

The Historiography of Race in Enlightenment Thought

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

While the Enlightenment has long been viewed as the intellectual movement that lies at the foundation of the modern world, the place of race in Enlightenment thought has received attention only relatively recently. Recent vintage does not mean paucity of published material; on the contrary, the subject of race in Enlightenment thought has attracted much attention, tied as it is to broader debates about the emancipatory or oppressive legacy of the Enlightenment in the past and present. Did the Enlightenment give birth to the values that form the foundation of modern liberal democracy, such as moral equality, toleration, and pluralism? Or did the Enlightenment form the crucible of scientific racism, sexism, and various other exclusionary and deadly modern political projects? Or did the intellectual movement perhaps contribute to both of these contradictory developments?

The answers to these questions are not easy to find because the Enlightenment, once seen as a relatively well-defined reformist intellectual movement centered on the ideas of a handful of mid-eighteenth-century Parisian philosophes, is now rightfully conceived as a kaleidoscopic complex of ideas, social institutions, and cultural practices spread throughout Europe and some colonial cities, and encompassing the entire "long eighteenth century" (c.1680–1815). There are now almost as many Enlightenments as there are distinct European regions, religious sects, or philosophical strands, and though the pluralization of the Enlightenment has enriched our understanding of the diversity of the movement, it also risks emptying the term of all meaning. Just as scholars pluralized the Enlightenment in the post-World War II period, race became an object of primary concern to social science and humanities scholars. The historian of medieval religion and religious violence David Nirenberg (2009: 233) has written that "the dismantling of racism's claims to provide a natural explanation for the existence of cultural, economic, and social differences, or for the persistence of such difference through time, was one of the most important achievements of the mid-twentieth-century social sciences."

Not only were the claims of scientific racism dismantled, but race—understood as a combination of phenotypic similarity and shared ancestry—was also revealed to be scientifically dubious. Despite some disagreement, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO 1952) "The Race Question" statement set the tone for

the coming decades in insisting on the nature of race as a social construction that has no meaningful biological content. The task became how to explain why people came to believe that races exist and how racial identities ("white," "Black," etc.) became fundamental to how people make sense of themselves and others. An increasing number of scholars in the post-World War II period came to argue that the Enlightenment, for reasons that we will explore in this article, played a pivotal role in forging the modern concept of race and making scientific racism possible. Simultaneously and perhaps especially recently, scholars point to the ways in which the Enlightenment bequeathed to us the tools with which we can dismantle a racist worldview. Before moving forward, it is important to note the distinction between race and racism, a distinction that some scholars sometimes elide. While discriminatory claims often accompanied racial classificatory schemes, the former does not logically or inevitably follow from the latter (Schaub and Sebastiani 2014: 25). It is at least theoretically possible to group humanity into a finite number of categories based on physical features without positing any fundamental inequalities between them (Mayr 2002; Mosse 2000). This is important because the term "race" was part of nearly all the European vernaculars well before the eighteenth century, while racism was a late nineteenth-century neologism, and so the contextualist analysis of Enlightenment texts requires that we bear this distinction in mind.

Background/Context

From the perspective of the history of Enlightenment historiography, the association of the Enlightenment with the invention of race and even racism that is by now commonplace is slightly surprising. This is because the opponents of fascism and scientific racism in the 1920s and 1930s explicitly drew on the legacy of the Enlightenment as a common heritage of democracy and toleration (Hunt 2002). While German and Italian fascists did not seek to establish a society rooted in a pre-Enlightenment religiosity and generally did not engage much with the Enlightenment explicitly, some of their opponents, such as Piero Gobetti, appealed to the Enlightenment to counter fascistic anti-liberalism. French fascists, on the other hand, more directly and explicitly repudiated the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and the virulent anti-Semitism of Charles Maurras and his *Action Française* became strongly associated with anti-Enlightenment views.

Ernst Cassirer (1932), a German-Jewish intellectual who fled Nazi Germany for the United States in 1933, wrote what is still considered one of the most penetrating analyses of Enlightenment philosophy, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, first published in English in 1951 as *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. While he was reticent to advance an overt political message in the book, he aimed to do away with the epithet of "shallow Enlightenment" that was common at the time, asserting, "the age which venerated reason and science as man's highest faculty cannot and must not be lost even for us" (Cassirer 1951: xvii). Peter Gay (1966, 1969), another German-Jewish intellectual who fled Nazi Germany for the United States, wrote a two-volume history of the Enlightenment that, like Cassirer's, aimed to resuscitate the movement from detractors and to present it as a "family of intellectuals united by a single style of thinking" (1966: xii). As David A. Bell (2016: 123) has remarked, some of the twentieth century's most trenchant defenders of the Enlightenment as the foundation upon which modern freedom and toleration were built have been secular European Jews like Cassirer and Gay, whose own emancipation they credited largely to the Enlightenment. Though not Jewish

himself, the French historian of the Enlightenment Paul Hazard was not allowed to serve as rector of the University of Paris when France was under Nazi rule. His highly influential study and defense of the Enlightenment, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680–1715), published in 1935, made clear where his political sympathies lay, as he championed the Enlightenment for transforming European civilization from one “founded on Duty” to one “founded on the idea of rights—rights of the individual, freedom of speech and opinion, the prerogatives of man as man and citizen” (Hazard 2013: xvi). Hazard became the teacher of the antifascist activist Franco Venturi, who would go on to write on Denis Diderot, the *Encyclopédie*, and, most influentially, the Italian Enlightenment in the post-World War II period. While Hazard highlighted the importance of travel literature as a crucial ingredient in producing the “crisis” of the late seventeenth-century European mind, neither he nor Cassirer nor Gay paid much attention to Enlightenment thinkers’ engagement with the non-European world or with questions of “race” internal to Europe (such as Enlightenment thinkers’ views of Jews).

Strikingly, it was also two German-Jewish intellectuals who had escaped Nazism and found refuge in the United States who arguably laid the first charge of racism against the Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno. Influential philosophers who were part of the Frankfurt School of Marxian critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Los Angeles in 1944, a book in which they influentially and forcefully charged: “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 4). Rather than leading to emancipation, Enlightenment thinkers’ emphasis on instrumental reason had led to its exact opposite, domination, as the intellectual movement sought to further the control of both nature and human beings. In the first four chapters of the book, Horkheimer and Adorno do not discuss race and racism at any length. In the last chapter, “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment,” they argue that racialist thinking and racial exclusion are bound up with capitalism: “Race today is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual, integrated into the barbaric collective” (138). In this chapter, they discuss no Enlightenment thinkers, concentrating instead on William Shakespeare, Richard Wagner, Sigmund Freud, and Adolf Hitler and other Nazis. For historians of the Enlightenment, the near-complete lack of sustained engagement with any thinkers traditionally subsumed under the umbrella term “the Enlightenment” has been and continues to be baffling. This had to do with treating *Aufklärung* as a metaphor concept for the cognitive process, as well as with the fact that Enlightenment was a concept much more important to philosophers than it was to historians until the mid-twentieth century (Robertson 2020; Schmidt 2018). Horkheimer and Adorno’s charge against the Enlightenment would be repeated and elaborated upon by postmodernists in the 1970s and 1980s, sometimes with a similar lack of sustained attention to any particular Enlightenment thinker (Schmidt 2000).

Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno’s lack of engagement with eighteenth-century thinkers, the Jewish-American scholar Arthur Hertzberg (1968) read extensively in canonical seventeenth-century philosophy and the eighteenth-century philosophes such as Denis Diderot, Paul Thiry d’Holbach, and Voltaire and argued that “modern, secular anti-Semitism was fashioned not as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the Revolution, but within the Enlightenment and Revolution themselves” (7). His basic argument was that the Enlightenment marked the transition from Christian discrimination against Jews as Christ-killers to secular anti-Semitism, in which Jews were cast as irredeemably superstitious, fanatical, and foreign. While some of

his arguments were challenged upon publication, his book was also praised for drawing attention to the hitherto neglected role of the Enlightenment's place in the history of racialization and racism, and spurred other scholars to further investigate precisely how Enlightenment thinkers may have contributed to the dark side of modernity.

The prominent American historian of philosophy Richard H. Popkin (1969) reviewed Hertzberg's book in the *American Historical Review* and soon thereafter wrote a highly influential essay on the Enlightenment's place in the history of racism. In the essay "The Philosophical Basis of Eighteenth-Century Racism," Popkin (1973) highlighted a "paradox": all the canonical early modern European thinkers formulated their theories of human nature in universalistic terms, yet they laid the basis for theories of the inferiority of non-Europeans simply on the basis of having a non-white skin color or a non-Christian religion. Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Popkin engaged extensively with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers' texts, arguing, for example, that David Hume's racism was not a marginal element of his wider philosophy but was rather "intimately related to his thought" (246). Popkin brought less tasteful aspects of Enlightenment thinkers' views of non-Europeans to the fore, such as Hume and Carl Linnaeus's depiction of non-Europeans as having significantly different mental lives than Europeans, or Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's view that non-white skin color is a disease or a form of degeneracy. He offered three reasons to explain the prominence of these racist Enlightenment perspectives on human diversity. First, the abandonment of biblical humanism—the idea that we are all made in God's image—created the space for imagining that some groups are more human or more worthy of respect than others (253). Second, naturalistic explanations of human diversity more easily flowed into normative evaluations. And third, the economic need to justify the rapidly growing institution of the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans and the stealing of Native American lands. While some of Popkin's arguments would later be successfully challenged by Enlightenment scholars, a topic to which we will return below, his essay was of immense importance in drawing attention to the racist and sometimes racist views of canonical Enlightenment thinkers and, like Hertzberg's book, encouraged scholars to investigate these themes further.

Two other Jewish scholars published important work in the 1970s that analyzed the place of the Enlightenment in the generation of anti-Semitism and racism more generally: Leon Poliakov and George L. Mosse. Poliakov (1974) was a Russian Jew whose family fled Russia shortly after the Russian Revolution and settled in France, joining the resistance during World War II. His book *Le Mythe aryen: Essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes* was published in 1971 and was translated into English as *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* in 1974. Like Hertzberg, Poliakov identified Voltaire as the most virulent Enlightenment anti-Semite and highlighted the importance of the "modernity" of such a perspective. Rather than being an atavistic prejudice, the racist ideas of Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers were quintessentially modern, grounded in the new patterns of thought associated with the Enlightenment. In a similar vein, George L. Mosse (1978), a German-Jewish scholar who fled Nazi persecution to the United States, wrote *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*. While Hertzberg had argued that the philosophes demanded that Jews abandon their Jewish identity and practices in order to achieve equality, Mosse countered by insisting that "the Jews were either ignored by anthropologists during most of the eighteenth century or considered part of the Caucasian

race, and still believed capable of assimilation into European life" (14). The importance of the Enlightenment in the history of racism for Mosse was twofold: the scientific investigation of humanity's place in nature and the intensification of reverence for the classical Greek aesthetic ideal. These two would merge in eighteenth-century thought, giving the birth of modern racism particular force. Drawing inspiration from Horkheimer and Adorno, Mosse highlighted the "underside" of the Enlightenment, insisting that "eighteenth-century Europe was the cradle of modern racism" (3). Poliakov and Mosse's books were published before Holocaust studies was a recognized field and they were important early examples of scholars who sought the origins of the Nazi genocide in a *longue-durée* approach, one in which the Enlightenment played a prominent role. In the context of Enlightenment studies, these works ran against a reigning prewar conception, encapsulated as we have seen in the work of Cassirer, Hazard, and others, that the Enlightenment was the progenitor of toleration and emancipation from the strictures of superstition and absolutist power.

While the belated postwar reckoning with the Holocaust helps to explain the impetus to new research on the place of the Enlightenment in the history of anti-Semitism, the decolonization struggles and the democratization of higher education goes some way in making sense of the increasing focus on the Enlightenment's role in the history of slavery, racialization, and colonialism. In this regard, a more critical distancing from the Enlightenment took place in the 1970s, most acutely captured by the French historian of Enlightenment philosophy and anthropology Michèle Duchet (1971), whose first book appeared at this time and would become a standard reference in the field: *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières*. In this erudite study, Duchet drew explicit attention to the Eurocentric, neocolonial, and sometimes even racist aspects of the thought of the key Enlightenment philosophes Buffon, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, and Diderot. One of Duchet's principal aims was to expose the anti-colonialism of the Enlightenment as a myth (18). She demonstrated that although many philosophes critiqued colonialism and slavery, this critique was launched from a perspective that she called neocolonial, in that the philosophes aimed to reform the system not because of their humanitarian ideals, but because changes had to be made to keep European colonial rule intact (160). Using such examples as Guillaume-Thomas Raynal's (1770) best-selling *Histoire des Deux Indes*, she argued that Raynal and other "philosophes-administrators" demonstrate the tight connection between the Enlightenment and European imperialism (125–36). Raynal's work, the first to treat the world that resulted from early modern European global expansion as a system, may even have been governmentally commissioned (129). The power of Duchet's work was to give agency to non-Europeans in the eighteenth-century fight against colonialism and slavery, as she showed that the philosophes' humanism evolved in response to slave revolts and other insurrections against European domination (Dubois 2006).

In a similar vein as Duchet's work, William B. Cohen's (1980) *The French Encounter with Africans* went against the then-reigning consensus that France was and had always been a fundamentally anti-racist country. In the chapter "The Philosophes and Africa," he identified the Enlightenment as a key moment in the transformation of French attitudes of superiority over Black Africans: while the perspective of a heathen, "savage" other had dominated French discourse from the sixteenth century, the eighteenth century saw the displacement of this religious framework with a "biological" one that continued to emphasize African inferiority in another key (60–99). Although most of the philosophes believed that Africans were

Europeans' potential equals and a thoroughgoing and systematic racism is absent from their thought, Cohen nonetheless placed the emphasis on their views of Africans as degenerated from an implicitly white, "superior" standard. Duchet and Cohen's research was immensely important because it demonstrated the centrality of the European colonial project to Enlightenment reflections on humanity's natural history and brought the issue of European and non-European agency to the forefront of the discussion.

Another American historian, Winthrop D. Jordan (1968), published *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro*, a work that remains a classic and one that "virtually originated the study of slavery and race in colonial America" (Brown 2012: viii). He was the first historian to discover that Thomas Jefferson was almost certainly the father of the children that the enslaved Sally Hemings birthed between 1795 and 1808. He didn't discuss the Enlightenment at any length but highlighted the coeval birth of a powerful secular notion of equality and the growth of racism right in the middle of the eighteenth century (Jordan 1968: Chapters 6 and 7).

In line with the questioning mood of the 1960s regarding the emancipatory role that the Enlightenment had played, the American historian David Brion Davis's influential study *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* appeared in 1966. Davis (1966: 393–4) doubted whether the Enlightenment was important in the abolition of slavery, highlighting how such thinkers as Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Alembert all accepted inequality to be perhaps not natural, but at least necessary for a well-functioning, productive society. While some philosophes were critical of slavery, they also (sometimes inadvertently) provided pro-slavers with new intellectual weapons to fight their cause. He highlighted how the intellectual movement and the set of ideas central to it, such as utility, social equilibrium, and the moral economy of nature, could be used for both the pro- and anti-slavery causes (Davis 1966: Chapters 13 and 14; Davis 1975: 257–9).

These studies appeared at the cusp of the postmodern challenge, a movement that is notoriously difficult to define, but one principal feature of which can be adequately captured in Michel Foucault's (1978: 11) phrase "power-knowledge": the knowable is determined by those who have the capacity to set the terms of the debate. The use of postmodernism to critique Eurocentrism is generally called postcolonialism and found its original and most influential expression in Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*. While Said didn't focus on the Enlightenment at any length, his work and that of other postcolonial scholars such as Stuart Hall helped to spur a veritable explosion of scholarship analyzing the concept of race and the practice of racism in the Enlightenment, as well as many other historical periods. And while Foucault's scholarship had an immense impact on the critique of the Enlightenment and the analysis of race and racism in modern history, race and racism were not central concepts or phenomena in his published work. It was only in lectures given at the Collège de France in 1975 and 1976, posthumously published in the 1990s and early 2000s in French and English, that Foucault (2003) analyzed European state racism. The American anthropologist and historian Ann Laura Stoler (1995) wrote an influential study in which she used Foucault's scholarship on the workings of power and the invention of sexuality to study the place of race and racism in the constitution of the modern European subject. Though Stoler did not focus on the Enlightenment in any depth, other scholars, such as the British historical geographer Charles W. J. Withers, drew inspiration from Foucault in their analyzes of the reconstitution of

Eurocentrism in the Enlightenment. In his investigation of the connections between geography, encyclopedism, and natural history, Withers (1996: 280) refers to an "Enlightenment project" characterized by "an imperializing masculinist gaze" that aimed to understand and subdue all of nature. In the postcolonial scholarship of scholars such as David Theo Goldberg (1993: 29), the Enlightenment came to be seen as not being about liberation, but being about subjugation: "subjugation of nature by human intellect, colonial control through physical and cultural domination, and economic superiority through mastery of the laws of the market."

The number of studies on the history of race, racism, and slavery proliferated rapidly in the post-1960s period and many debates that emerged then have yet to subside. Was the Enlightenment racist? How should we make sense of the concept of race, practices of racism and slavery, and nascent abolitionism within the matrix of the Enlightenment? Scholars working in a Marxian vein such as Giuliano Gliozzi (1977) and Theodore W. Allen (1994) argued that the concept of race and the ideology of racism emerged as a means of maintaining imperial power in a nascent capitalist world system. However, the limits of such a social explanation for an ideology sometimes associated with the Enlightenment must be revised when one learns that Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume expressed racist views, yet also opposed slavery (Schaub and Sebastiani 2021: 328). Hume and Adam Smith's opposition to slavery stemmed from their commitment to free labor relations regardless of the basic (in)equality of human beings, as the perspective that free rather than slave labor is more productive gained more adherents across the eighteenth century. In much of the rapidly growing historiography on eighteenth-century slavery and abolitionism, scholars highlighted the ambivalence of the Enlightenment if they paid any attention to it at all. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars generally moved away from Marxist explanations for the ending of slavery, which held that industrialization and capitalism required consumers and incentives that made slavery obsolete, as evidence mounted that slavery was still very profitable and growing at the time of its abolition, not to mention the role of slavery in creating capitalism itself (Blackburn 1997; Drescher 1977; Mintz 1985). The attention shifted largely to the role of the rising industrial class, mass politics, consumer culture, and evangelical Protestantism in explaining why slavery ended (Drescher 1986). Humanitarian sensibilities, largely rooted in a religious conviction, and the politics they drove could have autonomous force in bringing slavery down, but the Enlightenment did not play a significant role in many of these histories.

Some historians charged the Enlightenment with a full-blown racist and pro-slavery agenda. The most forceful of such statement came from the French historian Louis Sala-Molins (2006: 9), who stated, "How can the Enlightenment be interpreted? Only with the Code noir in hand." In a more nuanced fashion, Malick W. Ghachem's (1999) article "Montesquieu in the Caribbean: The Colonial Enlightenment between 'Code Noir' and 'Code Civil'" demonstrated that despite the importance of Montesquieu's misgivings about slavery, colonists used the Baron's scholarship to reform and defend slave laws. Also less polemical than Sala-Molins, another French historian, Pierre H. Boulle, argued that the legal regulation of slavery, particularly those who came back to France from the colonies, helped to contribute to the birth of a racist ideology at mid-century. As slave owners brought their human chattel to France with increasing frequency from the late seventeenth century, enslaved individuals began suing for their freedom in French courts and often winning because of the so-called "free soil principle" that held that slavery cannot exist in metropolitan France. The royal Edict

of 1716 set the conditions upon which slave owners could bring enslaved people to France without losing their ownership (Peabody 1996: 16). Seen in the light of later eighteenth-century laws regulating enslaved people in France, Boulle remarks that this edict is significant, as it makes no explicit mention of skin color or other "racial" features, nor of mixed marriages (Boulle 1988). In 1738, King Louis XV passed a declaration that reinforced the Edict of 1716 and made more stringent demands on slave owners bringing their slaves back to France, all in an effort to more strictly regulate the slave system both in France and the colonies. The racist direction that the laws were heading toward would reach its apogee in 1763, with an ordinance from the Duc de Choiseul, Louis XV's minister of the marine, that stipulated that all Black people, whether slave or free, would have to leave France and that barred Black people entry into the kingdom. While Boulle mentioned the antislavery and anticolonial sentiments of some philosophes, he placed the overwhelming emphasis on the creation of a racist ideology in the eighteenth century, even among many of those opposed to the institution of slavery. The American historian Sue Peabody (1996), who would go on to collaborate with Boulle on various projects, published the seminal study "There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime in 1996. Using the eighteenth-century legal cases in which enslaved people sued for their freedom, Peabody convincingly demonstrates that "during the second half of the eighteenth century officials in the French Admiralty and the royal administration hit on a new classification system that they hoped would regulate the boundaries between France and its colonies: the policing of race" (137).

The scholarship that disparaged the Enlightenment for an implicit or explicit racialism or even racism went hand-in-hand with the feminist critique of the Enlightenment as either a patriarchal project itself or a movement with patriarchal consequences. Londa Schiebinger's (1990: 389) influential article "The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science" effectively argued that eighteenth-century European anatomists and naturalists were primarily concerned with understanding and "fixing" the "inferior" sex of the "dominant" race (white women) and the "dominant" sex of the "inferior" race (Black men). She emphasizes that scientific investigations into anatomical difference came at the same time that equality was beginning to have real force in the political and social world of eighteenth-century France, suggesting that fixing difference and inequality in skeletons and flesh were ways of maintaining and furthering hierarchy and domination. Just one year before the publication of Schiebinger's article, the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) published the influential article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," in which she introduced the term "intersectionality," arguing that race and sex are inseparable, informing as they do all discourse and social practices. In addition to bringing race and sex together in an analytical framework to understand the workings of power in the past and present, Thomas W. Laqueur (1990) wrote an influential book in which he argued that the modern "two-sex" model of male and female was invented at the end of the eighteenth century. This model replaced a "one-sex" model that had endured from antiquity, in which men and women were placed on a vertical axis, underpinned by humoral theory, and women were viewed as "inverted" men. In the late eighteenth century, the view of women or men as "the opposite sex," incommensurable and arranged horizontally, came to dominance. Laqueur (1990: 11) eschewed discussion of what caused the transformation he so richly describes, pointing instead to a number of developments within which the remaking of the body was "intrinsic,"

including “Enlightenment political theory” but also Evangelical religion, the rise of the public sphere, the factory system, and the rise of a free market economy, among many other changes.

Schiebinger and Laqueur didn’t present the Enlightenment and its role in transforming race and sex as monolithically oppressive, in contrast to some postmodern feminists, who asserted that the Enlightenment as well as its legacy were and are inescapably patriarchal, as male reason is elevated to the point of a dogmatism (Hekman 1990; Jardine 1985). Other postmodernists lay the same charge against the Enlightenment regarding race: “the Enlightenment scientists rationalized that ‘subhumans’ were genetically inferior, and behaviorally irrational (of course, according to the criteria they devised). They created intelligence/power in their own image. How convenient” (Kramer and Ikeda 1997: 90). Scholars such as Pauline Johnson (1993) and Dena Goodman (2001) challenged these perspectives by arguing that modern feminism should rather be seen as an extension or continuation of the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment rationalism and philosophy. Much of the more radical postmodern scholarship condemning the Enlightenment presented a caricature of the movement or barely discussed any particular Enlightenment thinker(s) at all, as the Canadian-British historian Barbara Taylor (2012) has pointed out. These debates reached a kind of culmination in 2005 when the edited volume *Women, Gender, and Enlightenment*, edited by Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott and containing contributions by numerous scholars from around the world, appeared and in which the defenders of the Enlightenment’s feminist credentials far outweigh the critics (xvi). And as postmodernism developed, many scholars abandoned the simplistic condemnation of the Enlightenment as uniformly racist or racist, demonstrated by many of the contributions to *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* (Carey and Festa 2009) which integrate universalism and particularism as part of the historical Enlightenment and highlight that universalism could go against colonialism in the period (unlike what some postmodernists like Goldberg had argued).

Interestingly, it was also around the turn of the twenty-first century that an influential study challenging the association of the Enlightenment with racialism and racism was published—Sankar Muthu’s (2003) *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Muthu developed an incisive and influential argument concerning the robustness of Enlightenment anti-colonialism in which equality comes forcefully to the center of Enlightenment debates. He argued that in the thought of three influential Enlightenment thinkers—Diderot, Immanuel Kant, and Johann Gottfried Herder—there developed the most robust criticism of colonialism since the beginning of the Columbian exchange. While there had been critics of European colonialism since the early sixteenth century, Muthu shows that these critics focused on the manner in which Christianity and European lifestyles were spread, not on the fundamental injustice of colonial domination itself. An anomalous and short-lived line of thought developed in the mid-to late eighteenth century that postulated that humans are constitutively cultural beings, a view that Muthu calls “humanity as cultural agency.” Muthu focused on Enlightenment Europeans’ construction of the cultural other but not on race as a category of thought or practice among eighteenth-century historical actors.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, various historians of Enlightenment paid closer attention to the intellectual work that was being done when seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers used the concept of race, particularly regarding biblical controversies and theories of heredity

and climate. As Richard Popkin had pointed out in his seminal 1973 essay discussed above, a key factor that contributed to the invention of Enlightenment racial classification was the waning of biblical authority and genealogies, thus obscuring the image of humans as creatures made in God's image. Nicholas Hudson's (1996) article "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought" furthered this by highlighting the importance of the inclusion of the human species in natural histories, which occurred for the first time in the eighteenth century and most influentially in the work of Linnaeus and Buffon. Linnaeus and Buffon conceived of human physical variation and the ontology of species very differently—for Linnaeus, races are really existing natural divisions fixed across time; while for Buffon, they are impermanent entities that exist in the flux of time and result from environmental influences as well as processes of inheritance. Nonetheless, the usage of the race concept in this scientific literature pointed to a significant cultural shift. Popkin had also argued that one explanatory factor for the rise of Enlightenment race and racism was the need to justify the enslavement and exploitation of sub-Saharan Africans and other non-Europeans. Hudson pointed out that some Enlightenment thinkers both believed in a racial hierarchy or contributed to a racist discourse and opposed slavery, such as Hume.

Biblical controversies were also important in Siep Stuurman's (2000) analysis of the seventeenth-century French physician François Bernier's contribution to racial classification. Bernier published the essay "A New Division of the Earth" in the *Journal des sçavans* in 1684 and proposed four principal races or varieties of humankind, not divided by continent, language, or religion, as had been commonplace until then, but by a combination of physical similarity and ancestry. Stuurman remarked that Bernier's text was "an intellectual experiment" and that its significance lay in the fact that it partook "in a double intellectual transition: from sacred history to natural history, and from the kaleidoscopic, ungoverned taxonomies of Renaissance cosmography to the systematic spirit of classification that originated with Bacon and Descartes" (3). One prominent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debate in which Bernier remained agnostic, Stuurman argued, was that of polygenism versus monogenism. Though the terms were not coined until the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, they refer to positions that were clear in the early modern period. Polygenism is the theory that humanity does not have a single origin and therefore may not form a single species, while monogenism is the competing perspective that all human beings share a common origin and form one species. The debate picked up steam particularly following the publication of Isaac de la Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae*, published in Latin in 1655 and in all of the major European languages shortly thereafter. La Peyrère caused an immense stir because in his text, he argued that the book of Genesis in fact tells the story of two separate creations of human beings; humans had existed for millennia before Adam. La Peyrère's controversial intellectual experiment had very little to do with the so-called human races and much more to do with rescuing the biblical account of creation, ironically enough considering the firestorm that followed (Popkin 1987).

Another factor to explain the rise of race and racism in Enlightenment thought that Popkin had illustrated in his seminal article was the waning of biblical authority, but the historian of Scotland Colin Kidd (2006) challenged this thesis in his book *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000*. Focusing on the Anglophone sphere of the north Atlantic, he argued that "although many social and cultural factors have contributed significantly to western constructions of race, scripture has been for much of the early modern

and modern eras the primary cultural influence on the forging of races. 'Race-as-theology' should be an important constituent of the humanistic study of racial constructs alongside accounts of 'race-as-biology', 'race-as-ethnicity' and 'race-as-class or -caste'" (19). As for the Enlightenment, he argued that the reassessment of the movement in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries demonstrated that for its more "rank-and-file members," materialism and irreligiosity were basically absent, as reconciling Christianity with the new philosophy was one of these thinkers' primary concerns (82–3). Many Enlightenment thinkers, such as the Dutch anatomist and physician Peter Camper or the German "father of anthropology" Blumenbach, used new scientific methods and findings to reinforce the monogenist story of scripture. The polygenism of Hume and Voltaire can best be understood as a secular, anti-scriptural historical criticism that was not common to the Enlightenment as a whole. Regardless of whether Enlightenment thinkers found themselves on the radical fringe of religious/philosophical questions or in the mainstream, it was theological debates about the unity or multiplicity of human origins that largely determined their thinking on race. In a similar vein, David N. Livingstone's (2008) *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins* analyzed mostly polygenist thinkers from the sixteenth century onwards, tracing how various thinkers responded to the variety of challenges that arose to a literal interpretation of Genesis, such as the very existence of the New World, the older chronologies of the Chinese and the Egyptians, and the rise of modern geology.

Importance Today

The disagreements between historians concerning the role of scripture and the rise of science in the invention of race illustrate that the historiography of race in the Enlightenment must be placed in the context of broader controversies among scholars concerning what the Enlightenment was and what its legacy is in the present. One of the most forceful recent assertions of the Enlightenment's importance for today has come from the English-American historian Jonathan Israel, who acknowledges the plural nature of the Enlightenment but insists that the strand of the Enlightenment that mattered (and still matters) the most is the Radical Enlightenment—the set of thinkers from Baruch de Spinoza onwards who formulated a monist-materialist natural philosophy and supposedly held to a set of "liberal democratic" values (Israel 2001; Israel 2006; Israel 2011). Also defending the Enlightenment but from a different perspective, Anthony Pagden's (2013) *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* follows on decades of influential research into early modern European views of Amerindians and empire (Pagden 1982; Pagden 1993; Pagden 1998). Here, Pagden argues that race in the Enlightenment must be understood as part of a novel Enlightenment "science of man"—the secular study of humanity as a species with a natural history whose social, psychological, and moral nature had to be rethought in a world in which the Bible and the classics no longer held the final word (Pagden 2013: Chapters 4 and 5). Elsewhere, Pagden (2009) has argued that race played no part in European ideologies of early modern empire because the ideologues of empire were by and large committed to the evangelization of non-Europeans and if these populations were construed as "a race apart"—descending from someone other than Adam—then there could be no justification for empire.

Critiques of these defenses of the Enlightenment abound, especially that of Israel, and touch upon a number of issues, but interestingly for our discussion, one of the bones of contention surrounding Israel's thesis concerns the place of race in (radical) Enlightenment thought. Ann Thomson drew upon her earlier pioneering work on race in the thought of key Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot to challenge Israel's overarching narrative. Thomson (1999; 2003; 2008) has demonstrated that Diderot's materialism led him to emphasize the physical differences between human groups, as any explanation of human variety had to be sought in a history of nature, a history which also includes the human species. Diderot stopped short of conceiving of fundamental and unbridgeable inequalities between races because he refused the stability of any natural forms, adhering to Buffon's conception of the races as environmentally inflected forms that exist in the flux of time, and because he grounded his defense of human rights on a materialist conception of common humanity (human beings are one species because we can produce fertile offspring across any divisions one draws). Yet, just as with his views of women, his conception of inequality between Europeans and non-Europeans followed at least partially from his materialism, not despite it. Recently, Thomson (2017) has used her research on Diderot and Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* to argue that the Enlightenment cannot be seen as either inherently racist or anti-racist, pro- or anti-colonial; rather, both positions are to be found in the greatest texts and minds of the period and our job as historians is to highlight the ambiguities and complexities of the period, not to claim the Enlightenment as a mantle that must be passed on and defended.

In this regard, Thomson is in line with much recent work on race in Enlightenment thought, which eschews straightforward defenses or attacks on the movement and rather dissects what intellectual and political work race performed in eighteenth-century debates. For example, while some key works in the history of heredity and reproduction were published long ago (Gasking 1967; Jacob 1970; Roe 1981), scholars such as Charles T. Wolfe (2014) have demonstrated the importance of the epigenesis theory of reproduction to wider debates about atheism. Epigenesis is the theory that an embryo develops from an undifferentiated egg cell after fertilization (now the commonly accepted theory) and is usually contrasted with preformationism, which holds that the organism existed preformed either in the egg or sperm cell of the parent (Roger 1997a; Roger 1997b). Phillip R. Sloan (1973) remarked long ago that debates about heredity were important for understanding how early modern thinkers made sense of human physical diversity but research in this area has intensified in the twenty-first century (Lettow 2014; Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 2012; Smith 2006; Terrall 2002; Terrall 2007). One way of understanding the concept of race in Enlightenment thought is the placing of humanity in a history of nature that incorporates the nascent deep time revolution—the human species has evolved over many thousands of years, adapting to climatic conditions (though of course this was a world that predates Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, Vartija 2021).

Expanding knowledge of heredity developed in step with novel biopolitical views of altering the human species, as William Max Nelson (2010; 2021) has demonstrated for some Enlightenment thinkers' intellectual concerns. Gabriel de Bory, a governor-general of the Leeward Islands in the Pacific, and a lawyer named Michel-René Hilliard d'Auberteuil who had connections to colonial administration, independently published texts in the mid-1770s concerning the selective breeding of enslaved people, free people of color, and whites in colonial territories in order to create a stable and profitable colonial society. Both thinkers

utilized Enlightenment conceptions of utility and the advanced knowledge from natural history to elaborate their biopolitical programs. Nelson relies on Foucault and others in refusing the “blackmail of Enlightenment”—the dichotomous choice between accepting or rejecting the Enlightenment—because this ignores the complexities and inherent contradictions in Enlightenment thought (2010: 1391). Instead, he posits that “we must approach the extremes of emancipation and domination and search for the many links that connect them” (2010: 1392).

This is in line with much current research on race in the Enlightenment, such as Andrew S. Curran’s (2011) *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*. He presents a very detailed analysis of how and why blackness went from being a “variety” to a “race” in the period from intensified European interactions with sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, comparing eighteenth-century anatomy with other fields or modes of inquiry into human diversity. He is acutely aware of the Eurocentric and prejudiced views that underlay much Enlightenment “scientific” interest in blackness, which conflicted with the nascent and growing secular antislavery movement, and argues that one of the best explanations of this seeming paradox can be found in the different genres that Enlightenment writers engaged with to write about blackness and slavery. Writing about Black people from the perspective of natural history entailed different assumptions and modes of argument than writing in defense of Black peoples’ equal rights: “In both of these cases, Diderot’s so-called convictions regarding the black African were perhaps less real beliefs than they were the reflection of specific intent, conventions of genre, and competing Enlightenment-era epistemologies” (14). He highlights the connections between the growing importance of race-based slavery and colonialism and the increasing interest among Enlightenment thinkers in blackness within the disciplines of natural history and anatomy, thus foregrounding how oppressive practices underpinned new structures of thought.

Shortly after Curran’s study, another American historian, David Allen Harvey (2012), published a major study on race and the broader question of “otherness” in the French Enlightenment. Harvey argues that the Enlightenment should be understood as a novel “discursive field” in which a number of key issues such as human origins, the nature and possibility of progress, and the relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans were debated, rather than as a movement that advanced a single viewpoint. Regarding race, he argues that we can most usefully understand race in the French Enlightenment as the last stand of the climatic theory of human physical and, to a certain extent, cultural difference. Between the extremes of a wholesale defense or vehement attack on the Enlightenment for either its progressiveness or its oppressiveness, Harvey (2012: 213) takes a middle stand, asserting that the philosophes’ cross-cultural comparisons “served as a powerful double-edged sword for Enlightenment-era French writers and cultural critics, defining a discourse that was simultaneously universalist and relativist, Eurocentric and cosmopolitan.” Similar to Nelson, Harvey fully acknowledges that the Enlightenment laid the foundations for both scientific racism and the emancipatory political programs of the modern age but more so than the former, he stresses that the Enlightenment marked an epistemological and moral turning-point that invented the modern human sciences, with all of their emancipatory and destructive potential.

Analyzing Scottish rather than French Enlightenment thinkers, Silvia Sebastiani (2013) also highlighted the tensions and ambiguities in the thought of prominent eighteenth-century literati in *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress*. She demonstrates that the concept of race in the Scottish Enlightenment was engendered by novel eighteenth-century conjectural histories that described human progress in stages, most often from a monogenist perspective. The idea of the progress of humanity as described in stadial histories made the perceived “stagnation” of some peoples a problem, and she argues that the concept of race served to explain the divergent developmental paths of various peoples by attributing them to physical and moral causes that, depending on the thinker, could be either a “hard” or “soft” conceptualization of racial differences. She demonstrates that stadial history was a form of natural history, and her elegant study stresses the unresolved tensions between universality and hierarchy in the Scottish Enlightenment. Given the importance of a hierarchical conceptualization of humanity in Enlightenment thought and the relevance of thinking about humanity as an animal species with a natural history, it is logical that Sebastiani’s current research focuses on the role of chimpanzees and orangutans in Enlightenment debates on the boundaries of humanity. She demonstrates that Enlightenment thinkers’ humanization of the primates went hand in hand with the dehumanization of the “savage,” usually Africans and Amerindians, but also the feral children found in European forests (Sebastiani 2019).

Much of the post-1980s scholarship on race and racism in the Enlightenment so far discussed comes from those trained as historians, reflecting the fact that this period witnessed an enthusiastic embrace of the Enlightenment contribution to modernity among historians, as John Robertson (2020) has argued. Nonetheless, philosophers specialized in the thinkers generally associated with the Enlightenment devoted more and more attention to the role of race in their systems of thought, particularly those of Hume and Kant. In older scholarship on the place of race or racism in these philosophers’ body of work, it was generally taken to be marginal, if it was considered at all. Once again, Richard H. Popkin proved a pioneering scholar here, as he wrote about Hume’s racism in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The controversy surrounds Hume’s infamous footnote to his essay “Of National Characters,” first published in 1748 without the footnote, then added to the 1753–4 edition, and later revised by Hume for the final edition of his collected works toward the end of his life. The footnote reads, in part:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences.

--(Hume 1985: 629)

Popkin (1977–8) argued that Hume’s footnote might be considered a “casual addition,” though one that would have great influence on later racists and apologists of slavery. Popkin (1992) would later revise his assessment and something of a querelle de Hume developed as the number of publications increased exponentially (Eze 2000, 2001; Garrett 2000, 2004; Gliozzi 1993; Immerwahr 1992; Mankin 2009; Palter 1995; Sebastiani 2013; Zack 2002).

Immerwahr (1992) found that Hume's revision to the footnote for the final and definitive edition of his work had been omitted from an important modern edition of his work, and such a revision demonstrates that Hume's racism was a deliberate and considered position. To understand the footnote, it is important to place it in the context of Hume's disagreement with Montesquieu concerning the role of climate in giving shape to a people's customs or "culture," in modern terms. Hume argued for the primacy of what he termed "moral causes" for understanding the cultural diversity that characterizes the human species across both time and space. Silvia Sebastiani and Aaron Garrett (2017) demonstrate that Hume's racist footnote was far from insignificant; rather, it fit into his broader philosophy and debates with his contemporaries concerning national characters, political economy, and humanity's natural history. The moral and therefore changeable causes of variations in human behavior were confined to European peoples for Hume, as he held to a polygenetic account of the human races and insisted, despite evidence to the contrary, that no non-Europeans had ever made significant civilizational achievements. Sebastiani and Garrett also note that Hume's perspective was not shared by many of his contemporaries, as thinkers such as James Beattie challenged Hume's racism by underlining the unity of the human species and the primacy of environmental and social circumstances in explaining (perceived) inequalities between them.

In many respects, scholarship on Kant's racialism/racism developed in a similar fashion as that on Hume. In the early twenty-first century, historians of philosophy began to pay more attention to Kant's racism, arguing that Kant was a white-supremacist thinker who therefore fell far short of the moral universalism with which he was commonly associated (Bernasconi 2001; Bernasconi 2002; Eze 2001; Mills 2005). Others argued that although Kant expressed appalling racist views, these do not fundamentally affect or alter the way we should look at his critical philosophy (Louden 2000). The question thus became, as Pauline Kleingeld (2007: 576) puts it in her influential article "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race," "Was Kant an inconsistent universalist, or, as has been argued recently, a consistent inegalitarian?" Kleingeld convincingly shows that even before the 1790s, when Kant wrote numerous racist statements, he was not a consistent inegalitarian because he conceived of human beings as beings endowed with reason and was clear that all races belong to one species. She therefore rejects the "consistent inegalitarian" defenders, most notably Charles Mills. She also demonstrates that those philosophers who hold that Kant's racist views can be cordoned off and set aside from his wider theories are misguided because racist prejudices influenced the basic moral and political principles and their application in Kant's thought. Kleingeld's thesis is that Kant changed his mind about race in the 1790s, as he wrote forcefully against both non-white slavery (something he had previously accepted) and against colonialism, especially in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (Kant 2006). Particularly following Kleingeld's essay, a querelle de Kant developed, as Robert Bernasconi (2011) argued that Kant never made such a transformation in his racist views as Kleingeld argued, namely because he republished his essays on race in the late 1790s. However, as Kleingeld (2014) argued in a chapter on Kant's transformation regarding colonialism, he never abandoned race as a meaningful biological category and separated, from the beginning, the "moral characterization" of races from the "physical." More importantly, Kleingeld (2014: 63) remarks that Kant decided not to republish the section on the "character of the races" in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.

The fact that Kant was a monogenist is relevant to understanding his racialist and racist views, but not all scholars agree on the consequences that follow from such a position. The importance of the monogenism/polygenism debate and the inclusion of humanity in natural histories have been analyzed from a new perspective in an important recent book by Claude-Olivier Doron (2016). He effectively brings the concepts of degeneration and race together in his book, arguing that both concerned genealogy and help us to understand key transformations in thinking about human diversity in the Enlightenment. He argues that the modern concept of race was formed primarily among eighteenth-century monogenist naturalists such as Buffon who brought together a taxonomic style of reasoning with a genealogical style of reasoning, borrowed from diverse sources such as nobiliary practices and breeding. He argues against the many scholars who point to a paradox of Enlightenment thinking by contrasting Enlightenment universalism with its racialist or racist underbelly, as he posits that race allowed inequality to become more deeply rooted within a vision of inclusive humanity. This is because race became a concept most important in the monogenist thought of naturalists such as Buffon, who tried to explain human physical diversity from the starting point that humanity has a single, shared origin.

Doron's emphasis on the ambiguity of Enlightenment discourses on race is fully in line with much recent scholarship on the subject, as previously mentioned. Siep Stuurman (2017), discussed above in relation to François Bernier, later went on to write a sweeping intellectual history of equality and inequality in world history in which he, too, stresses the ambiguity of Enlightenment anthropology. He points to two turning points in thinking about equality in his *longue-durée*, global narrative. The first is the Axial Age (c.800BCE–200CE), during which the philosophical notion of humanity as an overarching moral community was established independently in various locations of the ancient world. This concept of common humanity was compatible with trenchant visions of a deeply hierarchical politics and society. The Enlightenment of the long eighteenth century is Stuurman's second turning point, the period when universal natural equality, or what he calls "modern equality," became the default assumption. "Modern equality" is utterly abstract, assuming the primacy of the individual, and can therefore be applied to a critique of all kinds of inequality. But Stuurman is under no illusions that Enlightenment thinkers advanced a uniform and straightforward notion of universal equality, as he also insists that the philosophes invented modern discourses of inequality, of which race was perhaps the most virulent and enduring. Unlike some scholars, then, Stuurman rejects the notion that the Enlightenment must be claimed and defended as a kind of talisman in the present because, while the movement gave birth to modern equality, it also bequeathed modern race and scientific racism to posterity.

In the Future

The first historian quoted in this article, David Nirenberg, remarked that one of the signal achievements of the post-World War II social sciences was the dismantling of racism's claims to explain cultural differences and social inequalities. That quotation continues: "Since that time, those sciences have been struggling with mixed success to find new terms and theories with which to describe and explain the persistence of group identity and group difference across time and space" (Nirenberg 2009: 233). This neatly captures the field of the study of race in any period, including the Enlightenment.

That race is a social construction is now a truism at least among social science and humanities scholars, pointing to the partial exhaustion of a line of inquiry that has become dominant since the 1970s and best captured by the term “othering”: demonstrating that throughout most of Western history and perhaps especially during the Enlightenment, non-Europeans have frequently been represented as both different from, and lesser than, European men. While the dominance of this negative perspective on non-Europeans is undoubtedly accurate, recent scholarship attempts to balance the new inclusionary and exclusionary power of novel Enlightenment ideas and practices, rather than declaring the movement firmly for the one or the other and suggesting that this direction of research will continue and intensify in the future. In a recent book, the historian of nineteenth-century race in the United States Kyla Schuller (2018: 205) aptly remarked that “the framework in which ‘race’ marks solely the accretion of social structures with little relation to physiological phenomena ... has ceased to serve as a viable resource for progressive politics.” Nirenberg and Schuller’s remarks point to the current issues scholars face when researching race in historical perspective, whether in the Enlightenment or another historical period. Demonstrating that racist thinking and identities have a history underlines their socially constructed nature, but the place that the Enlightenment once held—as the movement that gave birth to race and scientific racism—is now highly contested. The work of Nirenberg and other scholars points to the importance of the Iberian Peninsula in the late medieval period, or to even earlier periods in European or non-European history in the creation of racist discourse (Chaplin 2002; Schaub 2019; Sweet 1997). Literary scholar W. J. T. Mitchell (2012: 29) has remarked that “the idea that race-thinking and racism are specifically modern, then, has to be consigned to the dustbin of history.”

The so-called “origins” debate is losing steam and intellectual historian Vanita Seth (2020) has recently offered an effective critique of it using the tools of contextualist intellectual history. She demonstrates that many of the historians studying race and racism in the premodern period may sometimes fall prey to what Quentin Skinner (1969) called the “mythology of prolepsis” in his classic essay “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”: the kind of misguided interpretation or argument that arises when we are more interested in the retrospective significance of an event than in its meaning for the agent at the time. Seth (2020: 359) writes,

Ultimately, for all that distinguishes the scholarship on the origins of ancient and premodern racism, what is common is the implicit presumption that racism is an empty vessel residing outside of the history it is said to contain. ... Racism, like the chain of being, is presumed to retain enough conceptual cohesion that it precedes the history that it then particularizes.

While one can certainly critique certain aspects of Seth’s article—most importantly, insufficient attention to racism as (past) practice that therefore goes beyond a strictly conceptual history—her argument marks an important contribution to the debate on how we should make sense of the history of race and racism, also in the Enlightenment. Rather than drawing a line from the eighteenth century to Auschwitz, we can better try to make sense of what eighteenth-century thinkers were doing when putting the concept of race to use in an argument (Vartija 2021b).

One thing that Enlightenment thinkers were doing was putting their knowledge and contacts to use by serving the growing state apparatuses to govern far-flung colonial empires. While an older historiography concentrated on Enlightenment anti-colonialism, more recent work concentrates on the myriad and complex ways in which Enlightenment thinkers worked with colonial administrators. For example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Andrew S. Curran (2022: ix) have recently brought together the essays published in response to Bordeaux's Royal Academy of Sciences prize contest announced in 1739 that posed the question "What is the physical cause of the Negro's color, the quality of [the Negro's] hair, and the degeneration of both [Negro hair and skin]?" As Gates and Curran point out in their introduction, Bordeaux was one of the most important ports in the eighteenth-century French transatlantic slave trade and the academy's essay competition demonstrates how the Enlightenment concern with the utility of knowledge did not always coincide with an enlightened ethical position. Prize contests were an important and popular part of Enlightenment culture to which numerous people from diverse social backgrounds contributed and "the topic of human servitude runs like a red thread through the prize contests of the late eighteenth century" (Caradonna 2012: 152). The ways in which eighteenth-century thinkers fashioned race as part of the expanding slave trade and growth of slave societies, as well as colonial administrative more generally, will likely remain topics of primary concern going forward. Interest in Raynal's best-selling *Histoire des deux Indes* has surged of late, and numerous historians are continuing Michèle Duchet's pioneering work of investigating the royal administrative networks to which Raynal belonged and which the multi-volume work would have served (Thomson 2017; and the ongoing critical edition: Raynal 2010; Raynal 2018; Raynal 2020).

Conclusion

In the historiography of Enlightenment thought in the pre-World War II era, scholars paid little if any attention to race as a concept or racism as a phenomenon in the Enlightenment era, concentrating as they did on the intellectual movement's foundational role in establishing a progressive political tradition. Starting with Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno in the 1940s, however, there emerged a strand of scholarship that highlighted the Enlightenment's role in the development of an oppressive tradition that posited the superiority of Europeans over all others and rationalized the subjugation of non-Europeans. The decolonization movements of the postwar period and the democratization of higher education gave impetus to a re-evaluation of the Enlightenment's role in the invention of modern race, racism, and colonialist ideologies. Additionally, the study of race, slavery, and antislavery expanded rapidly and immensely in the same period, and historians emphasized Enlightenment thinkers' ambiguity in these historical developments, in addition to shifting attention to the social arena of race formation rather than the arena of elite intellectuals. Scholars on both sides of the Atlantic highlighted the importance of Enlightenment thinkers in the development of a tradition that naturalized inequalities between Europeans and non-Europeans, just as scholars at the forefront of postmodernism in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s vociferously denounced Enlightenment as inherently racist and oppressive.

During this time, many scholars pushed back, highlighting the inherent ambiguities rather than the inherent racism of much of the era's thought, and this line of inquiry is arguably the most prevalent today. Rather than emphasizing an inescapable Enlightenment white supremacy,

scholars sought to understand the philosophes' engagement with race in the context of debates over scripture, polygenism and monogenism, mechanisms of inheritance, and humanity's place in the natural world. While Jonathan Israel attempted to argue that it was only the moderate strand of Enlightenment thinkers who developed the race concept and defended colonialism, more careful research by other scholars has revealed that there was no direct correlation between metaphysics and politics in the Enlightenment.

Given that the Enlightenment is, to some degree, a post hoc creation that inevitably reflects the perspectives of the era from which it is produced, one should not be surprised that the rapidly shrinking world of the postwar era that witnessed successful decolonization and civil rights movements should have looked to how modernity's foundational intellectual movement paved the way both for the need for such movements, as well as the resources from which these movements drew. The promise of Enlightenment—liberation from myth, superstition, and humankind's self-imposed immaturity—must not be lost on us, even as we recognize that the movement destroyed some age-old myths only to help to create another, equally dangerous one in the idea of racial supremacy.

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