyclopédie* on European nations, de Jaucourt develops a running contrast between the Scandinavian countries—the true birthplace of freedom, writes de Jaucourt—and for example Spain, a country given over to superstition and neglect of the arts. But climate can be the source of much broader categorisation, one that explains the physical and moral qualities of all the peoples of the world: in *De l’esprit des lois*, Northern climes are described as producing societies of strong, hardy and freedom-loving men; Southern peoples are characterised by passivity and idleness.¹⁶ The best human specimens—characterised by the conjunction of moral, aesthetic, physical excellence—are to be found in climates which avoid the extremes of heat or cold.

A key passage which illustrates the importance of climate in Buffon’s argument—a passage which is repeated almost word for word in the *Encyclopédie* entry, “Humaine espèce”—is found at the end of the section “Variétés dans l’espèce humaine” in the volume on Man. Throughout the two hundred pages in which Buffon passes in review the peoples of the earth, an implicit standard is being applied; this explicit assertion appears as though at the end of a demonstration, as though a culmination and conclusion of his argument:

The most temperate climate lies between the 40th and 50th degree of latitude; it is accordingly in this zone that one finds the most handsome and well proportioned men. It is from this climate that one should derive the idea of the true natural colour of mankind and the model or unity (ideal) to which should be compared all the other shades of colour and of beauty. The two extremes are equally remote from truth and from beauty. The civilised countries situated under this zone are Georgia, Circassia, the Ukraine, Turkey in Europe, Hungary, the south of Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France and the northern part of Spain; all these peoples are accordingly the most handsome and well-proportioned in the world.¹⁷

This list of most favoured countries begins with Georgia, thus echoing a traditional idea that Georgians are the most beautiful people in the world. The choice of this particular region—apart from its obvious eurocentrism—seems, according to Londa Schiebinger, to result from the value ascribed to women from this region on the Levantine slave market from the thirteenth to the late-fifteenth century.¹⁸ By drawing the line in the South at the fortieth latitude, Buffon excludes most of Greece; placing the Northernmost edge at the fiftieth includes all but a fraction of France, but excludes Britain totally. In 1775, Kant extended the region to the thirty-first and fifty-second degrees, thus including Greece and North Africa to the South and most of present-day Germany to the North.

This one passage contains almost all the major themes which reverberate through the French *philosophes*' preoccupation with classifying and judging mankind at this point in the mid-eighteenth century. First, there is the importance attached to climate in determining appearance—in fact, Buffon refines the almost universal Enlightenment assumption that skin colour is determined by the sun, for he notes that it is not always the case that peoples living in the same latitude are of the same colour; an additional factor must be at work and Buffon finds it in the temperature of the air and its excessive dryness in extremes of heat and cold. Are not Laplanders almost as black as those living in equatorial Africa?

The second point to note is the accompanying aesthetic judgement: the extremes of climate are equally unpropitious to the human stock, producing men who—as Buffon expresses it in the passage cited—are “equally remote from Truth and from Beauty”. An additional assumption is apparent here, that the original colour of the human

stock is white; elsewhere Buffon writes that white is “the original colour of nature”, and adds: “Nature as perfect as she can be, made men white”.¹⁹ The idea that the original humans were like Europeans is further illustrated by Buffon’s frequently made claim that certain facial characteristics of “savages”, such as flat noses or elongated skulls, were the result of mothers squashing their infants’ noses or skulls at birth, the assumption being that straight noses are the original feature and that flat noses are artificial and unnatural.

The plate that opens the volume on Man is revealing and explicit. It shows a man and a woman apparently in the state of nature (portrayed naked and amidst rocks) and yet approximating closely to a European ideal: both are light-skinned and their facial features and body structure seem European—the man has a roman nose, flowing locks and a lush beard but an almost complete absence of hair on his body.

The possession of a beard was a feature which Bernier in 1684 had already used as one of the distinguishing criteria of Europeans: hair on the male European chin is a positive distinguishing mark from the (supposedly) beardless native Americans and Mongolians.²⁰ Hair or the lack of it, its texture, its position on the body, are also invested with judgements of aesthetic superiority and inferiority in *Histoire Naturelle* and the *Encyclopédie*.²¹ Hair on the head is aesthetically pleasing if it consists of flowing locks and not of the “wool” which is the term often used to describe the hair of Negroes: “Their skin is very dark; their hair is truly wool, and their sheep have hair”.²² In this passage, the term “laine” is reinforced by the adjective “véritable” which encourages the reader to go beyond the simple visual analogy to recognise the brutish nature beneath, reducing the natives to the level of animals, or lower, since their sheep have hair.

Buffon, like most of the French *philosophes*, believed—following the Biblical story—that all humans belonged to one original stock (monogenesis); clearly he also believed that this stock had originated in Europe. As men spread out across the globe, the action of factors, including primarily climate, but also food and living conditions in general, led to variation.²³ Buffon does not hesitate to speak not simply of variation, but of degeneration in some branches of humanity exposed to extreme environments. Only in the temperate zones did the climate and conditions of life combine to allow the development of societies that were “policées”, that is to say, civilised and peopled with beautiful inhabitants. Buffon appears to have been the first to define certain peoples—he sometimes uses the word

“race” but not consistently—as degenerations of an original stock; the very first people he describes in “Variétés”, are those found in the far North, in Lapland and the North of Tartary whom he describes as “a race of men who seem to have degenerated from the human species”.²⁴

Buffon’s criteria of difference between peoples come under three headings which he defines himself as first colour, second form and third size, in terms of their natural disposition.²⁵ Colour he declares to be the first and most remarkable of the differences, a claim which would seem to be quite as arbitrary as Linnaeus’s taxonomy.²⁶ The first three criteria: colour (of hair, eyes, skin), form, and size (of body, facial and cranial structure) are in their application infused with moral and aesthetic judgements combined. Small is generally negative, close to stunted, and often associated with stupidity. Thus the peoples of the far North are described as: “a race of men of small stature, strange in appearance, whose savage features are as brutish as their customs”.²⁷ They are “lacking in courage, in self-respect, in modesty; this contemptible people has only enough customs to be despised”.²⁸ They are further described as the “avortons” of humanity: puny, stunted specimens, the runt of the litter; the only difference between the peoples of the far North resides in their greater or lesser degree of “difformité”.²⁹ This is one of the many descriptions by Buffon taken up in the entry “Humaine espèce” in the *Encyclopédie*, where Diderot repeats the association of ugliness, physical deformity and moral degeneracy: “All these ugly peoples are coarse, superstitious and stupid”.³⁰

But it is not only at the extremes of climate that human beings are negatively affected—a multitude of smaller distinctions are made both in *Histoire Naturelle* and in the *Encyclopédie*. In the entry “Humaine espèce”, Buffon’s “narrowly ethnocentric” aesthetic ideal³¹ is taken up uncritically by Diderot, as he summarises Buffon’s lengthy descriptions of the peoples of the world, retaining and even emphasising the aesthetic judgements of his contemporary. He makes frequent use of terms such as “laid” and “beau”: the term “laid” and close synonyms such as “grossier” occur at least ten times in the entry;³² the terms “beau/belle” fifteen times.³³ The key and often repeated positive expression to describe a people is as “bien faits”—well made, well proportioned—corresponding to the idea that beauty is to be found in a certain relationship of elements. Examples include the comparison between the Tunquinois and the Cochinchinois, where it is asserted that since the Tunquinois “live in a better

country and a milder climate, [they] are better proportioned and less ugly than the Cochinchinois".³⁴ Note the usual assumption of a link between favourable climate and human beauty. There is also an assumption of an association between regular and well-proportioned features and whiteness of skin. That this is the norm is expressed by the use of the conjunction "but" in the following example: "The Spanish are thin and quite small. They have a slim build, a nice head, regular features, fine eyes and quite regular teeth, but a yellow and swarthy complexion".³⁵

In the ancient continent of Africa, Buffon identifies a number of distinct peoples: "there are as many varieties of blacks as there are among whites".³⁶ Northern Africa is peopled by Arabs (the Maures); further South he distinguishes two broad races: the Nègres and the Cafres (Kaffirs). Who are the Negroes? It is clear—as Buffon's gaze ranges across the continent—that Negroes are defined as those peoples who are apt to be taken into slavery. They are not, for example, the Hottentots, who, though a "wretched people", are not only not as black as the Negroes but are, Buffon writes, jealous of their liberty, whereas the true Negroes "easily accustom themselves to the yoke of servitude".³⁷ Negroes are different again from the peoples of Sofala who "although quite dark are different from the Negroes; their features are softer and less ugly, their body has no unpleasant odour and they cannot endure servitude or work".³⁸ This description implies a link between positive aesthetic qualities ("less ugly") and the resistance to servitude.

Such descriptions provide a clear example of the transformation of a social relationship into a "natural" one: "Negroes" is a socially constructed category dependent on a particular economic context and power relationship, that of slavery and the slave trade.³⁹ In the *Encyclopédie*, the entry on the "Code noir" similarly uses the terms "Nègres" and "esclaves" or "esclaves noirs" interchangeably as quasi synonyms. Thus Buffon's classificatory system in fact reflects the reality of slavery: the dividing lines he draws, the criteria he uses, correspond to the commercial interests and agricultural practices of slave traders and plantation owners. Thus it is shocking, but not surprising, to find the great Buffon discussing which Negroes make the best slaves "pour nos îles", in other words, for the French West Indies.⁴⁰ Similar comments can again be found in the *Encyclopédie*, in the entry "Nègres. Commerce" for example, where the author lists the best sources for slaves: "les meilleurs nègres".⁴¹

Comments on the "nature!", the natural disposition of the Negroes (their idleness and craftiness, for example), reflect a context where they were slaves; information about their lives in Africa (often drawn from missionaries in the slave colonies⁴²) functions as an implicit justification of slavery. Left to themselves in their own lands, the Negroes produce nothing, Buffon claims: they take no advantage of the fertile valleys but live in the most barren and inhospitable places.⁴³ Buffon rails against the cruelty of many slave masters but he never condemns slavery as such. Indeed, his descriptions of the characteristics and lives of the Negroes, even of their appearance which, as we have seen, brings them close to animals, are implicit explanations of slavery, even justifications. The Negroes languish in brutish conditions until a stronger force makes them productive for others and for themselves, doing necessary violence to their natural disposition.

Although this article has concentrated on the aesthetic discourse surrounding human variety in the mid-eighteenth century French Enlightenment, it should be emphasised that ideas about the nature and origins of human variety were caught up in a range of discourses. It is not clear that aesthetic judgement is the primary or the originating source of discrimination. Rather it is one element in a complex series of categorisations which sometimes reinforced one another, and were sometimes contradictory. And the categories themselves had different boundaries, different qualities and functions in different discursive contexts. Thus, "savages" might be the ugliest, most wretched and unfortunate of men, cursed by climate and the accidents of nature—like those of Nouvelle Hollande, whom Buffon describes as the most miserable of men and those who most nearly approached brute animals.⁴⁴ But in a different discursive context they might re-appear in the guise of Natural Man, healthy, free and untroubled, whose simple life and virtues served as a foil to criticise the social vices and corruption of contemporary Europe. This ambiguity can be found at the level of individual thinkers, as the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau and de Jaucourt, illustrate: the same author might deploy contradictory characterisations in a single text, in different contexts. Thus Voltaire, in *Essai sur les Mœurs*, deplores the brutish state of the Cafres and Hottentots on page ten, and yet on page twenty-three compares the same peoples, along with other savage nations, favourably to the "true savages" of Europe: "the rustics who vegetate in our villages, and the sybarites who languish in our towns".⁴⁵ The various categorisations served different functions. But

in each case the humans disappeared behind the uses and abuses to which they were put by the interested classifications of the *philosophes*, when reason, science, nature and aesthetic judgements were often summoned to justify prejudice, traditional ideas and the social and economic status quo (what is real is natural and rational).

David Bindman sees 1775/6 as the pivotal year in the hardening of ideas about race and the construction of racial hierarchies, the year in which Blumenbach, Lavater and Kant published key texts on the subject. Clearly influenced by Buffon's ideas on degeneration, Blumenbach distinguished four races in the 1776 edition of *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, in later editions five, the differences arising through degeneration from an original stock. Though not an advocate of racial hierarchy, he held that the Caucasian was the primeval variety and the most beautiful, possessing notably the most beautiful skull.⁴⁶ Lavater concurred: "The beauty and the ugliness of a face has a correct and exact relationship to the beauty and ugliness of a person's moral condition"⁴⁷—especially the form of the skull: "the forehead of the Apollo indicates more wisdom, reflection, spirit, energy and sentiment than the flat nose of a Negro."⁴⁸

Kant, who was, according to John Zammito, "steeped in the writings of Buffon" (as also of Maupertuis, Bonnet and Haller⁴⁹) repeats, and even elaborates on the kind of judgements cited in this article. Discussing different national capacities to appreciate aesthetic and moral qualities in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), Kant asserts: "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling"⁵⁰—thus the inferior races have no feeling for the sublime, not even for the beautiful. On two occasions in later works, Kant cites the example of the Iroquois who was shown the sights of Paris but appreciated only the cook-shops.⁵¹ The higher faculties of discrimination thus accorded to the Europeans add one more criterion, in addition to skin colour, nose, profile, hair, and so on, to the search for distinctiveness which preoccupies Enlightenment writers on human variety.

In his 1775 essay on the different races of man, *Von den verschiedenen Racen des Menschen*, Kant argues for the existence of four distinct races, three of which are degenerations from an original stem genus: white brunette, which existed between the 31st and 52nd parallels in the Old World. The stem genus is currently best approximated by the inhabitants of Northern Germany, writes Kant: "very blond, soft white-skinned, red-haired, pale blue eyes".⁵² He puts forward a

number of reasons for believing in the existence of separate races, and particularly in the essential difference between Negroes and Whites: one is self-evident—"The reason for assuming the Negroes and Whites to be fundamental races is self-evident" – the context makes clear he is referring to their appearance.⁵³ He argues further that they must belong to different races since, if they intermarry, they produce children that are hybrid: deviations that developed from the original stem therefore maintain themselves over time. Kant thus nuances Buffon's argument that human beings belong to the same stock. Whereas most eighteenth century writers on human variety had been limited by the Biblical tradition and the assumption of monogenesis, Kant, in his "Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgement", shows an interest in arguments in favour of epigenesis.⁵⁴

In his Introduction to *Race and the Enlightenment*, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze argues that it is mistaken to believe that Kant's writings on race are a sideline to his main concerns: "rarely is it noted that Kant devoted the largest period of his career to research in, and teaching of, anthropology and cultural geography".⁵⁵ These comments are supported by Michèle Cohen-Halimi who points out that Kant was the first to introduce the discipline of physical geography into the university and that while his early courses were limited to purely physical descriptions of the earth, from 1772 to 1773 he extended his concerns to anthropology.⁵⁶ It is striking that his descriptions of the various peoples of the earth in such courses reveal the intermingling of moral and aesthetic judgements. Thus, in his lectures on physical geography, Kant writes:

In the hot countries, the human being matures in all aspects earlier, but does not, however, reach the perfection of those in the temperate zones. Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent, the Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples All inhabitants of the hottest zones are exceptionally lethargic. With some this laziness is somewhat mitigated by rule and force.... The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world, above all the central part, has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world. That is why, at all points in time these peoples have educated others and controlled them with weapons.⁵⁷

Such comments lead seamlessly on from the moral and aesthetic to the political: lethargy, laziness, lack of self-control justify, indeed

require, intervention, even violence. Similar judgements can be found in his more strictly philosophical writings too: a throwaway line in the "Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgement" questions the point of the existence of the New Hollanders and the Fuegians: "... yet one does not see why it is necessary that human beings exist (a question which, if one thinks about the New Hollanders or the Fuegians might not be so easy to answer)".⁵⁸

This brief discussion of Kant's ideas on race indicates how widespread such ideas were, even amongst those thinkers who might be expected to be most inured against them; who might be expected to question the basis of 'information' which was so readily and uncritically repeated. The similarity between Kant's arguments and those of Buffon and the *encyclopédistes* reinforces Eze's comment on the interdependence of ideas about race in the Enlightenment.⁵⁹ Diderot quotes Buffon, Kant (1764) quotes Hume's notorious footnote on the (in)capacities of blacks and concludes: "... so fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour".⁶⁰ And yet, as Eze also points out, counter-arguments were widely circulated, indeed were openly discussed, as the Kant-Herder debate demonstrates.⁶¹ Camper, also writing in 1764, vigorously denied the existence of fundamental differences between whites and blacks and questioned whether white was the original colour of man.⁶² De Jaucourt's entry, "Esclavage", in the *Encyclopédie* offers a sustained and passionate rebuttal of the range of arguments used at the time to justify slavery, insisting that it is a practice contrary to both reason and nature. Affirming the inalienable dignity and liberty natural to all men, his entry shows that other positions were possible within the framework of Enlightenment ideas. And yet even De Jaucourt resorts in other entries to standard descriptions of the vices of the black man.⁶³

The systems of differentiation found in Buffon and the *encyclopédistes*, and which influenced other Enlightenment thinkers, involved overlapping moral, physical and aesthetic judgements of superiority and inferiority that placed European man at the summit of what are presented as natural hierarchies. It is impossible to doubt—whatever their overt scientific intentions—that their classifications were impelled by a search for distinction: whatever the criteria chosen, they inevitably redounded to the credit of white men. The examples in this article of the application to human variety of what were claimed to be universal aesthetic standards illustrate how readily

these judgements can be traduced by actual social and economic relationships. Far from being independent of such power relationships, aesthetic judgements were summoned to support traditional prejudice and current social and economic realities.

Michel Foucault has identified a set of fundamental cleavages in Western thought: reason against madness, truth opposed to falsehood, that constitute not only the bases on which Western thought is organised but form complex systems of exclusion and domination.⁶⁴ In the discourses on human variety studied in this article we can recognise the unquestioned prestige attributed not only to the claims of reason, science, truth, and nature, but also to judgements of beauty. Indeed judgements of beauty are conflated with judgements about the rational, the natural, the moral, the true ("equally remote from truth and from beauty" writes Buffon).⁶⁵ The pair beauty/ugliness thus functions in association with the other sets of oppositions as another "principe d'exclusion ... un partage et un rejet".⁶⁶ Foucault argues further that all criteria of judgement and spheres of intellectual activity in Western thought are increasingly drawn into the orbit of truth claims.⁶⁷ Thus, from the second half of the eighteenth century, ever more determined attempts will be made to prove scientifically the validity of aesthetic and moral hierarchies decided in advance

Notes

The translations into English of passages from the *Encyclopédie* and *Histoire naturelle* throughout the article are my own. The original is quoted in the end-notes.

- 1 George M. Fredrickson, *Racism, A Short History* (Carlton North, Victoria: Scribe Publications, 2002), p. 63.
- 2 *Racism, A Short History*, p. 56.
- 3 Elizabeth Rechniewski, "References to 'national character' in the *Encyclopédie*: the western European nations", in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 12 (November 2003), pp. 221-37.
- 4 *Racism, A Short History*, p. 61.
- 5 George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: a History of European Racism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1978), p. 2.
- 6 David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 7.
- 7 A word search of the *Encyclopédie* produces 233 references to Buffon.

- 8 The interpenetration of ideas on natural history between the *Encyclopédie* and the *Histoire naturelle* has been the subject of a recent article: Jeff Loveland, "Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton and the *Encyclopédie*" in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 12 (November 2003), pp. 173-219. He does not however address the specific question of human variety.
- 9 "La providence y a pourvu par rapport à nous; & une chose vraiment belle, est assez ordinairement une chose bonne", "Beau", *L'Encyclopédie* vol 2, 1751.
- 10 "[I.] La perception des rapports est donc le fondement du beau".
- 11 "In the combination of Buffon's and Daubenton's discussions, the eighteenth century was supplied with its longest single discussion to date of the human species as a scientific, zoological object", Philip R. Sloan, "The Gaze of Natural History", in *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains*, Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler, eds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 130.
- 12 "Buffon criticised Linnaeus's system of classification because it remained at the level of abstract universals without connection to the material and concrete order of nature", Sloan, "The Gaze of Natural History", p. 128.
- 13 Phillip R. Sloan, "The Buffon-Linnaeus controversy", in *Isis*, 67 (1976), pp. 356-75.
- 14 In the order of Primates Linnaeus identifies types of *homo diurnus* as: *Homo rufus, cholericus, rectus: Americanus; Homo albus, sanguineus, torofus: Europeanus; Homo luridus, melancholicus, rigidus: Asiaticus; Homo niger, phlegmaticus, laxus: Afer* and *Homo monstrosus* (1735).
- 15 *L'Esprit des lois*, Book XIV, ch 2. Such experiments had already been carried out by Arbuthnot in England.
- 16 The question of whether hot climates can justify slavery occupies several passages in *L'Esprit*, Book XV, chs 1-8.
- 17 *Oeuvres complètes de Buffon, tome II: L'homme—Les Quadrupèdes* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1821), p. 220.
- 18 Londa L. Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 131.
- 19 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 205: "la couleur primitive de la nature"; "la nature, aussi parfaite qu'elle peut l'être, a fait les hommes blancs".
- 20 Pierre H. Bouille, "François Bernier and the Origins of the Modern Concept of Race", in *The Colour of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 14.
- 21 Voltaire attaches particular importance to hair in distinguishing different species of Man, affirming that: "les blancs barbus, les nègres portant laine, les jaunes portant crins, et les hommes sans barbe, ne viennent pas du même homme", *Traité de Métaphysique*, reproduced from the Kehl text

- with Preface, Notes and Variants by H. Temple Patterson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957), p. 5. The *Traité* was originally published in 1734.
- 22 "Leur peau est très noire; leurs cheveux sont une véritable laine, & leurs moutons portent du poil," "Guinée", *L'Encyclopédie*. "Poil" can refer to both human and animal hair.
- 23 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 220.
- 24 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 138: "une race d'hommes qui semblent avoir dégénérés de l'espèce humaine."
- 25 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 137: "le naturel des différens peuples", opening paragraph of "Variétés dans l'espèce humaine".
- 26 "[L]a première et la plus remarquable".
- 27 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 138: "Une race d'hommes de petite stature, d'une figure bizarre, dont la physionomie est aussi sauvage que les moeurs."
- 28 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 140: "sans courage, sans respect pour soi-même, sans pudeurs; ce peuple abject n'a de moeurs qu'assez pour être méprisé."
- 29 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 138.
- 30 "Tous ces peuples laids sont grossiers, superstitieux & stupides." "Humaine espèce".
- 31 Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 104.
- 32 *Laid/s*, eight occurrences; *grossier/s*, three.
- 33 *Beau/beaux/belle/belles*, fifteen occurrences; *bien fait/e/s*, ten.
- 34 "[L]es Tunquinois dont le pays est meilleur, & qui vivent sous un climat moins chaud que les Cochinchinois, sont mieux faits & moins laids." "Humaine espèce":
- 35 "Les Espagnols sont maigres & assez petits. Ils ont la taille fine, la tête belle, les traits réguliers, les yeux beaux, les dents assez bien rangées, mais le teint jaune & basané." "Humaine espèce":
- 36 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 214.
- 37 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 189: "s'accoutument aisément au joug de la servitude".
- 38 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 193: "quoique assez noirs, sont différens des Nègres; ils n'ont pas les traits si durs, ni si laids, leur corps n'a point de mauvaise odeur et ils ne peuvent supporter ni la servitude ni le travail".
- 39 Colette Guillaumin, "The Idea of Race and its Elevation to Autonomous, Scientific and Legal Status", in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Unesco, 1980), p. 39.

- 40 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 187.
- 41 "Les meilleurs nègres se tirent du cap Verd, d'Angole, du Sénégal, du royaume des Jaloffes, de celui de Galland, de Damel, de la rivière de Gambie, de Majugard, de Bar, &c. "Nègres.Commerce".
- 42 Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et Histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), p.209.
- 43 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 185.
- 44 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes, tome II*, p. 157.
- 45 Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs*, René Pomeau, ed. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1963), p. 23 (my translation).
- 46 Blumenbach's ideas on the degeneration of the races are quoted in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1997, pp. 79-90.
- 47 Lavater, volume 1 of *Physiognomische Fragmente*, 1775, quoted in Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*, p. 95.
- 48 Lavater, *Essays in Physiognomy, III*, quoted in Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*, p. 113.
- 49 John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 302.
- 50 Quoted in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 55.
- 51 Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement", in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 90.
- 52 Quoted in *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 48.
- 53 Quoted in *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 42.
- 54 Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgement", in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, p. 292. See Zammito pp. 302-7 for a detailed discussion of Kant's views on epigenesis.
- 55 *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 2.
- 56 Michèle Cohen-Halimi, "L'anthropologie dans la géographie humaine", in *L'année 1798: Kant sur l'Anthropologie* (Actes du colloque de Dijon de la Société d'Etudes kantienne de langue française, 9-11 mai 1996, Paris: Vrin, 1997), p. 119.
- 57 Quoted in *Race and the Enlightenment*, pp. 63-4.
- 58 "Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgement", *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, p. 250.
- 59 *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 7.
- 60 Quoted in *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 55.
- 61 *Race and the Enlightenment*, ch 5. Kant wrote a review of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, a text which challenged the classification of races according to skin colour and the hierarchy of cultures. See also Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, pp. 344-5, for a brief comparison of Kant and Herder's ideas on race.

- 62 Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*, pp. 203-4.
63 De Jaucourt is responsible for the entry "Guinée" cited above.
64 Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 10-16.
65 Buffon, *Oeuvres complètes*, tome II, p. 220.
66 Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, p. 12.
67 Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, p. 21.