

Race et histoire dans les sociétés occidentales
(XV^e-XVIII^e siècle)

Jean-Frédéric Schaub and Silvia Sebastiani

(Paris: Albin Michel, 2021)

[ISBN: 9782226253866]

GIROLAMO IMBRUGLIA

(Università di Napoli L'Orientale)

The two authors of *Race et histoire dans les sociétés occidentales (XV^e-XVIII^e siècle)* explain at the outset that their work is a 'livre d'histoire,' delving into the role played by the conceptualisation of racial categories in shaping and perpetuating power dynamics in modern Europe (79). This preliminary statement, along with the terms 'race et histoire,' may initially evoke associations with the anthropological research of Lévi-Strauss and, more recently, post-colonial studies. These perspectives are occasionally seen as diverging from the historiographic tradition of political history and the history of ideas, to which this work truly belongs. It can be said that Schaub and Sebastiani employ Michel Foucault's genealogical research method. Although not explicitly referenced, the influence of Foucauldian teachings, and perhaps the work of Giorgio Agamben, is clearly discernible through the adoption of a perspective where the genealogy constructed by the authors focuses on the forms and mechanisms used to wield power, resulting in the development of representations of race and the (pseudoscientific) concept of racism. Characterising Europe's social and political regimes over the four centuries in question as 'racist' may seem anachronistic, given that the term 'racism' originated much later. Moreover, this assertion may appear incorrect, considering our contemporary understanding that race is an untenable category. It was not race that produced power practices; rather, these practices gave rise to the category, created with the aim of establishing and preserving social relations of dominance. The genealogical perspective centres on social conflict, where the desire to resolve such conflict translated into the persecution of groups or peoples who were kept subjugated through racialised policies. Navigating these horizons, Schaub and Sebastiani present an innovative book by choosing a point of view that allows for a new history of both the concept of race and modern Europe.

The volume offers a history of the concept of race and the practices that gave rise to it, unfolding in two distinct parts with different approaches. Chapters 1–4 trace the political history of European societies, illustrating the formation of racial categories and how their use shaped the social and political structure between the fourteenth and

Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography), ISSN 1123-7023, 26/2023

© 2023 The Authors. This is an open access article published by Firenze University Press under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

DOI: 10.36253/cromohs-15165

eighteenth centuries. Chapter 5–6 analyse the history of Enlightenment thought on race, a coherent choice given that the history of ideas is the history of how societies and individuals grappled with the past and envisioned the future. These two approaches, though distinct, are complementary and provide new depth to our understanding of the emergence of racist theories. The concept of race has on the one hand been denied in the name of universal theories of human rights, and on the other defended in the name of practices and hierarchies legitimised by that very notion.

Schaub examines how, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the invention of race was a political resource justifying racialised societies founded on dominance, oppression, and terrifying violence. This modern idea and practice were distinct from that of the ancient world. Race was an imaginary structure devised to defend the power of elites determined to safeguard their superiority, deny equality, and impose the subordination of groups represented as different and, consequently, dangerous. Schaub identifies four characteristics of colonial and territorial conquest, allowing for a long periodisation reaching back before the fifteenth century. These characteristics include a) the dominion exercised by the conquering power, b) the more or less forced migration of populations, especially males, c) the construction of conditions of hierarchy and social superiority, and d) the corresponding formation of a varied but homogeneous ideology of legitimisation. The temporal horizon is thus extended to include the conquests of Wales and Ireland, as well as Eastern Europe, along with the overseas settlements of Aragon, Genoa, and Venice. While the conquest of the Americas undoubtedly marked a new era, it is emphasised that it ‘demeure un chapitre de l’histoire médiévale de l’Europe’ (remains a chapter in European medieval history) (159). Furthermore, the meaning of the Iberian mechanism of racialisation is shown to be contingent upon the European context (165). Schaub revisits John Elliott’s thesis on the centrality of Spanish politics in European political life, a proposition Elliott himself advanced based on Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet (excluding Alexis de Tocqueville) in his work *La France espagnole. Les racines hispaniques de l’absolutisme français*. In *Il faut défendre la société*, Foucault suggested that a war of races erupted in seventeenth-century France and England, where two social groups belonging to the same society sought to assert themselves by affirming the inferiority of the rival. In other words, a racial conflict emerged among physiologically homogeneous groups. Schaub extends the chronology of this thesis. The self-representation of the Spanish aristocracy as a superior race was rooted in notions of purity and qualities transmitted through bodily fluids such as milk, blood, and sperm, holding tangible rather than metaphorical value (123). The perceived defect of the group that was defeated and judged inferior was likewise invisible, transmitted through these same bodily fluids. The purity of blood, serving as the foundation for the exclusion of Jews and Muslims from Iberian societies and the marginalisation of *conversos*, aimed to secure the exercise of power over groups that were homogeneous by religion but heterogeneous in an imperceptible characteristic attributed to them. The difference or lack of blood purity was believed to render individuals incapable of virtue.

This resulted in the formation of a stably infamous group within society. The internal racial conflict endowed race with a sense of natural fixity, governing selection and excluding those deemed dangerous and subsequently racialised. In instances where the radical approach of eliminating a hostile group through genocide or expulsion proved unsuccessful, the method for handling conflict with alterity sought to naturalise relationships that were both inclusive and exclusive: ‘Exclure ceux qui s’assimilent: voilà une des meilleurs définitions possibles du racisme’ (To exclude those who assimilate: that is one of the best possible definitions of racism) (144). However, in certain cases, social arbitrariness could override the exclusion factor in this selection process. Alteration, one of the modes of genealogical dynamics primarily oriented towards degeneration, could also move in the opposite direction. The state of exception was a characteristic structure of the early modern state, and the control of social mobility remained within the discretion of the elites. This mechanism is examined in the context of Spain, encompassing both the formation of the aristocracy of immaculate blood and the monarchy that supported it, as well as in relations with ‘stained’ groups—Jews and Muslims. In both instances, it was not the absence of purity that barred ascension to the aristocracy, but the fullness of infamy, perceived as real due to its transmission through blood. Virtue was not lacking, as it was potentially attainable by education, but faith was absent. This absence, that *conversos* were accused of concealing, was thought to give rise to despicable personalities. As *conversos* became objects of necessary suspicion and persecution, the persecution itself was perceived as rightful, given its sacred nature. The suspicion that their faith was not sincere was indeed a certainty. Their original religion persisted and, perhaps unbeknownst to them, became an immutable guilt. An important role in the deployment of these practices was played by the Inquisition, an unsurpassed and indispensable tool for combating the invisible, capable of controlling a dynamic that was contradictory (136 ff). Accused of being tied to their original faith and condemned accordingly, *conversos*, over time—a key category—had nevertheless distanced themselves from their former religion and tended to integrate at least partially into Christian society. However, as Prudencio de Sandoval wrote in the biography of Charles V, they remained dangerous. Racialisation, therefore, was felt as a necessity when the perception of alterity diminished (151–53).

However, the inquisitorial gaze was not the sole perspective. The historical culture of the time did notice the phenomenon of diminishing Jewish alterity, interpreting it in various ways.¹ The political strategy of dominance did not go uncontested, as Burckhardt reminds us; however, this dynamic is somewhat underexplored by Schaub and Sebastiani. In the late sixteenth century, amid the turmoil of religious wars, European reflection on tolerance began, aiming to prevent

¹ YAACOV DEUTSCH, “A View of the Jewish Religion”. Conceptions of Jewish Practice and Ritual in Early Modern Europe, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3, no. 1 (2001): 273–95. Cfr. LEON OF MODENA and RICHARD SIMON, *Les Juifs présentés aux Chrétiens. Cérémonies et coutumes qui s’observent aujourd’hui parmi les Juifs, par Léon de Modène, traduit par Richard Simon, suivi de Comparaisons des cérémonies des Juifs et de la discipline de l’Église, par Richard Simon*, eds JACQUES LE BRUN and GUY G. STROUMSA (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998).

oppression, expulsion, or genocide for the cause of religion from being the sole forms of social organisation. Efforts were made to recognise the possibility of coexistence of different religions and to deny the right—acknowledged and imposed by St Augustine on the Christian state—to resort to violent conversion, which, in turn, generated simulation. A new idea of sovereignty was needed, as asserted by Jean Bodin. In the mid-seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes argued that the power of the state was exercised over individuals recognised as equals by natural law. Europeans may have been superior to other peoples, such as Asians, Africans, and Americans, in terms of their capacity to produce ‘arts,’ Hobbes noted. However, he also argues, this requires explanation and should not be accepted as a natural fact: why, that is, did this hierarchy appear when all men had ‘animae’ and faculties of the same kind?² Already in those decades, a contradiction began to emerge. The need to eliminate the persistence of the conditions of conquest in the name of the universalism of sovereignty was in conflict with the political need to recognise states of exception instrumental in denying that universality. A different way of thinking about politics began to take shape, as later seen in the Enlightenment. However, this aspect, perhaps due to an excess of coherence on the part of the authors, is kept outside the scope of the book (480).

The political construction of American alterity was in continuity with the experience of invisible and religious alterity. The continuity lay not in the substitution in social imagination of Africans and Indians for *conversos* but in maintaining the exclusion mechanism based on the naturalistic category of blood. This mechanism now transmitted not impurity and the inferiority of faith but physiological impurity. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a shift from a ‘métaphysique du sang’ (metaphysics of blood) to an effort of classification (190), from an ethno-religious principle to the naturalistic classification of humanity as a species based on skin colour and the *reticulum mucosum*. For Schaub and Sebastiani, this transition was not a sudden change. The genealogical thesis that the alterity and inferiority of some and the superiority of others were produced by political practices and objectives is evident in the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans. They were deported and placed below every other social stratification. Imperial institutions sanctioned a social regime of inhumanity through the visible and chromatic difference, rather than the invisible.

In the two chapters on Native Americans and African alterity, particular attention is given to childhood as the locus of the visibility of interbreeding. The fate reserved for *mestizo* children is key to understanding the racial nature of the discrimination imposed on the descendants of the indigenous people. *Mestizaje* is also discussed through the analysis of *pinturas de castas*, representations flourishing in Mexico in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which a ‘social body which has become opaque’ becomes intelligible again. The depictions of family relationships show the variety of intermixing that occurred between Europeans, Africans, and

² THOMAS HOBBS, *De corpore*, I, i, 7.

Native Americans. At the bottom of the social hierarchy was the indistinction produced by mixed unions; at the top was the indistinction of whites, as no difference was perceived between Europeans born in America and those born in Spain, since what mattered was blood, not the place of birth. The two worlds faced each other. The case of African populations deported to America was even more dramatic. Recalling Act no. 12 passed by the Virginia Assembly in December 1662, which established that the child of an African slave mother was born a slave, Schaub concludes that, without prejudicing the Christian conception, the black humanity of plantations was judged closer to great apes than to whites (305). The racial definition based on skin colour went beyond the distinction between social status and freedom. Even in societies where hierarchies were based on skin colour, the emancipation of women and men of colour was possible. Free people of colour were created—individuals whose nature was inevitably uncertain and who could aspire to full humanity only after six generations of uninterrupted reproduction with whites.

Hence, in this reconstruction, the shift towards the Enlightenment era does not lead to the affirmation of universal values and morally cosmopolitan ideals. Instead, it takes place through the classification of humanity as a natural species, within which the hierarchy of varieties was conceptualised to support the incomplete humanity of Black Africans and Native Americans. Thomas Jefferson perhaps best symbolised this separation between culture and politics: as the authors remind us through the words of historian Winthrop Jordan, Jefferson ‘hated slavery’ but believed Black people to be ‘inferior to White men’ (467).

Sebastiani introduces the issue with a meticulous analysis of the historiographical landscape. Current debates on the Enlightenment seem to have returned to early twentieth-century historicism, when Benedetto Croce and Friedrich Meinecke looked upon eighteenth-century theories of natural rights with impatience. Now, however, these theories are judged too fragile, both by the tradition initiated by the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and by post-colonial studies. Enlightenment culture proves incapable, in the first case, of containing the utilitarian and anti-humanistic dimension of technology and, in the second case, of preventing colonialism and slaveholding by European states. Sebastiani rightly notes that these critiques have not received historically relevant responses and analyses the ‘lourd héritage historiographique’ (heavy historiographical legacy) of the eighteenth century (322), following Richard Popkin rather than George Mosse. According to Popkin, Western racist ideologies originated within universalist ideologies. Far from being separated from the Enlightenment, the issue of race was rooted in eighteenth-century intellectual reflection, where one again finds the sense of *pinturas de castas*—that is, that Europeans, wherever born, were superior in brain and beauty to every other race and distant from animality.

The racialisation of Africans as slaves is chronologically close to the appearance in Europe of orangutans (‘men of the woods’), transported from Africa on the same ships as the slave trade. The questions that arose pertained to the contiguity between

human varieties and animal races, and the definition of humanity. The problem of races raised the issue of the correlation between humanity and animality, but according to Sebastiani, the race theory formulated by Hume and Voltaire did not mark a break between the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. Multiple formulations of polygenism had already circulated in the seventeenth century, gaining widespread popularity in the eighteenth century. Voltaire, after observing the *reticulum mucosum* of a Black person, became convinced that ‘la race des nègres est une espèce d’hommes différente de la nôtre, comme la race des Espagnols l’est des lévriers’ (the race of negroes is a species of men different from ours, like the race of the Spanish is different from greyhounds).³ This membrane, independent of external environmental conditions, was seen as clear evidence that there exists in every human species a specific principle that distinguishes them.

Africans were deemed physiologically inferior in beauty, intelligence, and attention capacity. ‘C’est par là que les nègres sont les esclaves des autres hommes’ (That is why the negroes are the slaves of other men). Although not yet founded on the observation of a *reticulum mucosum*, the colonial experience had also shown the analogous inferiority of Native Americans through a surprising reasoning that reveals the confusion of natural history and history—a confusion that Voltaire was not alone in experiencing. Native Americans, ‘aisément vaincus partout, n’ont jamais osé tenter une révolution, quoiqu’ils fussent plus de mille contre un’ (easily defeated everywhere, have never dared to attempt a revolution, even though they were more than a thousand to one).⁴ Alongside Voltaire appears Hume and his essay *Of National Characters*. Compared to Europeans, according to Hume, the inability of Africans to produce culture could only originate from a different natural structure. Contiguity with animality was a way to address the question of the nature of humanity. An example is found again in Voltaire, where albinos, ‘petits, faibles, louches’ (small, weak, cross-eyed), were placed below Black Africans and Khoekhoe (then known as ‘Hottentots’) and above monkeys, ‘comme un des degrés qui descendent de l’homme à l’animal’ (as one of the steps descending from human to animal).⁵

The ‘tournant anthropologique des Lumières’ (the Enlightenment’s anthropological turn) is the characteristic in which Sebastiani finds the novelty of the Enlightenment. It is not a defence of or a search for anti-Enlightenment but a study in something of a silhouette of the Enlightenment, conducted specifically on the issue of race, tracing its cultural and political history. This novelty consisted in inserting humanity into the natural order and placing individuals and societies in history. On the one hand, there was the fixity of nature; on the other, the diversity that had arisen over time. The comparison between the natural history of societies and the natural history of humanity began around the mid-century, with Buffon and Montesquieu—and perhaps the analysis of the *Esprit des loix* should have been pursued farther—and their

³ VOLTAIRE, *Essai sur les mœurs*, ch. CXLI, ed. RENE POMEAU, 2 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1963), vol. 2, 305.

⁴ VOLTAIRE, *Essai sur les mœurs*, ch. CXLV, vol. 2, 335.

⁵ VOLTAIRE, *Essai sur les mœurs*, ch. CXLIII, vol. 2, 319.

readers in Britain and France. The comparison and convergence of these two perspectives is original and brings out new categories of civilisation, perfectibility, and reproduction. Humans are placed in the classification system of the natural world, alongside the camel and the monkey, and in the system of moral and historical causality, which no longer has a religious anchor but a physiological and anthropological one (388–89). The rejection of the biblical Adamic monogenism seemed to offer the possibility of thinking in a materialistic way about moral diversity, opening the way to the denial of human psychic homogeneity. Inserted into a context dominated by such categories, polygenism acquired a new temporal dimension, accounting for the development, in different autonomous degrees, of the original potential for civilisation, improvement, and degeneration of each human group. The logic of comparison produced, alongside relativism, a theory of progress, which, in turn, was ‘l’une des matrices de la racialisation’ (one of the matrices of racialisation) (349). Voltaire argued for the divine origin of polygenism to counteract the ideas about transformative energy that Buffon and Diderot were introducing. According to Buffon, there was no continuity among races because the absence of thought and speech constituted a radical break. In this argument, Buffon engaged with Rousseau, who in the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) considered the orangutan close to humans, praising its sociability, which, for him, was not originally present in humans. This discussion was probably influenced by the fact that in the eighteenth century, the orangutan was known only in captivity, while it seems that in different conditions and in its natural habitat, it is far from a gregarious animal.⁶ The analysis of the various definitions of humanity by Linnaeus and Buffon shifts towards the anthropological sphere in Germany, with much attention to Kant and less to Lessing.

However, the discussion about the homogeneity of human nature was contentious and found a moment of extraordinary depth in the controversy that involved Rousseau, Helvétius, and Diderot for more than twenty years. For them, this discussion became a search for differences that separate individuals from each other, which, besides being derived from education, are considered natural but not racial. ‘Individuum est ineffabile, woraus ich eine Welt ableite’ (The individual is ineffable, from which I derive a world), wrote Goethe to Lavater, and perhaps the expression could be valid for Diderot. Reflecting on the specificity of the individual was the way to think about freedom, and for Diderot, natural rights could only be social.

Par-tout, des superstitions extravagantes, des coutumes barbares, des loix surannées étouffent la liberté. Elle renaîtra, sans doute, un jour de ses cendres. A mesure que la morale et la politique feront des progrès, l’homme recouvrera ses droits. Mais pourquoi faut-il, qu’en attendant ces tems heureux, ces siècles de lumière et de prospérité, il y ait des races infortunées à qui l’on refuse jusqu’au nom consolant et honorable d’hommes libres, à qui l’on ravisse jusqu’à l’espoir de l’obtenir, malgré l’instabilité des événemens?

⁶ SARA D. EDWARDS and CHARLES T. SNOWDON, ‘Social Behaviour of Captive, Group-Living Orangutans,’ *International Journal of Primatology* 1, no. 1 (1980): 39–62; MARLEN FRÖHLICH et al., ‘Orangutans Have Larger Gestural Repertoires in Captivity than in the Wild - A Case of Weak Innovation?’, *iScience* 24, no. 11 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2021.103304>.

Non, quoi qu'on en puisse dire, la condition de ces infortunés n'est pas la même que la nôtre.⁷

Enlightenment culture, for the first time, presented historical reflection with the question of the 'terrible why' of political life and institutions⁸ without stopping at the narrative of 'how.' To address the question of why there was slavery, Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* combined the two perspectives of the natural history of societies and humanity, excluded the racial thesis, and recognised the importance of moral causes. Skin colour is the result of external circumstances, and thus, 'cette organisation est aussi parfaite dans les nègres que dans l'espèce d'hommes la plus blanche' (this organisation is as perfect in blacks as in the whitest species of men)⁹. Race was a false notion, and slavery had been created by the desire for domination.

Hâtons-nous donc de substituer à l'aveugle férocité de nos pères les lumières de la raison, et les sentimens de la nature. Brisons les chaînes de tant de victimes de notre cupidité, dussions-nous renoncer à un commerce qui n'a que l'injustice pour base, que le luxe pour objet.¹⁰

⁷ GUILLAUME-THOMAS FRANÇOIS RAYNAL, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1780³), XI, 24, eds ANTHONY STRUGNELL, GIANLUIGI GOGGI, and KENTA OHJI, 4 vols., vol. 3 (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d'étude du dix-huitième siècle, 2020), 178: 'Everywhere, extravagant superstitions, barbaric customs, and outdated laws stifle freedom. It will undoubtedly be reborn one day from its ashes. As morality and politics progress, humanity will reclaim its rights. But why must it be that, while awaiting these happy times, these centuries of light and prosperity, there are unfortunate races to whom even the consoling and honourable name of free men is denied, from whom even the hope of obtaining it is taken away, despite the instability of events? No, whatever may be said, the condition of these unfortunate ones is not the same as ours.'

⁸ This facet of the historical culture of the Enlightenment was highlighted by Johann Gustav Droysen. See BENEDETTO BRAVO, *Philologie, histoire, philosophie de l'histoire. Étude sur J.G. Droysen historien de l'antiquité* (Warsaw: Zakład narodowy imienia Ossolinskich wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1968), 258–59.

⁹ RAYNAL, *Histoire des deux Indes*, XI, 10, vol. 3, 124.

¹⁰ RAYNAL, *Histoire des deux Indes*, XI, 10, vol. 3, 179: 'Let us hasten, then, to replace the blind ferocity of our fathers with the light of reason and the feelings of nature. Let us break the chains of so many victims of our greed, even if it means giving up a trade that has only injustice as its foundation and luxury as its object.'