REPRODUCTION, RACE, AND GENDER
IN PHILOSOPHY AND THE EARLY LIFE SCIENCES

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CONTENTS

Introduction
Susanne Lettow 1

PART I. REPRODUCTION AND THE EARLY LIFE SCIENCES

1. Generation, Genealogy, and Time: The Concept of Reproduction from Histoire naturelle to Naturphilosophie
Susanne Lettow 21

Florence Vienne 45

3. The Scientific Construction of Gender and Generation in the German Late Enlightenment and in German Romantic Naturphilosophie
Peter Hanns Reill 65

4. Zeugung und Fortpflanzung: Distinctions of Medium in the Discourse on Generation around 1800
Jocelyn Holland 83

5. Treviranus’ Biology: Generation, Degeneration, and the Boundaries of Life
Joan Steigerwald 105
PART II. ARTICULATIONS OF RACE AND GENDER

6. Skin Color and the Origin of Physical Anthropology (1640–1850)
   Renato G. Mazzolini

7. The Caucasian Slave Race: Beautiful Circassians and the Hybrid Origin of European Identity
   Sara Figal

8. Analogy of Analogy: Animals and Slaves in Mary Wollstonecraft's Defense of Women's Rights
   Penelope Deutscher

9. Reproducing Difference: Race and Heredity from a longue durée Perspective
   Staffan Müller-Wille

10. Heredity and Hybridity in the Natural History of Kant, Girtanner, and Schelling during the 1790s
    Robert Bernasconi

11. Sexual Polarity in Schelling and Hegel
    Alison Stone

About the Contributors

Index
SKIN COLOR AND THE ORIGIN OF PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY (1640–1850)

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Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the historiography of physical anthropology has concentrated on identifying the chronological sequence of the various influential studies that gave rise to the systems used to classify the human races. Derived from this endeavor is an emphasis placed by the bulk of this historiography on the emergence of the concept of race. Concomitantly, this notion of race was arbitrarily extended in works by scholars belonging to historical periods in which the term (or any equivalent notion) did not even exist. On the other hand, even the most cautious historiography—that which has sought to understand the political and social implications of racial classifications—has been to some extent enthralled with the concept of race, both in its wholesale reduction of physical anthropology to racial classification alone and in its historical assessment of it as nothing more than colonial ideology, thereby relegating important issues to the status of a pseudoscience and, indeed, favoring their deceitful concealment.

The insistence with which both the apparently neutral historiography, and that critical of the concept of race have looked at early racial classifications, is not without its intrinsic interest. It is my belief, however, that both historiographies do not yield understanding of the various scientific, religious, political, and cultural reasons for the complex genesis of physical anthropology as a discipline, as well as the meaning it has assumed in the various contexts of European society and culture in the course of the last
five centuries. On the basis of wide-ranging research conducted over many years, it is my intention in this chapter to suggest some elements for a general rethinking of the origin of physical anthropology during its gestation between approximately the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. However, rethinking this historical phase requires us, first of all, to consider it not as a “phase” that inevitably produced the racial theories of the nineteenth century but rather to examine it in relative autonomy and detached from its presumed future. In other words, when we read the texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which a well-established historiographical tradition regards as constituting the foundation of physical anthropology, we must set this interpretation aside and instead ask what problems these texts addressed and sought to explain. We must also ask what categories Europeans employed to classify non-Europeans before the advent in the nineteenth century of such notions as race, racism, civilization, primitive, monogenesis, polygenesis, and so on. We must require, for example, as to whether physical otherness was effectively a cognitive problem in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Questions of this kind undermine our relative certainties on the perceptive modes of Europeans in that period, and they require a systematic reinterpretation of the documentation available to us.

If we take physical anthropology to be that area of scientific research that concerns itself with human biological diversity, then we must concur with those who locate the flourishing of the discipline in the second half of the eighteenth century, when scholars like Buffon (1749) called it the “natural history of man.” If instead we ask when, in Western Europe, human biological diversity became a problem to explain and why it became a problem, we find ourselves in great difficulties, because the question has not been subjected to systematic historical inquiry. Moreover, the belief in the existence of men with the heads of dogs and tails, which from Herodotus through Pliny and Pomponius Mela was still widespread in the Middle Ages and the early modern age, can hardly be taken to be the matter of an alleged physical anthropology, because the difference was not ascertained. It was not the object of research, nor was it thematized. This is not to imply that the belief is not of historical significance; only that it cannot be taken to be part of an explicit anthropology or “natural history of man.” The historical importance of the belief resides in the fact that scholars of antiquity and of the Middle Ages were ready to recognize beings with the heads of dogs and tails as human beings. Consequently, although these scholars located these beings at the margins of the explored world, their physical diversity did not overawe them, and they were willing to accept a more polymorphous image of man as human. Since the sixteenth century this image has grown increasingly restricted in its range.

It was perhaps because the travelers of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century did not come across men with dog heads and tails during their long, dangerous, and exhausting journeys that their accounts of these travels say little about the physical features of the peoples that they met along the way and, instead, abound with descriptions of customs and beliefs. These accounts had a forceful impact on the imaginations of those who read them in Europe, depicting as they did forms of behavior and beliefs at odds with those permitted in closely structured and disciplined European society. They also prompted the first collection of observations that brought the stock in trade of a new discipline: ethnology. But at that time, they were rather the object of theological and moral reflection, which gave rise to speculative models of another sort of humankind: “man in the state of nature” in the seventeenth century and the “noble savage” in the eighteenth. The activation of an imaginative capacity now able to conceive a different kind of human existence was not a matter of minor importance. It is comparable in its implications and effects on European culture to the great sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debates on the structure of the cosmos. This imagination, however, closely interwove with another dimension: the past. Historically erudite inquiries conducted by using the method of historical derivation sought to legitimate vested power on genealogical grounds, propounding the unlikely descendants of coeval noble houses from Roman or even Trojan families. This gave rise to renewed interest in Greco-Roman civilization, which was proposed as the model of enduring civil and artistic virtues against which the present—the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—should measure itself in an ideal endeavor to emulate and surpass it, and of which the querelle des anciens et des modernes was only one of the many symptoms. However, seeking to emulate a beloved and mythicized past also meant emulating its decadence. Europeans were thus foreseen a fate similar to the one that befell the Greco-Romans, which the millenarianist Christian tradition viewed as even more likely, and indeed inevitable. Anxiety about the future and a desire, almost always unexpressed, for endless conservation prompted for some a comparative concern with the relative features and merits of the various European populations. This generated, on the one hand, a peculiar genre of essays on “national characters,” which enjoyed great success in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, on the other, a new view of history in which the Christian idea of salvation was secularized into that of progress.
When Western European scholars realized that the Americas formed a continent unknown to the ancients and separated from the Old World by interminable expanses of ocean, the fact that it was inhabited by humans became an intractable theoretical problem for them. How could human beings have reached the Americas? This was the question. It obviously did not concern a physical difference among humans; but concerned, rather, their different location in a space where the Old World was deemed the center. The reason why this constituted a problem was the narrative of the origin of the human species and its distribution as portrayed in the book of Genesis. This narrative was considered a revealed truth, and for Christians it constituted a binding framework for interpretation of humanity as a whole and therefore also for the inhabitants of the New World. Numerous theories of migration contended that a population from the Old World had settled—after traveling by sea or by land—in the West Indies. The new themes propounded in numerous works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were those of latent analogies between the rituals of the Amerindians and those of the populations of the Old World. But the explanatory paradigm for the spatial distribution of mankind was migration and colonization by a population stemming from the Old World; that is, by predecessors of the same Europeans who were now once again migrating and colonizing. Only by hypothesizing ancient migrations, in fact, could the presence of a human species on an incredibly distant continent be explained. This was a self-projection through time, and no European could possibly conceive that the Earth might have been populated from the Americas. The notion of migration accounted for the diversity of the places inhabited by man and gave reassurance that the human species was one and one alone. And it is a postulate that remains today.

In its chronological distribution, from the first fifteenth-century accounts to the studies of the late seventeenth century, the literature on the Amerindians displays an evident shift of interest among Europeans from an intellectual curiosity about their customs and beliefs and also their origins, to an almost exclusive insistence on the latter. It is as if the Amerindians, with their diversified and mysterious cultures, disappeared from the scene—and their more complex political and social structures did indeed effectively disappear—so that what remained was their geographical distribution, which proved so difficult to fit into the framework of classical historiography and biblical revelation. Consequently, the theory propounded by Isaac La Peyrère (1655) of a twofold creation (one of all men, the so-called pre-Adamites, and of Adam, the progenitor of the Jewish people alone), whereby the Amerindians were pre-Adamites who had survived the Great Flood, attracted harsh criticism from both Protestants and Catholics. It was attacked because it emphasized the inherent contradictions in the Mosaic revelation (who, in fact, were the people who tilled the land at the time of Adam, and who was Cain’s wife?), and undermined the canonical beliefs that underpinned the Europeans’ conception of the origin of the human species and its distribution around the globe. It reinforced the idea that there might exist a humanity parallel and alien to the one elected by God and the sole object of sacred history and gave rise to a dichotomous view of humanity, which was powerful and selective. There were the descendants of Noah (the second Adam) on the one hand, and, on the other, everyone else; namely those apparently excluded from the restricted paradigm of mankind’s origins from Adam and Eve. Although assailed by the proponents of universal evangelization, this view took deep root, becoming the covert criterion—especially in everyday life—which justified exclusion, subjugation, and exploitation on historical grounds.

The geographical expansion of the Europeans furnished further elements and suggestions for recasting traditional notions, including those concerning the difference between men and animals and, in particular, between men and monkeys. That the anatomical structure of men and apes displayed surprising similarities had been well-known since antiquity. Indeed, Galen’s anatomy—as critically pointed out by Vesalius and the Italian anatomists of the sixteenth century—was much more an anatomy of the ape than of the human. However, while the anatomists of the early modern age boasted that they had emancipated human anatomy from that of apes, news arrived of creatures similar to monkeys whose appearance and behavior closely resembled human beings. The information on the intellectual abilities of certain apes—like the Asiatic “pithecanthrope,” which “could be mistaken for a wild man” (Gesner 1551)—the industrious ape (probably gorilla), which built itself shelters against the rain (Barrel 1613); the emotions displayed by the female orangutan (de Bondt 1658); the anatomy of a chimpanzee, which had thirty-four features in common with other apes and forty-eight with the human species (Tyson 1699)—induced some naturalists to reconsider the similarities found between men and apes and, more generally, man’s place in the animal kingdom. While Descartes postulated an unbridgeable difference between humans and animals, whereby the former were endowed with reason and were therefore spiritual, and the latter were machines entirely devoid of reason, some naturalists were so struck by the parallels between physical features and behavioral patterns that they claimed that the intellectual differences between men and apes were not quantitative, but merely a matter of degree and...
that they could be attributed to a different conformation of the brain. From the point of view of zoological classification, for Linnaeus (1735), humans should be placed together with apes in the order of "Anthropomorphs"—that is, what were later termed "Primates." "I ask you," Linnaeus wrote in 1747 to one of his correspondents, "and the whole world [if there is] a difference of genus according to the principles of natural history between man and ape. I certainly did not know of any."7

The debate on the relation between humans and apes, man's place in the animal kingdom, and his alleged singularity, grew more intense. It mingled with other interconnected themes like the notions of "species" and "reproduction," or the reciprocal links among organic structure, function, and environment. The debate thus influenced the systems of classification employed and the images of nature and man that were the products and/or matrices of those classifications. The solution of one problem, therefore, entailed changes or adjustments to contiguous or more general theories. The discussion was not restricted to specialists like Buffon, Linnaeus, Camper, Blumenbach, Lamarck, and Cuvier alone, but involved a large part of European culture in an overall rethinking of the order of animate nature. Indeed, the issues, which preoccupied successive generations of naturalists from circa 1749 onward, had an interest of general scope: What was the natural order, and if one existed, how could it be perceived or conceived? Inevitably, questions of this level of importance were influenced by the aspirations, projects, experiences, and reflections relative to another order—the political and social system—which in those same years, amid reforms, revolutions, wars and restorations, envisaged or established new relationships among men. Due to often simultaneous correspondences, the two orders of phenomena (i.e., the natural and political-social) overlapped in the minds of even those who sought to keep them distinct, giving rise to a slow but inexorable shift from classificatory criteria, in which the spatial dimension and the ontology of beings predominated, to criteria in which the temporal or historicist dimension and the becoming of beings held sway.

"WHY ARE THE ETHIOPIANS BLACK?"

SKIN COLOR AS A RESEARCH OBJECT

The process just outlined becomes more evident if we consider the debates on black skin in their chronological sequence from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. At first sight, it may seem curious that, as the Europeans continued their geographical expansion, the main physical difference noted was not a difference perceived in populations previously unknown to them, but a difference perceived—and which therefore became problematic—in populations with which they had been acquainted since time immemorial. And yet, numerous seventeenth-century texts show unequivocally the presence of a recurrent question: "Why are the Ethio­pians black?" At that time, and in the two following centuries, Ethiopian was the learned term used to denote the sub-Saharan African. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the question gave rise to a large number of monographs or specialist articles. The issue was also addressed in chapters or sections of manuals on anatomy, physiology, natural history, natural philosophy, general history, theology, and in travel literature. From the second half of the eighteenth century onward, it was a central topic of texts on the natural history of man.

Chart 6.1 shows the chronological distribution, between 1640 and 1849, of the first editions of four hundred works that either sought to explain why the skin color of sub-Saharan Africans was black or used skin color as a criterion for the classification of humankind. Although the chart refers to research still in progress, and is therefore incomplete also because it does not consider entries in dictionaries and encyclopedias, it nevertheless demonstrates that the problem of the pigmentation of Africans was a major and constant subject of inquiry. The chart shows the "peaks" of the debates in the specialist literature
which only includes works whose title refers to black skin—as well as the presence of the topic in scientific handbooks (scien.) and more general works (gen.).

The chart acquires greater significance if we consider that, during the period in question, not a single work whose title referred to the skin color of the Chinese or Amerindians was published. There is one exception, but it is easily explained. The controversial book by Cornélius de Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur le Américains*, contains a chapter entitled “De la peau des Américains,” but this in fact describes the skin of Africans, not Amerindians.8 The obsession of Europeans with the skin color of Africans, moreover, is evidenced by further findings. For the period 1675–1810 documentation exists on at least thirty-eight dissections of Africans, the sole intention of which was to study the color of their skin. This is a substantial number considering that, in the same period, there is no evidence of a single dissection of an Amerindian or an Oriental for the same purpose.

But what matters do all these books and articles discuss? Most of them conduct anatomical analysis on the location of pigmentation in a particular layer of the skin and offer physiological hypotheses and speculations on the theological and physical causes of such pigmentation. They sometimes draw up a classification of human peoples and their temperament; or they discuss the origin of humankind and the unity of the human species on the basis of skin color, speculating as to Adam’s color. Some texts set out aesthetic judgments and discuss the intellectual capacities of Africans, while others deal with such enigmatic and disconcerting phenomena as albinism among individuals whose parents were black. For some authors it represented a return by blacks to humankind’s original coloring. It is somewhat surprising to find that, although the Europeans had displayed great curiosity in the albinism of Africans since the sixteenth century, it was not until the late eighteenth century that they realized that albinos existed among themselves as well.9 This suggests that they previously had been unaware of them.

While European scholars sought to explain why the Ethiopians were black, some authors raised questions concerning the coloring of animal pelts and the changes that take place in them from one season to the next. Others instead examined the way in which skin color was transmitted to the next generation by crossing among whites, blacks, and Amerindians.10 In this manner, new areas of research were opened up; for instance, on the coloring of animals (on which no contemporary history of significance exists) or on what some historians call “pre-Mendelian genetics.” In this regard, maximum importance should be given to a paper by William Charles Wells, published in 1818, in which the author developed a theory of natural selection while conducting research to explain the skin color of Africans.11

As regards anatomical research, it should be pointed out that before the development of the cell theory in the 1830s and the use of the microtome to prepare animal tissue for microscopic examination, skin was analyzed anatomically not with vertical sections but by inspecting layers detached from each other by means of boiling or slow maceration. These techniques enabled Marcello Malpighi to separate the horny and the “mucous” (also termed reticular mem­brane) layers of the epidermis and to suggest, in 1665, that color was located in the mucous layer.12 In 1677, by dissecting the skin of an African woman, Johannes Pechlin managed to show that the “black pigment” (i.e., granules of melanin) was contained in the Malpighian layer; not in the horny one. Pechlin’s location of skin color was verified and accepted by the great majority of subsequent authors.13 However, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Malpighi’s conjecture and Pechlin’s findings were misinter­preted (among other reasons) because, from a technical point of view, it was easier to discern the Malpighian layer in Africans than in Europeans. Consequently, a number of authors claimed that the former had an extra “cuticle” with respect to the latter. The erroneousness of this theory was proved mainly by two brilliant Dutch anatomists, Ruysch and Albinus, who demonstrated the existence of a Malpighian layer in Europeans as well.14 The difference consisted solely in the color of the mucous layer—just as Malpighi had already suggested in 1665 without having performed any dissection on Africans, but by basing his conclusion on a comparative analysis of animal skins.

If the literature used to draw up chart 6.1 is assessed as a whole, from a positivist point of view, the main results obtained by anatomists and physi­ologists during the period considered can be summed up as follows. Their merit was to:

(a) consider blackness a natural rather than a metaphysical phenomenon;
(b) correctly locate it in the Malpighian layer of the skin;
(c) show that the dermis is white in both Europeans and Africans, and that the skin of both comprises a differently colored Malpighian layer;
(d) demonstrate that the "black pigment" (termed *ethiops animal* in 1765 by Le Cat, and *melaina* by Bizio in 1825) was not present solely in the skin, but also in part of the eye and in cuttlefish ink;15
The anatomical difference sought between Europeans and Africans thus turned out to be only a difference of coloration in a layer of the epidermis present in all human beings. For many scholars this feature was to be explained by singling out its causes. It should be noted that it was almost never asked why the Malpighian layer of Europeans was whitish. It was the norm from which those who were not white deviated. For that matter, Adam was generally imagined as white. As a consequence, the search for the causes of the pigmentation of the sub-Saharan Africans concerned only the latter.

Numerous causes were considered and discussed. They can be distinguished between metaphysical (or, theological) causes and physical causes. The former were looked for in holy scripture. A number of authors argued that Africans were the descendants of the cursed people of Canaan and that their skin was dark because of Noah's curse. Others argued that Africans were the descendants of Cain; that blackness was the mark impressed upon Cain and that they were survivors of the Deluge. Neither explanation was backed by any textual evidence, but scholars endeavored to support them with elaborate biblical exegesis and by citing Hebrew and Arabic texts.

The physical causes examined were: climate, sperm, bile, blood, the conditioning of the fetus by the mother's imagination, purported chemical substances produced by the body and not excreted through respiration, the nervous fluid, and an ancient pathology (leprosy). Each author proposed one or several causes. The significance of each theory—as well as its political and social implications—can only be assessed by setting it in the historical context of those who formulated it. However, at a general level, it may be of interest to observe the fortunes of two theories on the basis of the works surveyed to construct the histogram in chart 6.2.

The above histogram shows the temporal distribution of works that offered theological explanations for the blackness of Africans and also of those that denied the validity of these explanations. It shows that the theological explanation was more contested (−) than it was asserted (+). Nevertheless, its large number of adversaries, as well as the number of references made to it, suggests that it was the opinion most widely held by the general public. Moreover, the reason why so many naturalists dismissed it was its reliance on a metaphysical (and not a natural) cause. Overall, the histogram shows the decline—only among scholars—of a supposed biblical paradigm that allegedly explained the difference of the sub-Saharan Africans.

The histogram in chart 6.3 shows the fortunes of the climatic theory. First developed in antiquity, this theory offered a naturalistic explanation of human pigmentation and was reformulated in the eighteenth century. It was based on two groups of observations: those relative to the tanning of the human skin, and those that pointed out that human peoples were distributed from the poles to the tropics according to a scale of colors, which ranged from light to dark. Since this explanation postulated that humans would change their skin color if they lived at different latitudes for a few generations, it was easily contradicted by many travelers of the sixteenth century, who found
no change of skin color among the descendants of Africans who had been transported to different latitudes. Despite the criticisms brought against the theory, when appropriately recast, it enjoyed great success in the second half of the eighteenth century. This was principally because it found such authoritative proponents as Montesquieu and Buffon, but it was once again discredited in the mid-nineteenth century.

Buffon considered the natural history of man to be the history of the human species through time, and he argued that the effects of the climate-environment could not be ascertained in only a few generations. To give credibility to his theory, he requested that much longer time spans should be considered. This was similar to the request made by the late nineteenth-century evolutionists, who asked for more time for the slow mechanisms of evolution to become apparent.

SKIN COLOR, CLASSIFICATION, AND DIFFERENCE

In the course of their inquiries into the color of Africans, some authors drew dramatic comparisons of color, mucous layer, temperament, and mind. The core of the connection was what is known today as cutaneous sensitivity.

Then, as today, the majority of physiologists agreed that the horny layer of the skin is not sensitive and that tactile sensations are aroused by pressure on the papillary body of the skin (discovered by Malpighi in 1665). However, some authors argued that the pigment present in the mucous layer of Africans impeded delicate sensation and consequently hampered the harmonious activity of the mind. William Frederick Van Amringe, for example, in a bulky work entirely devoted to the natural history of man, An Investigation of the Theories of the Natural History of Man, published in New York in 1848, wrote that the structure of the skin,

[Must necessarily modify the functional power of the nervous system, and therefore affect the quality of impressions upon the brain in a very high degree. The difference, in this respect, in the species of man, independently of capacity, or form of the skull, is amply sufficient to produce all the differences observable in all the species. It will account for the strenuous temperament of the Shemites [or white species]; the passive temperament of the Japhetites [or yellow species]; the callous temperament of the Ishmaelites [or red species]; and the most hopeless and lowest of all, the sluggish temperament of the Canaanites [or black species]—whose only hope for an ameliorated condition appears to lie in the bondage incident to a "servant of servants." 18

The above passage provides an example of the value judgments inscribed in most classifications of the human species based on skin color. Contrary to what one might suppose, these classifications were relatively new among Europeans. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the large groups of populations distributed around the globe were not labeled as "whites," "blacks," "reds," or "yellows." The process of abstraction that combined (a) the geographical distribution of a population, (b) its supposed skin color, and (c) its supposed constitution, was a feature distinctive of the work of certain scholars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and it was part of a more ambitious endeavor to classify reality. As far as mankind was concerned, this process took paradigmatic form in the classification drawn up by Linnaeus in the tenth edition of his Systema naturae (1758–1759), where the varieties of the human species were classified as:

-Americanus. rufus, cholericus, rectus.
-Europeus. albus, sanguineus, torosus.
Each of the four terms designating human variety, indicates its geographical distribution, skin color or complexion, temperament and physique. The underlying scheme is the ancient quaternary system that Linnaeus introduced to this area of inquiry, and which was used for similar purposes by Kant in 1775. The notion of species of men, varieties of men or races of men emerged mainly from the combination of skin color with geographical distribution, conceived within the ancient quaternary scheme of the human constitution. However, the core of this scheme was the black/white polarity, while the skin colors "red" and "yellow" were arbitrary abstractions based on selected sources along with the assignment of a typical temperament and physique to each human variety.

From a historical point of view, it should be stressed that the idea that each human variety could somehow be identified by skin color became an integral part of all subsequent classifications of the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, like those devised by Blumenbach, Virey, Cuvier, Lawrence, Prichard, Bory de Saint-Vincent, and Broc. This should be emphasized because the idea persisted among specialists, although some scholars argued at the end of the eighteenth century that skin color on its own was not enough to signal the differences among men. In 1787, for instance, while enumerating some of the theories concerning the causes that might produce black skin, Jefferson wrote:

The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races?

Aesthetic and intellectual features were the main criteria by which Jefferson distinguished blacks from whites:

Comparing them [blacks] by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

Neither the astronomical almanacs produced by the mathematical practitioner Benjamin Banneker, a free black who also participated in the survey of the Federal Territory (now the District of Columbia), nor the many slave narratives published by blacks during the abolitionist campaigns, ever changed Jefferson's opinion that no black could achieve anything intellectually significant without the help of a white person.

The focus thus shifted from color to mental faculties and to analysis of the cranium. But, despite this shift, the main object of inquiry continued to be the polarity between Europeans and Africans; hence, comparisons were made between the brain volume of whites and blacks, or between their facial angles. The new classifications besides color, based on Pieter Camper's measurement of the facial angle and the shape of the cranium, yielded a different image of humanity from those exclusively based on color. While in the latter, humanity could be envisaged as a set of colors which merged into each other without being necessarily arranged in a hierarchical order (as in Buffon, Blumenbach, and Herder), the alignment of human and animal crania according to the increasing order of the facial angle, generated instead a sense of a hierarchical progression in the scale of beings.

SKIN COLOR, SLAVERY, AND THE NOTION OF RACE

What, therefore, is the upshot of all this? From a historical point of view, it is that the notion of biological race came chronologically later than classifications of the human species based on skin color alone, and also that the debates relative to human pigmentation were the first categorization of physical difference. Color preceded the notion of race. This means, furthermore, that prejudice against colored peoples was chronologically antecedent to the idea that there existed human types or races, for which it provided the constitutive matrix. Any contemporary discussion that seeks to understand the roots of European racism should concern itself with those early debates, because the interpretative models forged by them persisted much longer and more pervasively than the notion of race, developing into the macro-models and stereotypes that still shape our language and behavior, and of which we are often unaware.
I have already pointed out that the first physical difference to become an effective cognitive problem for Europeans was the skin color of a population that it had known, at least in the Mediterranean area, since time immemorial. I have also pointed out the obsession with which Europeans studied the skin of Africans; I have mentioned their theological and physiological speculations on the origins of blackness, emphasizing that the first classifications of the varieties of the human species were based on the polarity between white and black. I now briefly discuss some of the motives underlying that interest and the accompanying studies on Africans and—as far as possible—show that they make some sense.

When the scholars of the late seventeenth century asked “Why are Ethiopians black?” they were certainly not immune to collective perceptions of Africans. These perceptions had been recast in the early sixteenth century when, for the first time in the history of mankind, the Europeans introduced a system of color-based slavery (or what is generally called racial slavery), which profoundly altered their perceptive evaluation of the peoples they subjugated. Color-prejudice, in fact, either did not exist or was very mild in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world, and scant traces of it are to be found in the Middle Ages and the fifteenth century. It gathered strength, however, in the course of the sixteenth century and was one of the consequences of color-based slavery.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the order that Europeans conferred on the colonies ranked the African as a slave, and for the majority of Christians, he was certainly a human person, though a descendant of a forebear bound in slavery. From a legal point of view, he was a commodity, and he was defined as such by the dictionaries of the time, while for some philosophers the color of his skin was so enigmatic that they raised doubts as to his human nature. The literati made use of the image of the sub-Saharan African according to the traditional symbolism of white and black, while some painters depicted him as a precious object included in a still life.

The conceptions just outlined can be borne out by a large quantity of sources, but what I wish to emphasize here is that the social and political classification of Africans preceded the scientific classifications and the anatomical investigations of skin color. When in the mid-seventeenth century, a European, even if a natural philosopher, saw a black man or the picture of one, he associated his skin color with a well-defined rank in the social hierarchy: a slave in the colonies, a valuable or prestigious commodity in Europe. This political-social classification presumably exerted a major influence on the studies and scientific classifications mentioned above. This does not imply, however, that those studies were motivated solely by an endeavor to give religious, rational, and natural philosophical legitimacy to slavery; otherwise one could not explain the many protests against slavery voiced by doctors and naturalists. In 1646, the English doctor Thomas Browne denounced two theories then current on the blackness of Africans as “vulgar errors”—what today would be called prejudices—and proposed a chemical explanation, which asserted that color was an integral part of nature. The German-Dutch doctor Johannes Pechlin demonstrated the relativity of the concept of physical beauty and its inapplicability in science. Moreover, in 1677, Pechlin began to emphasize that it had been the exploitation of Africans by Europeans, which modified the latter’s perception of Africans! The works of Buffon, Camper, and Blumenbach contain passages in which they express sympathy for their Ethiopian “brothers” and condemn slavery.

In 1765 Le Cat thought it was sheer madness to consider black skin the punishment of a crime. One of the main results achieved by natural historians was the definition in the Encyclopédie, “NEGRE, f.m. (Hist. Nat.), homme qui habite différentes parties de la terre.” No previous French dictionary had included the word homme in its definition of “Negro.” It was natural history, therefore, that showed that the sub-Saharan African was a human person and not a commodity. In 1808, after the abolition of the slave trade, in his book Antropologia, Thomas Jarrold said of Africans that “their persons are no longer merchandise. No longer merchandise!” and Bory de Saint-Vincent, although a polygenist, included in his work of 1825 the most ferocious critique on slavery that I have found in a scientific work. In his Su I neri: saggio ideologico e fisiologico of 1826, the Neapolitan Gaetano Pesce wrote that the races described by the naturalists were “devoid of reality” and “pure fictions of naturalists,” while in the same year Abbé Grégoire, an illustrious abolitionist and scientist, wrote that “la différence de couleur est un accident physique qu’on a travesti en question politique.”

However, there was no lack of scholars, like Meiners, Virey, and Heusinger, who argued in favor of maintaining slavery and held that the category of “beauty” could act as a valid criterion of classification. It is interesting to note what Virey had to say on the subject: “The negro is and always will be a slave; interest requires it, politics demands it, and his own constitution submits itself to it almost with no pain.” The idea that there were biologically superior and inferior human groups certainly also originated from the work of naturalists and more generally of scientists. When the first volume of Gobineau’s Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines came out in 1853, it was already a dominant doctrine. Nor did Gobineau’s work appear in a vacuum.
It may be considered—and usually is—the beginning of racist ideology, but it should also be interpreted as the outcome of a long cultural and political process.39

In fact, from a chronological point of view, the idea gained ground and imposed itself as the majority view, just as the campaigns for abolition of first the slave trade and then slavery got under way, but especially after the revolts in the Caribbean and the enactment, on the July 8, 1801, of the first constitution of St. Domingue. Article 1 of the constitution stated that the colony was part of the French empire, but was ruled by “special laws.” Article 3 established that slavery be abolished forever: “All its inhabitants are born, live and die free and French.” Article 4 specified that any person, whatever “his color,” was entitled to apply for all forms of employment, and Article 5 stated that no other distinction exists between men than that of virtues and talents and that all men are equal before the law, whether they are to be punished or protected.40

The principle of self-government (Art. 1.), the abolition of slavery (Art. 3.), the removal of all distinctions among whites, blacks, and mulattos, and therefore of the caste system (Art. 4.), and finally the statement of the principle of equality before the law with the consequent abolition of all the privileges, which hitherto had been enjoyed by the planters and suffered by the blacks and the mulattos (Art. 5.), represent the pillars of the 1801 Constitution of St. Domingue. Never before, and in no other colony, had blacks achieved anything similar: the accomplishment of a constitutional order about which not even the most enlightened European philosopher had ever dared to write. However, it was only through powerful structural social changes that such an extraordinary event came about; that is, through conflicts, revolts, revolutions, invasions, wars, and massacres on all sides, which had steeped St. Domingue in blood since July 1790, pitting “royalists against Republicans, masters against slaves, whites against colored, mulattos against blacks, invaders against invaded.”41 The revolts in St. Domingue caused a stir throughout Europe and changed the image that many scholars had of blacks. In his highly successful Gène du christianisme, published in April 1802, Chateaubriand wrote: “Who will now plead the cause of the blacks, after the crimes they have committed?”42 The Danish naturalist Johann Christian Fabricius, a pupil of Linnaeus, well known for his studies of insects and for his reflections on hybridization and professor at the University of Kiel (then under Danish rule), published a book in 1804 in which he explicitly mentioned the events in St. Domingue. Apart from underlining the physical differences between whites and blacks—the color and structure of skin and hair, the form and

bone structure of the skull, the prominence of the jaws, the thickness of the lips, the flat bone of the nose, the length of the forearm—Fabricius held that blacks lacked “acumen of intellect” because none of them had ever made a true discovery.43 The absence of reflection, he wrote, is the reason why they had never liberated themselves from “the yoke of the whites.”44 “We annually lead them,” he added, “as a flock of sheep from the coasts of Guinea to the West Indies, where we hold them by the thousands in slavery, and their frequent revolts against the whites have never been successful.”45 Should the blacks prevail over the French in St. Domingue, this would not depend on their capacity “to programme great plans with precision,” but only on their number, the features of the region, the inhospitable climate, diseases, and the lack of French support troops.46 Deploying the concept of an “intermediate fertile species” (Mitteltar), Fabricius wrote, “For this reason I consider the black just as my half brother, generated by the cross of the white man and the ape.”47 The expression “half brother” was an implicit criticism against the English abolitionists’ motto, “Am I not a Man and a Brother?”

ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF A EUROPEAN SOMATIC IDENTITY

I believe that it is impossible to get at the underlying sense of why Europeans considered color to be a mark of inferiority, thereby producing the stereotypes that have been transmitted in European culture to the present day, unless one asks the question: Why did the Europeans consider themselves to be superior? A clue is provided by certain definitions of “European” that are found in dictionaries and encyclopedias published during the period in question and in the views of eminent historians of the early nineteenth century.

The entry “European” appears rarely in the dictionaries and encyclopedias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while “Europe” is defined as the third, and then the fourth, part of the world. There are no entries on the subject in, for example, Calepino (1569), Florio (1659), Howell (1660), Richelet (1680–1688), Menagio (1685), Furetiere (1690), the Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca (1691), Le dictionnaire de l’Academie francaise (1694), Phillips (1706), and Richelet (1719). In the Dictionnaire de Trévoux of 1721 an entry states:

Les Européens sont fils de Japhet; car l’Europe fut peuplée après le déluge par les enfants de ce fils de Noé [. . .] Les Européens sont les peuples de la terre les plus polices, les plus civilisés & les mieux
The entry "Europe" in *Le grand dictionnaire historique*, published in 1759 by Louis Moréri, declares that:

Les peuples de l'Europe, par leur adresse & par leur courage, se sont soumis ceux des autres parties du monde; leur esprit paroit dans leurs ouvrages, leur sagesse dans leur gouvernement, leur force dans les armes, leur conduite dans le commerce, & la magnificence dans leurs villes. L'Europe surpasse aussi en toutes choses les autres parties du monde, soit pour ses édifices saints & profanes, soit pour le génie différent des peuples qui l'habitent. Nous pouvons encore ajouter aux avantages de l'Europe, celui d'avoir le vicaire de J. C. en terre dans la personne des papes.  

The *Encyclopédie* (1751–1765) also lacks an entry on "European," but includes a short one on "Europe," which states that, although it is the smallest of the four parts of the world, it has achieved such a high level of power that history has almost nothing to compare with it. The entry "Europeans" in *The New and Complete American Encyclopedia* (1805–1811), however, contains a significant novelty:

EUROPEANS, The inhabitants of Europe. They are all white; and incomparably more handsome than the Africans, and even than most of the Asiatics. The Europeans surpass both in arts and sciences, especially in those called liberal; in trade, navigation, and in military and civil affairs; being at the same time, more prudent, more valiant, more generous, more polite, and more sociable than they: and though divided into various sects, yet as Christians, they have infinitely the advantage over a very large part of mankind. There are few places in Europe where men sell each other for slaves; and none where robbery is a profession, as it is in Asia and Africa.  

It will have been noted that this latter entry is almost a translation of the one in the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, but with a significant difference. The Europeans, it is said, "are all white," a feature rarely to be found in any previous dictionary or encyclopedia. And they are also contrasted with Africans and Asians from an aesthetic point of view.

The underlying sense, it seems to me, was that of a European somatic identity, in which whiteness was equated with freedom and blackness with slavery. But it was a somatic identity mainly constructed on political-social relationships, and in particular on relationships of dominance and subjugation, which generated an ideology I have called *eugencracy*. The otherness of the person destined for subjugation and exclusion—then and in the future—was explained in relation to the complexion of those who arrogated the right to subjugate and exclude. The claimed superiority of the "white man" was not dictated by nature; it arose from Europeans' evaluations of their own religion (Christianity) and military, commercial, and civil domination. *White* and *civilized* were terms so closely associated by early nineteenth-century historians, philosophers, and philologists, that they became almost synonymous. The same happened with the terms *colored* and *uncivilized*. Not surprisingly, therefore, the influential historian from Göttingen, Arnold Heeren, declared that the most difficult phenomenon for a historian to explain was the superiority of whites with respect to people of color:

Whilst we see the surface of the other continents covered with nations of different, and almost always of dark color, (and, in so far as this determines the race, of different races,) the inhabitants of Europe belong only to one race. It has not, and it never had, any other native inhabitants than white nations. Is the white man distinguished by greater natural talents? [ . . . ] And yet we must esteem it probable; and how much does this probability increase in strength, if we make inquiries of history? The great superiority which the white nations in all ages and parts of the world have possessed, is a matter of fact, which cannot be done away with by denials. It may be said, this was the consequence of external circumstances, which favoured them more. But has this always been so? And why has it been so? And, further, why did those darker nations, which rose above the savage state, attain only to a degree of culture of their own; a degree which was passed neither by the Egyptian nor by the Mongolian, neither by the Chinese nor the Hindu? And among the coloured races, why did the black remain behind the brown and the yellow? If these observations cannot but make us inclined to attribute differences of capacity to the several branches of our race, they do not on
that account prove an absolute want of capacity in our darker fellow-
men [in German Brüder], nor must they be urged as containing the
whole explanation of European superiority.55

In 1823, the French Protestant historian, François Guizot, defined superiority
as "a living and expanding force" (the myth of Japhet the expansionist), which
acted in fulfillment of a mission, which it itself did not know.56 A few years
later, he discovered that this mission was established by Providence: "Europe-
ean civilization has entered, if we may so speak, into the plan of Providence;
it progresses according to the intentions of God. This is the rational account
of its superiority."57 The Europeans were a mystery even to themselves! To
clarify the mystery they oriented the sciences to select tools of analysis that,
by highlighting differences, fostered the growth of a powerful myth in which
the construction of a biologically superior somatic identity was an integral part.
First color, and later a notion of race, used as a biopolitical concept, were the
constitutive elements of a mythological identity and of epidermic differences
in others.

NOTES


2. Isaac La Peyrère, Pré-Adamite [. . .] (np: np, 1655); La Peyrère, Systema theologicum, ex Praeadamitarum hypothese: Pars prima (np: np, 1655).


12. The "mucous" or "reticular membrane" is now called Malpighian layer of the epidermis.


14. Frederik Ruysch, Johannis Gaudii Epistola problematica, prima ad [...]. Fredericium Riuschium [...]. De pilis, pinguedine [...]. de corpore reticulari, sub cuticula sito (Amstelaedami: apud Johannes Wolters, 1696), table I, figs. 4, 5, 6, 7; Ruysch, Thesaurus anatomicae primus. (Amstelaedami: apud Joannem Wolters, 1701), table IV, figs. 8, 9; Id., Thesaurus anatomicae secundus. (Amstelaedami: apud Joannem Wolters, 1702), 62; Ruysch, Thesaurus anatomicae tertius (Amstelaedami: apud Joannem Wolters, 1703), 61; Ruysch, Thesaurus anatomicae quintus. (Amstelaedami: apud Joannem Wolters, 1705), 3–4; Ruysch, Curae posteriores. seu thesaurus anatomicae omnium praecedentium maximus (Amstelaedami: apud Janssonio-Waesberghios, 1724), 1–2; Bernhard Siegfried Albinus, De sede et causa coloris Ethiopum et ceterorum hominum (Leidae Batavorum: apud Theodorum Haak; Amsterdam: apud Jacobum Graal & Henricum de Leth, 1737); Ruysch, Academicarum annotationum, 8 vols. (Leidae: apud J. & H. Verbeck, 1754–1768), Lib. I, table I, figs. 1, 2; Lib. III, table IV, figs. 1, 2, 3; Lib. VI, tables II and III. On the work of the two Dutch anatomists, see Renato G. Mazzolini, "Frammenti di pelle e immagini di uomini (1700–1740)," in Natura-cultura. L’interpretazione del mondo fisico nei testi e nelle immagini, ed. Giuseppe Olmi, Luca Tongiorgi Toshi, and Attilio Zanca (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2000), 423–443.


27. Pieter (Petrus) Camper, *Verhandeling [...]* over het natuurlijk verschil der wezenstrekken in mensen van onderscheiden landdaarten en ouderdomen; over het schoon in antyke beelden en gesneedens steenen (Utrecht: B. Wild en J. Altheer, 1791). This work was translated into French, German, and English. It should be noted that Camper was a staunch monogenist and did not associate the varieties of the human species with intelligence. As Miriam Claude Meijer has aptly shown, the facial angle theory took on a life of its own, which had nothing to do with Camper’s general views on man, see Meijer, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper* (1722–1789) (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 167–177. See also, Charles White, *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man..."
and in Different Animals and Vegetables: and from the former to the latter (London, printed for C. Dilly, 1799).


32. Le Cat, Traité de la couleur de la peau, 3.

33. Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, 17 vols. (Neufchastel, 1765), 11:76–83, 76: "Negro (Natural History), man inhabiting different parts of the earth."

34. Thomas Jarrold, Anthropologia: Or, Dissertations on the Form and Colour of Man: with incidental remarks (London: printed for Cadell and Davies, 1808), 259.


36. Gaetano Pesce, Su i neri: saggio ideologico e fisio logico (Napoli: presso Manfredi, 1926), "vuoti di realtà" (Ibid., 273); "pure finzioni de' naturalisti" (Ibid., 274). Henri Grégoire, De la noblesse de la peau, ou du préjugé des blancs contre la couleur des africains et celle de leurs descendants noirs et sang-mêlé (Paris: Baudouin Frères, 1826), 61: "color difference is a physical accident which one has disguised as a political issue."


40. Las constituciones de Haiti, Recopilacion y estudio preliminar de Luis Marías Otero (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispanica, 1968), 109–110.


42. "qui oserait encore plaider la cause des Noirs après les crimes qu'ils ont


44. "von dem Joche der Weißen." Fabricius, Resultate, 213.


48. Dictionnaire universel François et Latin [. . .], 5 vols. (Paris: chez Florentin Delaulne, 1721), 2:1542: "Europeans are the sons of Japhet; because Europe was peopled after the deluge by the sons of this son of Noah [. . .] Europeans are the most cultivated, civilized, and handsome peoples of the earth. They surpass all those of the other parts of the world in sciences and arts, especially in those called liberal, in trade, navigation, in warfare, in military and civil virtues. They are more valiant, more prudent, more generous, more polite, more sociable, more humane [. . .]."

49. Louis Moréri, Le grand dictionnaire historique [. . .], 2me édition, 10 vols. (Paris: chez les libraires associés, 1759), 4:315–316, 316: "By their dexterity and their courage the peoples of Europe have subdued those of the other parts of the world; their esprit is disclosed in their works, their wisdom in their governments, their strength in weapons, their conduct in trade, and their splendour in their towns. In everything else Europe also surpasses the other parts of the world, both for its secular and sacred buildings, and for the different genius of the peoples who live in it. We may also add to the advantages of Europe that of having the Vicar of Christ in the person of the popes."


52. The statement, "The inhabitants [of Europe] are all white; and incomparably more handsome than the Africans, and even than most of the Asians," may be found in the entry "Europe" in vol. 7 (1798), 39–40, 40 of the Encyclopaedia; or, a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature [. . .] (Philadelphia: printed by Thomas Dobson), which lacks the entry "Europeans."


