

# **Enlightenment, Scientific Racism and Slavery : A Historical Point**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper addresses a destructive and regrettable development in western European thought. The passages quoted here are frequently blatant in their opinion and no doubt offensive. It is the intent of this paper to examine the unfounded and often wildly speculative origin of the so-called "scientific racism" through which non-white peoples were "justifiably" enslaved or oppressed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This paper dares quote such opinions in the belief that in understanding and evaluating the origin, one may more accurately and thoroughly respond to these notions which are echoed, if not shouted, by various segments of contemporary culture.*

**Keywords:** enlightmeny, racism, slavery, modernism, western culture

## **I. In the Age of Enlightenment and Fascination**

Western Europe's eighteenth century, the self-proclaimed age of Enlightenment, was an era in which men of learning or means advanced to new depths questions of society, religion, science and humanity. These men were the "philosophes", Lovers of Wisdom, whose writings characterize the era and hold the status of classics in contemporary libraries. This paper will examine in particluar the philosophes' treatment of what would become a nebulous topic which perhaps has impacted later history to a greater degree than any other from that era. Eighteenth century European science and philosophy regarding non-European/non-white peoples put procceses in motion which to this day remain influential and which directly contributed to the death or oppression of tens of millions of non-whites through slavery or conquest.

In addition to increased interest in specifically local or internal matters, western Europe of the seventeenth and eighteenth witnessed

unparalleled political and exploratory expansion which brought exciting new places and peoples to the imagination of the public. Through encounters with these other people groups it was quickly realized that even "primitive" cultures possessed undeniably high morality and the sense of nobility. For some, this resulted in lengthy inquiries regarding the true nature and origin of modern society and politics. Others sought a meaningful comparison of these highly moral "pagan" religions with the exemplar of unrivaled religious authority in Europe, Christianity. It is clear that for many philosophes, these foreign peoples embodied an innocent nobility which they deemed lacking within their overcivilized culture.

Very early on, general and speculative opinions also advanced regarding the various non-European people groups due to prolonged encounters with merchants and explorers. The accounts of these encounters clearly show that the Asians were respected for their civilization and social order, which predated Europe's. The Native American's physical attributes and demeanor were deemed both gentle and "god-like". However, despite such general compliments, both these groups were categorized as "savage" along with a third group, the African, with whom significantly less contact had been made by the Europeans. It is perhaps primarily due to the extreme difficulty European explorers faced in penetrating the interior of the African continent, that the fate of the African, both in European opinion and outcome, was to immensely differ from the Asian and Indian. Sixteenth and seventeenth century myths and stories concerning the African haunted the eighteenth century explorer, so much so, that Pruneau de Pommegorge, a merchant within Upper Senegal writes:

"it is impossible to have knowledge of the far interior of the country, because to reach it one has to cross so many nations which are often barbaric, that the white who would be brave enough to attempt such a voyage would have his neck chopped off before he reached it." (Pruneau de Pommegorge, 1789:150).

The safety of the coasts and rivers allowed the French to penetrate as far as the source of the Senegal River. But, as Abbe Prevost admitted, knowledge of Africa

"is limited nearly to the coast and some of the rivers such as the Senegal and the Gambia. We know the interior sites so little that we cannot with certitude speak of their location, their extensions and limits ... Africa is nearly unknown as compared to Asia and America, although it hardly is inferior in the variety and value of its products". (Prevost ,1746: 139).

It is for this reason, namely the inability of European explorers to penetrate the African mainland, that we find eighteenth century writers and philosophes relying mainly, if not exclusively, upon seventeenth century works claiming to explain, though vaguely, the African continent.

## **II. Source One: Abbe Prevost's *Histoire***

In 1745 John Green published in London with great success the New General Collection of Voyages and Travels on this wave of increasing interest in foreign travels. Of this four volume work, one volume dealt exclusively with Africa. Abbe Prevost later translated this work into French, mainly due to personal financial hardships. The French translation of Greene's work encompassed seven volumes, to which Prevost added eight more volumes consisting of his own collections and insights. Prevost's fifteen volume set was published between 1746 and 1759 entitled *Histoire generale des voyages* and quickly became incredibly successful. (Prevost's work was posthumously expanded to twenty-one volumes.). Although the first edition soon became an expensive collector's item, many could afford the less expensive *quarto* edition published in eighty-volumes over the period of 1746 and 1789.

Not only did major explorers and voyagers such as Montcalm and Bougainville carry Prevost's edition with them across the seas, but it clearly influenced the writings and thought of the philosophes. Buffon, the *Encyclopedie* (the *Opus Magnus* of the era), and Rousseau

all gleaned most of their information from Prevost and often even plagiarized the *Histoire*. (Cohen, 1980:66).

Prevost's information on Africa, however, was a hodgepodge collection which he had simply taken from previous seventeenth and early eighteenth century accounts and opinions by various authors. His financial motive and subsequent haste in writing the *Histoire* added to an inconsistency and contradictory view of African peoples. For example, of the West Africans, Prevost writes:

"Since they are naturally sly and violent they cannot live in peace with each other. The Europeans who are not safe from their insults can find no better vengeance than to burn their huts and ruin their plantations. On the other hand the Negroes of Sierra Leone are sober... They have more feeling and intelligence than the Negroes in the other parts of the Guinea Coast." (Prevost, 3:236).

Elsewhere Prevost states:

"The Negroes in general are given over to incontinence. Their women, who are no less stirred by the pleasure of the senses, employ herbs and barks to excite their husbands. These vicious customs reign here... But the inhabitants (of the Guinea Coast) are more moderate, more gentle, more sociable than the other Negroes. They do not like to shed blood, and don't think of war unless they are forced to by the need to defend themselves." (Ibid,595)

Prevost commonly uses this pattern of presenting favorable qualities of a particular group as an exception to the whole of the African peoples. As we noted earlier, European bias against the Africans may derive quite directly from the impenetrability of the African mainland and the resulting mystery/ignorance regarding those peoples. In support of this suggestion we can here point to the interesting fact that those groups of Africans of which Prevost speaks most favorably are in fact those groups with which Europe was most familiar, namely the

populations of the northwest coast of the African mainland. Thus Prevost deems the more familiar group as an exception of civility and respectability to the otherwise mysterious remainder of African peoples.

### **III. Source Two: Buffon's *L'histoire naturelle***

A second major collection informing eighteenth century France of the non-European world was Count Buffon's *L'histoire naturelle* (The Natural History). Buffon, like Prevost, merely gleaned, summarized and expanded accounts and notions already at his disposal. Buffon's work, however, seems to have been more widely read than Prevost's. A modern study of 500 eighteenth-century private libraries discovered Buffon's *L'histoire* to be the **third most commonly owned work**. (Mornet, 1910: 460).

Buffon's passages pertaining to Africa were undoubtedly more literary entertainment than accurate account. One very vivid example of this is found in his description of the men of Guinea as "idle and inactive, lacking any sense of imagination or innovation. They were said to become debauched at an early age and also commonly died young due to exhaustion caused by too frequent sexual intercourse since youth" (Leclerc & Buffon, 1811:284-85; 291).

Such incredible statements resulted in Buffon's work later being dubbed the "unnatural" Natural History. A greater and more unfortunate result was that such over-generalised and wildly exaggerated statements posing as science clearly contributed to a very visible and predominant negative opinion of African peoples by Enlightenment thinkers.

Examples of the influence of Buffon and Prevost's works upon individuals who had themselves never ventured off European shores are easily produced. The following are offered merely as examples of the manner in which negative opinions regarding the Africans were propagated on sheer dependence upon the prior popular accounts.

Voltaire, the otherwise self-persuaded independent thinker claims that "[blacks] are incapable of great attention, they reason little, and do not seem made to enjoy the advantages nor the disadvantages of our philosophy." (Voltaire, CC, 12:357 ).

Regarding the *whole* of the African continent, the supplement to the Encyclopedie says: "The government is nearly everywhere bizarre, despotic, and totally dependent on the passions and the whims of the sovereign. These people have, so to speak, only ideas from one day to the next, their laws have no principles... no consistency other than that of a lazy and blind habit. They are blamed for ferociousness, cruelty, perfidy (i.e. treachery), cowardice, laziness. This accusation is but too true." (Jaucourt, 780: 194).

Under the heading "Negroes, character of Negroes in general", the Encyclopedie describes "the large number" of Africans as "always vicious... mostly inclined to lasciviousness, vengeance, theft and lies". (Diderot, 11, 82).

#### **IV. Classifying Differences: The Origins of "Racism"**

Many Enlightenment authors attempted to probe and solve the question of physical differences between the African and European peoples. Though many might claim as significant differences exist between Europeans and Africans as between Asian and Europeans, the cumulative negative speculation regarding Africans lent itself to a near fascination in comparing the lightest and darkest skinned peoples.

As early as 1684, the French physician Francois Bernier, in an article published in a Paris journal, proposed a new method of classifying human differences. Rather than the ancient system of dividing according to geographical regions, Bernier proposed, perhaps for the first time academically, that peoples be classified according to facial and bodily appearances and figurations. Using this method, he recognized four general classifications or races: Europeans, Far Easterners, "blacks", and the Lapps. ("Nouvelle Division de la Terre, 1684: 133-40). According to Bernier's classes, the Native American is a subgroup of one of these, though he never specifies which. Despite

apparent overgeneralization, most marked in his optimism/naivete regarding knowledge of the whole of humanity, Bernier is remembered as possibly the first attempt to define "classes" of humankind. (Gossett,1963:.33).

Bernier's theory of innate differences among classes of people seemed to contradict a favorite presupposition of the philosophes, John Locke's "tabula rasa" and its implications of limitless possibility in education and enlightenment. For this very reason, Leibniz objected to Bernier's theory stating that although visible differences exist among groups of men, "that is no reason why all men who inhabit the earth should not be of the same race, which has been altered by different climates, as we see that beasts and plants change their nature, and improve or degenerate". (von Leibnitz, 1718 t:.37; quoted in Montagu, 1942:19).

#### **V. Environmental theory**

Leibniz's "environmental theory" was in fact also held by Buffon, though Buffon also clearly believed the "white" race to be the epitomy of races, and that all others were exotic variations of the same species. According to Buffon, the African's blackness became "hereditary" due to prolonged, excessive heat of the tropical sun. He also believed this implied that the African emmigrating to the northern regions would eventually lighten in color, "perhaps as white as the natives of that climate". Whereas temperature alone was not able to explain all observable differences, altitude, proximity to the sea, diet and social customs were also suggested as causes. Thus Buffon's view of race was **temporal**, stating that it "persists as long as the milieu remains and disappears when the milieu is changed". (Leclerc &Buffon, 1791, VIII:34-35).

Notions of environmental or climatic impact upon human development may have already been in place by this time. For example, the memoirs of the French Academy of Sciences in 1705 states that a child who has learned the rudiments of Latin forgets it all during the hot season, but regains this knowledge during the winter. The French Journal des savans likewise claimed that Newton could

work more easily and successfully during the winter than during the summer.( Mercier, 1960:161). Both these references point toward the assumption that the heat of tropical environments decreases mental acuity and activity while colder climates enable learning and educational progress.

Montesquieu, building on this foundation, suggested that despotism flourishes in hot countries and while more temperate zones are the home of "constitutional" societies. In Montesquie's thinking, all men were originally equal but the intensity of the heat caused visible and predictable gradations among them. He writes (again, we note, without his ever entering Africa):

"You will find in the climates of the north, peoples with few vices, many virtues, sincerity and truthfulness. Approach the south, you will think you are leaving morality itself, the passions become more vivacious and multiply crimes... The heat can be so excessive that the body is totally without force. The resignation passes to the spirit and leads people to be without curiosity, nor the desire for noble enterprise."  
([Secondat, 2:.562](#)).

The environmental theory clearly lacked comprehensive explanatory power, and so creative attempts were made to provide for its inadequacy. For example, regarding differences in facial features among Africans and Europeans, Daubenton, Buffon's assistant, wildly and without any evidential substantiation, stated that Africans were not born with "noses that flat, and lips that thick", but claims that African parents, after judging their children to be lacking in beauty, would "crush their noses and squeeze their lips so that they swell and thus believe they have beautified nature while disfiguring it".  
([Daubenton, 1, 1782:xxxiii](#))

Regarding facial features Volney had a different theory:

"The countenance of the Negroes represents precisely that stage of contraction that our faces assume when strongly affected by



heat. The eyebrows are knit, the cheeks rise, the eyelids are contracted and the mouth distorted. This state of contraction, to which the features are perpetually exposed in the hot climates of the Negroes, has become the peculiar characteristic of their countenance." (Volney, 1, 1787:.80).

In summary, the environmental theory, while upholding the original equality of race among men, very clearly stated that all humans were originally white and that unnatural or extreme ecological conditions caused degeneration among the people of particular (non-white) areas.

The wedding of environment and subsequent biological theories gave rise to a legion of new "sciences" which at first simply drew sharper distinctions between "races" but later inevitably created an incomprehensible chasm between the European and African peoples.

## **VI. Biological theory**

Cornelius de Pauw perhaps exemplifies the movement from environmental to biological factors when he states that Africans, as victims of the sun, were darkened, and thus their "physiognomy" was "disfigured". He then goes on to say, "The most delicate and subtle organs of the brain have been destroyed or obliterated by the fire of their native land, and their intellectual faculties have been weakened." (de Pauw, 2, 1774:56; and *ibid.*, 1:52; quoted in Duchet, 1969:123).

Here the theoretical jump is made from temporal, environmental changes in physical appearance to the notion that physical differences (from Europeans) entail irrecoverable "damage" to brain and body. This notion of "damage" to the brain clearly precludes expectation of restoration and fuels a very prolonged (and mistaken) series of speculations regarding "brain size" whereby permanent distinctions among people groups were attempted. Historically, once this conceptual jump from environment to biology is accepted, there remained no real obstacle to purely biological classifications of humans, what we today understand as "racism".

The science of "Craniology" was introduced by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a professor of medicine at the University of Gottingen in 1775. Blumenbach had a profound interest in collecting skeletons, especially crania, from differing peoples and regions throughout the world. Blumenbach, after examining his skulls, concluded that humankind could be divided into five classifications: American, Mongolian, Ethiopian, **Caucasian**, and Malay. Of his five classification, the reader no doubt recognizes that one in particular remains widely used to this day, that of "Caucasian". In fact Blumenbach's classifications appear to the present day in various textbooks and are even codified in various laws. His five varieties are usually named by the colors "red, yellow, black, white, and brown", respectively.

Blumenbach's term "caucasian" derives from his possession of a single skull from the Caucasian mountain region in Russia. After finding strong resemblances between this particular skull and those of the Germans he conjectured that the Caucasian region was possibly the original home of the Europeans. (Gottingen, 1795, pp.viii, 264-65).

Although Blumenbach sharply criticized those holding to a superiority or inferiority of certain races, he also claimed that the "most perfect" skull was the single Caucasian skull he owned. (alrighty then...)

A contemporary of Blumenbach, Peter Camper, a Dutch painter, attempted to aid other painters struggling to capture the features of the Africans. He created a system measuring the "prognathism" or "prominence of the lower part of the face among Africans". Camper, by slightly decreasing the degree of angle of the faces, claimed to demonstrate the similarity of facial structure between African and beast:

"If I make the facial line lean forward, I have an antique head; if backward, the head of a Negro. If I still more incline it, I have the head of an ape; and if more still, that of a dog, and then that of an idiot". (Cunningham, 1908: 20, 26).

Camper's theory was severely criticized by Blumenbach, but was nevertheless uncritically adopted by the French and made its way into the foundation of nineteenth-century racist thought. (Haddon, 1934:16, 31). The notion of the (construed) similarity of African and beast fueled "polygenist" (lit. "multiple origin") theories which claim that most, if not all, non-white peoples are derived from non-Adamic and thus, "biblically speaking", non-humanic races. This perspective, of course, opens all manner of justification for "discriminating" between "races". An example of discriminatory polygenist thought is found in the recently (and unfortunately) popularized "Church of the Creator" which considers non-white people groups "mud people" due to their non-Adamic origin (hence the emphasis on *Creator*).

"Monogenism" therefore is the belief that all humans find their origin in the same original parents, and if one is to believe the Scriptural account of the origin of humanity and its gradual spread to diverse geographical regions (including Africa), this is undoubtedly the biblical position. But as we have seen, monogenism, as espoused by many of the philosophes assumed that all variations (away from the white) in people groups was due to a degeneration through environmental causes of the original white(r) people. This dual definition of monogenism, namely the biblical account on the one hand and environmental theory (presumably) on the other, resulted in its being targeted by both critics of the Church and of environmentalism. In other words, by lumping the biblical account and environmental theory together, critics could as easily attack one as the other.

Voltaire, who perhaps more than any individual is equated with enlightenment thought, exemplifies this effort to target at one and the same time both the Church's authority in seemingly scientific matters and the environmental theory. In this pre-Darwinian age, the major argument against the environmental theory was the observation that generations of dark peoples did not turn lighter after migrating to less harsh regions, nor did generations of lighter peoples turn darker by migrating to harsher regions. Thus this seemingly irrefutable

observation allowed Voltaire and other critics of the Church's monogenism to speak very confidently of the polygenistic alternative. Those familiar with Voltaire's writing have learned to expect nothing but overly colorful and intentionally controversial arguments. Thus readers are here warned that his statements quoted here regarding African and non-white peoples are no less controversial. The author's purpose in providing these passages is to reveal to what extent sheer assumption regarding the African people penetrated even the most iconic of enlightenment thinkers. As to Voltaire's personal "knowledge" of the situations he describes below, it must be noted that not only did he never touch foot on African soil, but an analysis of his personal library reveals that out of 3,867 books (titles), only 4 dealt with Africa.

On the difference between the African and European, Voltaire writes: The negro race is a species of men different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds. The mucous membrane, or network, which nature has spread between the muscles and the skin, is white in us and black or copper-colored in them. (Voltaire, 1878: .5-6).

On the difference in the measure of intelligence:

Their round eyes, their flat nose, their lips which are always thick, their differently shaped ears, the wool on their head, the measure even of their intelligence establishes between them and other species of men prodigious differences.

If their understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seem formed neither in the advantages nor the abuses of our philosophy. (Op Cit., p-240).

On the exclusion of any non-white people:

As the negro of Africa has not his original from us whites, why should the red, olive, or ash-colored peoples of America come from our countries? (ibid,241).

And as regards Voltaire's opinion of Scripture's monogenism:

It is a serious question among them whether [the Africans] are descended from monkeys or whether the monkeys come from them. Our wise men have said that man was created in the image of God. Now here is a lovely image of the Divine Maker: a flat and black nose with little or hardly any intelligence. A time will doubtless come when these animals will know how to cultivate the land well, beautify their houses and gardens, and know the paths of the stars: one needs time for everything." (ibid, 241).

### **VII. Racism and Slavery: A Feeble Backlash**

It soon became apparent to conscientious contemporaries that this direction of thought was establishing a philosophical basis for slavery and the subjugation of Africans (and other non-whites). Purely economically-driven individuals seized upon these speculations and very quickly justified slave trade and made it the unrivaled industry for more than 100 years.

During this time we see many previously outspoken polygenists such as Abbe Raynal reverse views to better promote their anti-slavery convictions, and polygenism soon became significantly outnumbered and overshadowed by influential monogenists such as Buffon and Blumenbach. The popular realization that polygenism was a pawn for an apparently brutal slave industry resulted in its very rapid decline within the writings of the philosophes.

In essence, the entire notion of polygenism was dropped and its advocated positions (and so also arguments against it) were no longer developed or seriously pursued. According to the evidence of the historic record, polygenism was discarded by all serious players due to the common-sense realization that its resultant human injustice was indefensible. Ironically, for this very reason, contemporary polygenist rhetoric by groups such as the recently infamous Church of the Creator catch even wisened individuals off-guard and encounter little if any anti-polygenist literature. By resurrecting a perspective cast

aside more than 200 years ago, polygenist groups easily appear to provide an either new or ancient solution to social problems.

By far, the most influential theory regarding the nature and social position of the races, as well as the order of all creation is known as "the Great Chain of Being". This notion is generally believed to have begun with Aristotle's statement that "some [men] are marked out for subjection". This idea held that:

The universe resembles a large and well-regulated family, in which all the officers and servants, and even the domestic animals, are subservient to each other in a proper subordination; each enjoys the privileges and prerequisites peculiar to his place, and at the same time contributes, by that just subordination, to the magnificence and happiness of the whole. (Jenyns, 1757, quoted in Lovejoy, 1957:.207).

The Chain of Being by definition denied any great rift among species and so was often interpreted as denying the category of "specie" altogether. For example, John Locke, in book III of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* refuted the idea of systematic divisions since such were merely man-made categories. Locke admitted the existence of "real essences", implying necessary attributes within each "nature", but stated that only the Creator and possibly the angels were acquainted with these "real essences", and thus mortal men were incapable of grasping them, with the exception of essences of mathematical figures and perhaps, moral properties. Locke writes:

Our distinguishing substances into species by names is not at all founded on their real essences; nor can we pretend to range and determine them exactly into species, according to essential internal differences. (Locke, 111, Ch.6, 3.6.).

And elsewhere:

I do not deny that nature, in the constant production of particular beings, makes them not always new and various, but

very much alike and of kin to one another; but I think it nevertheless true that the boundaries of species, whereby men sort them, are made by men. (*Ibid.*, § 27).

Locke believed that even the essence of "man" cannot be defined by "precise and unmovable boundaries set by nature". It is only through arbitrary definitions created by man "that we can say: This is a man, this is a [baboon]; and in this, I think, consists the whole business of "genus" and species". (*Ibid.*, § 36.)

Following Locke, Buffon, in *Histoire Naturelle* (1749) argued extensively against the whole of systematics, and concludes by saying, "In general, the more one increases the number of one's divisions, in the case of the products of nature, the nearer one comes to the truth; since in reality individuals alone exist in nature." (*Buffon*, 1,1749: 38).

In like manner, Diderot's *Encyclopedie* gives the relationship between this "systemless system" and the philosophe:

"...Everything in nature is linked together," since "beings are connected with one another by a chain of which we perceive some parts as continuous, though in the greater number of points the continuity escapes us," the "art of the philosopher consists in adding new links to the separated parts, in order to reduce the distance between them as much as possible. But we must not flatter ourselves that gaps will not still remain in many places." (*Encyclopedie*, art. "Cosmologie").

Heeding Diderot's call to "add new links", many indeed submitted new theories regarding the relation of the "seperate parts" of nature, and of particular interest was apparently the possible link between man and apes.

### **VIII. Origins of the Contemporary Model**

The Swedish naturalist Carol von Linnaeus listed five human races which he believed revealed a descending order in the Chain of Being. Linnaeus' chain went as follows: white, Native American, Asian,

African, and "homo troglodytes". The "troglodytes" were, according to Linnaeus, "monstrous", and his classification of them is apparently due to both the "Troglodytes" of ancient classical mythology and Linnaeus' notions of orangutans. (Linne, I,1956: 24-25).

Of importance here is not simply Linnaeus' naivete regarding the status of mythological creatures, but that he classifies these half ape, half human creatures *within* the human races.

In 1753, perhaps following Linnaeus' lead, Jean Jaques Rousseau asserted that the higher apes, namely the orangutan or the chimpanzee are of the same species as man, and that language was not originally "natural to man", but is simply an art which one variety of the species developed. (Jean Jacques Rousseau. *Second Discourse on Inequality*, note j).

Though this growing opinion did not elevate the social position of the monkey, it did drastically lower social esteem of African peoples. The "fact" that both apes and Africans were black added to the credibility of these "missing link" theories. Other "evidence" involved the fact that both African and ape were of the same geographical region. J.D. Robinet, an important French writer wrote in 1768 that the orangutans lived in Angola, "where the ugliest and stupidest" Africans also resided. (Robinet, 1768:168).

Those rare eyewitnesses of the Africans did very little to alleviate negative "scientific" and popular opinion. For example, Larimar, himself a former official in Senegal, wrote that the people south of the Gambia River physically resembled primates in their appearance due to their social relations, lack of "proper" language, and nudity. He thus concluded that there exists "no intermediary species between this race of men and the men of the woods [orangutans]." (Cohen,87) The bored yet excitable European imagination soon enthusiastically entertained and proliferated stories of African women being carried off by sexually excited male apes as mates and the alleged promiscuity of the African women who, it was claimed, invited either man or ape.



This topic of the "baseness" or depravity of the African seems to have captivated the imagination of many enlightenment thinkers, to the extent of renewing interest in "physiognomics". Hardly new, physiognomics had been present since Aristotle's proclamation that:

"When men have large foreheads, they are slow to move; when they have small ones, they are fickle; when they have broad ones, they are apt to be distraught; when they have foreheads rounded or bulging out, they are quick-tempered."

### **IX. Physiognomics**

In the 1780's, France enthusiastically welcomed Caspar Lavater, the Swiss popularizer of the physiognomic school. The first edition of his work *Essai sur la physionomie detine a faire connaitre l'homme et le faire aimer* was published in 1780, and was followed by eight more editions in the next half-century. The original physiognomic theory, that an individual's character is discernable by physical appearance, was soon expanded to the assumption that a whole people group (or "race") is discernable by its members' physical appearance. Thus skin color, being the most visible physical difference, became thought of as indicative of inner character.

This esteem of skin color quickly became interwoven with French sentiments of aesthetics, and soon even major writers such as Diderot and Maupertuis bluntly state that they deem black peoples as "ugly". Many statements on the blackness of Africans made by writers at this time seem to spiritualize skin color. Darkness was said to imply depravity and whiteness nobility and a closer proximity to perfection. Daubenton declared Europeans "the model for beauty" and Bougainville that "blacks were much more savage than the Indians, whose color approached that of whites." (Daubenton, 1, p.xxxi; Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde*).

Physiognomics' basic and most desctructive premise is that physical variations in color and appearance not only result in "intellectual and moral differences" among people groups, but that such differences account for or cause intellectual and moral differences. Though

subtly different, the latter notion is clearly "racism" as understood in modern parlance.

Let's see if you recognize notions implied in the following passages:

Georges Cuvier, at the end of the eighteenth-century, epitomizes the ultimate conclusion of physiognomics when he writes:

The white race, with oval face, straight hair and nose, to which the civilized peoples of Europe belong and which appear to us the most beautiful of all, is also superior to others by its genius, courage and activity. (And that there is a) cruel law which seems to have condemned to an eternal inferiority the races of depressed and compressed skulls. ...and experience seems to confirm the theory that there is a relationship between the perfection of the spirit and the beauty of the face."

J.J. Virey, a medical doctor, wrote, "All the ugly peoples are more or less barbarians, beauty is the inseparable companion of the most civilized nations.""

The German art historian Johann Winckelmann suggested that "our capacity to think is normally analogous to the shape of our body." He went on to summarize the mission of the European: "The European, called by destiny to run the empire of the globe which he knows how to enlighten by his intelligence, tame by his abilities, is man par excellence, the others are nothing but hordes of barbarians". (Daubenton, 1, p.xxxi; Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde*).

## **X. Conclusion?**

This story continues in even more shocking and degrading ways throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Though some steps were made within the twentieth-century to correct the inaccurate presuppositions of the earlier centuries, to say that the modern world

has been freed from the previous centuries' superstition and ignorance is undoubtedly an over-optimistic evaluation.

One must wonder why enlightenment thinkers, in their self-proclaimed project to arrive at objective truth, fell so feebly to rumor, innuendo and the populus' momentum regarding the mystery of the African. This wonder must also necessarily carry over to the fact that America's founding fathers, proclaiming "unalienable rights" for all humanity, equally engaged in and thus set the precedent for America's most lamentable crime of institutional slavery.

Had the Enlightenment offered in the area of anthropology what it claimed to offer in other sciences, the world would truly be a vastly different place. Instead, it clearly opted to become the mother of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Theologian James Cone rightly states that "for the black and red peoples in North America, the spirit of the Enlightenment was socially and politically demonic, becoming a pseudo- intellectual basis for their enslavement or extermination." (Cone, 1975:46).

It is universally held that actions speak louder than words. The actions resulting from Enlightenment theories regarding Africans more than overwhelmed any good intended by these writings. The residue of Enlightenment racial optimism remains fully operant within European and American culture, and enables many to discriminate on the basis of skin color. But if the basic premise of the Enlightenment is correct, namely, that objective knowledge of the truth will free minds fettered by superstition and demonstrably false beliefs, then perhaps this paper will serve its purpose.

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