

Race and the Enlightenment part II: The Anglo-French Enlightenment and beyond



American left communist Loren Goldner's history of the origins of race and racism. Part Two of Two.

[Part one](#) / [Part two](#)

Quote:

"The animal is immediately one with its life activity, nor distinct from it. The animal is its life activity. Man makes his life activity itself into an object of will and consciousness. It is not a determination with which he immediately identifies. (The animal)...produces in a one-sided way while man produces universally...The animal only produces itself while man reproduces the whole of nature."

-Karl Marx, 1844

Quote:

"They enslaved the Negro, they said, because he was not a man, and when he behaved like a man they called him a monster."

-C.L.R. James

The Black Jacobins (1938)

Quote:

"The only race is the rat race."

-Wall graffiti, London rioters, 1981

The Western ¹ invention of the idea of race in the 17th century, at the beginning of the Enlightenment, was not merely a degradation of the peoples of color to whom it was applied.² Such a degradation had to be preceded, and accompanied, by a comparable degradation of the view of man within Western culture itself. A society that sees the racial "Other" in terms of animality must first experience that animality within itself. "If you're going to keep someone in the gutter," as a black activist of the 60's put it, "you're going to be down there with them".

Part One, it will be recalled, showed how rationalist Biblical criticism in the mid-17th century tore away the last of the myths, drawn from Greco-Roman classicism and Judeo-Christian

messianism, which purported to explain the origins of the New World Indians in terms of traditions then known to Europeans. This critique unintentionally left in its wake a new, purely biological vision of "natural man" which, in some instances (such as the North American colonies), fused with the new white supremacist color-code justifying the Atlantic slave trade, and the previously unknown idea of race, the identification of cultural attributes with physical features such as skin color, was born.

It is now necessary to situate the Enlightenment between what preceded it and what followed it, in order to see how it got caught up in this definition of human beings as animals, which underlies any association of cultural attributes with skin color or physical features. As stated in Part One, the Enlightenment as such is neither inherently racist nor valid only for "white European males". But the Enlightenment today cannot be defended merely in terms of the Enlightenment alone. Its limited rationality can only be adequately understood and seen in true proportion by those who see a higher rationality. The best of the Enlightenment, taken by itself, is disarmed against the worst of the Enlightenment.

An ideology is best understood when seen against the background from which it began, and against the future in which it will end.

The view of human beings as animals is inseparable from the birth of bourgeois and capitalist society, which simultaneously gave rise to two interrelated questions which that society has never solved, and will never solve: the question of the proletariat, and the question of the underdeveloped world. (By "animality" in this article I mean what Marx meant in the above quote: someone (i.e. a wage laborer) compelled by society to identify themselves with their life activity. From this fundamental degradation flow others, namely compulsory identification by any presumably "fixed" "natural" quality, such as skin color, gender, or sexual orientation.)

The philosophically-disinclined reader is asked to bear with the following, for in a critique of the Enlightenment, it is necessary to first set up the question philosophically. Ideas by themselves of course do not make history. To go beyond the idea of race - the connection between biology and cultural attributes which, for one strand of the Enlightenment, succeeded medieval religious identities--the mere idea of the human race would be sufficient. But before locating these questions in the balance of real social forces where they are actually decided, it is necessary to know what the questions are. Once they are posed, it will be clear why the immediate attitudes on race and slavery of this or that Enlightenment thinker are not the real issue; the issue is rather the view of man of even the best of the Enlightenment which is ultimately disarmed for a critique of its bastard offspring.

The new society which arose out of the collapse of feudalism in early modern, pre-Enlightenment Europe, between 1450 and 1650, was revolutionary relative to any pre-existing or then-contemporary society. Why? It was revolutionary because it connected the idea of humanity to the new idea of an "actual infinity".[3](#)

What does this mean? In social terms, "infinity" in class societies prior to capitalism is the world of creativity, e.g. art, philosophy, science, usually monopolized by an elite, as well as improvements in the society's relationship to nature, first in agriculture and then elsewhere, usually made by skilled craftsmen. "Infinity" here means innovations that allow a society to reproduce itself at a higher level, by creating more "free surplus" for its members, or cultural innovation that anticipates or expresses those improvements in human freedom. (The word "infinite" is appropriate because the elasticity of these innovations is infinite.) These improvements in a society's relationship to nature are universal and world-historical, beginning with stone and bronze tools, and societies that fail to make them run up against "natural barriers" (known today as "ecology crises") to their existence and either stagnate or

are destroyed, often by other societies. This freedom in their relationship to nature through such improvements is what distinguishes human beings from animals, which mainly do not "use tools" but which "are" tools (e.g. beavers, termites) in a fixed relationship to their environment.

Such improvements, once again, have occurred many times and in many places throughout human history. But history is also filled with examples of brilliant civilizations (such as Tang or particularly Sung China) where many such innovations were lost in blocked stagnation or terrible social retrogression. What was revolutionary about the bourgeois-capitalist society which first appeared in Europe, initially in northern Italy and in Flanders ca. 1100, was that these innovations were institutionalized at the center of social life⁴, as necessity. For the first time in history, a practical bridge was potentially established between the creative freedom, previously restricted to small elites, and society's improvements in its relationship to nature.

It was this institutionalization which made possible the appearance of "actual infinity". In the ancient (Greco-Roman) and medieval worlds, "infinity" was expressed in a limited way. The Greco-Roman elite had aristocratic values, and considered any relationship to material production⁵ to be utterly beneath itself, an attitude which meshed well with a "horror of the infinite" often expressed in their ideology. Medieval philosophy, largely shaped by Aristotle in Christian, Moslem and Jewish thought, generally considered an "actual infinity" to be an abomination, often associated with blasphemy. It was exactly this "blasphemy" which was developed in the early modern period of capitalism by Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza and Leibniz.

While these figures developed the concept of actual infinity in theological or philosophical terms, prior to the Enlightenment, its implications for the appearance of the concept of race can best be understood by looking ahead to its further development, in social terms, after the Enlightenment, from Kant via Hegel and Feuerbach to Marx. Hegel called Enlightenment (Newtonian) infinity "bad infinity". The practical realization of pre-Enlightenment actual infinity by Marx retrospectively clarifies the impasse (and social relevance) of Enlightenment bad infinity, without an even longer philosophical detour.

Many people know Marx's quip that communist man "will fish in the morning, hunt in the afternoon, and write criticism in the evening, without for all that being a fisherman, hunter or critic". But the underlying theoretical meaning of that quip is not often grasped; it is usually understood merely to mean the overcoming of the division of labor, but it is rather more than that. It is the practical expression of what is meant here by "actual infinity". It is the concrete expression of the overcoming of the state of animality, a reduction of human beings to their fixed life activity in the capitalist division of labor. Marx expressed the same idea more elaborately in the Grundrisse:

Quote:

"Capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness, and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labor therefore no longer appears as labor, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared, because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one."⁶ (emphasis added)

The "full development of activity itself" is the "practical" realization of actual infinity. It means that every specific activity is always the "external" expression of a more fundamental general activity, having an expanded version of itself as its own goal. In such a social condition, the immediate productive activity of freely-associated individuals would always be in reality self-(re)production aimed at the multiplication of human powers, including the

innovation of new powers. Every activity relates back to the actor. "Actual infinity" in this sense is the practical presence of the general in every specific activity in the here and now. For the Enlightenment, an object was merely a thing; for Hegel and above all for Marx, an object is a relationship, mediated by a thing.

The link between the mechanist revolution of the 17th century and the attribution of animality to human beings is Newton's theory of infinity. This--what Hegel called "bad infinity"-- is the nub of the question. The infinity, or infinitesimal, of Newton's calculus, which solved the problems of mathematically describing the motions of bodies in space and time, was an "asymptotic" procedure (with roots in Zeno's paradox in Greek philosophy) involving the infinite division of space or time approaching a limit that was never reached. With Newton, infinity for the West became infinite REPETITION toward a goal that was never reached. (It was an appropriate conception for an era in which Man was an ideal to be approached but never attained). This infinity, as shall be seen, expressed the social reality of the new capitalist division of labor, as theorized by Adam Smith, who praised the social efficiency achieved by the relegation of the individual worker to the endless, lifelong repetition of one gesture. With the emergence of this new social phenomenon of the relegation of the atomized individual to a single gesture, early capitalism transformed the human being into the wage worker who (as Marx put it in the quote used at the outset) was precisely identified with his/her life activity, that is into an animal. This was the degradation of the human, simultaneously with the subjugation of non-European peoples, into which the new concept of race could move, in the last decades of the 17th century, following the lead of Sir William Petty's Scale of Creatures (1676)⁷. The Enlightenment could say that some (e.g. dark-skinned) people were animals and beasts of burden because the disappearance, under the blows of the new mechanistic science, of the earlier, Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian views of the human made it potentially possible, in the right circumstances, to see anyone as sub-human, starting with the laboring classes of Europe itself. (This potential would require 250 years to work itself out, from Malthus to the the fascist paroxysm of Social Darwinist "living space" (Lebensraum) for the "master race").

But it is necessary to be careful; not all Enlightenment theorists of the new idea of "race" were racists; some used the term in a descriptive anthropological sense without value judgement. What laid the foundation for the virulent 19th century theories of race was the taxonomic-classificatory "fixity of species" with which the Enlightenment replaced the older Christian view of the unity of man: "It is the assertion of biologically fixed, unchanging 'races' with different mental and moral value judgements ("higher", "lower") which became the decisive criterion for modern racism and a key argument for its propagation. Bernier, Buffon, Linnaeus, Kant and Blumenbach develop their systems for the classification and hierarchy of humanity with extremely varied positions on slavery and on the humanity of "races" both outside Europe as well as among the "whites" who were increasingly dominant in world affairs"⁸.

The following is a list of the major Enlightenment theories of race, with author, work and year of publication:

Georgius Hornius (ca. 1620-1670) Arca Noae (1666) Japhetites (white), Semites (yellow) Hamites (black)

Francois Bernier (1620-1688) Nouvelle division de la terre (1684) (1684) Europeans, Africans, Chinese and Japanese, Lapps

Linnaeus (1707-1778) Systema naturae (1735) Europaeus albus (white), Americanus rubescens (red), Asiaticus luridus (yellow), Afer niger (black)

Buffon (1707-1788) *Histoire naturelle* (1749) Lapp Polar, Tartar, South Asian, European, Ethiopian, American

Edward Long (1734-1813) *History of Jamaica* Genus homo: Europeans and related peoples; blacks; orangutans

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach *De generis humanis varietate nativa* (1775) Caucasians; Mongolians; Ethiopians; Americans; Malays

Immanuel Kant *Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschen* (1775) Whites, Negroes, Mongolian or Calmuckic race, the Hindu

Christian Meiners (1747-1810) *Grundrisse der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1775) "light, beautiful" race, "dark, ugly" race

(The above, with small additions, is translated from I. Geiss, *Geschichte des Rassismus*, Frankfurt 1988, pp. 142-143)

The Enlightenment was, as such, neither racist nor an ideology of relevance only to "white European males". Nevertheless, it presents the following conundrum. On one hand, the Western Enlightenment in its broad mainstream was indisputably universalist and egalitarian, and therefore created powerful weapons for the attack on any doctrine of racial supremacy; on the other hand, the Enlightenment, as the preceding chart shows, just as indisputably gave birth to the very concept of race, and some of its illustrious representatives believed that whites were superior to all others. This problem cannot be solved by lining up Enlightenment figures according to their views on slavery and white supremacy. Adam Smith, better known as the theoretician of the free market and apologist for the capitalist division of labor, attacked both, whereas Hobbes and Locke justified slavery, and such eminences as Thomas Jefferson, who favored abolition (however tepidly) and defended the French Revolution even in its Jacobin phase, firmly believed that blacks were biologically inferior to whites.

This kind of polling of Enlightenment figures for their views on slavery and race is, further, is an extremely limited first approach to the question, easily susceptible to the worst kind of anachronism. What was remarkable about the Enlightenment, seen in a world context, was not that some of its distinguished figures supported slavery and white supremacy but that significant numbers of them opposed both. As Part One showed, slavery as an institution flourished in the color-blind 16th century Mediterranean slave pool, and no participating society, Christian or Moslem, European, Turkish, Arab or African, questioned it. Well into the 17th century, Western attacks on New World slavery only attempted to curb its excesses. Radical Protestant sects in North America (the Mennonites, then the Quakers) were well ahead of secular Enlightenment figures in calling for outright abolition, between 1688 and 1740, and a political movement for abolition⁹, again with religious groups more preponderant than secular Enlightenment figures, only emerged in the Anglo-American world in the final quarter of the 18th century, as the Enlightenment was culminating in the American and French Revolutions. There is no intrinsic relationship between Hume's philosophical skepticism or Kant's critique of it, and their common belief that whites were innately superior.¹⁰

Any critique of the limits of the Enlightenment, where the question of race is concerned, has to begin by acknowledging the radicalism of the best of the Enlightenment, for that side of the Enlightenment, in the 17th and 18th centuries, was radical in relation to the Western societies in which it appeared¹¹, and also radical relative to many non-Western societies it influenced. Readers of C.L.R. James' account of the Haitian Revolution will recall his description of the abolition of slavery in all colonies by the French National Assembly in February 1794, when the Jacobins and the even more radical Mountain were at the height of

their power, under the pressure of the Parisian masses in the streets. Abolition in Haiti had been won by the black slaves led by Toussaint l'Ouverture in August 1793, but, threatened by British and Spanish military intervention to seize the colony and restore slavery, the Haitian revolutionaries wished to remain allied to France, and wanted abolition confirmed by the Assembly. Neither Robespierre nor the Mountain wanted it, but the radicalization of the situation under mass pressure, in the most extreme year of the revolution, forced it on them:

Quote:

"...The workers and peasants of France could not have been expected to take any interest in the colonial question in normal times, any more than one can expect similar interest from British or French workers today (James was writing in 1938-LG). But now they were roused. They were striking at royalty, tyranny, reaction and oppression of all types, and with these they included slavery. The prejudice of race is superficially the most irrational of all prejudices, and by a perfectly comprehensible reaction the Paris workers, from indifference in 1789, had come by this time to detest no section of the aristocracy so much as those whom they called "the aristocracy of the skin"...Paris between March 1793 and July 1794 was one of the supreme epochs of political history. Never until 1917 were masses ever to have such powerful influence--for it was no more than influence--on any government. In these few months of their nearest approach to power they did not forget the blacks. They felt toward them as brothers, and the old slave-owners, whom they knew to be supporters of the counter-revolution, they hated as if Frenchmen themselves had suffered under the whip."[12](#)

Bellay, a former slave and deputy to the Convention from San Domingo (as Haiti was then called) presented his credentials and on the following day introduced a motion for the abolition of slavery. It was passed without debate and by acclamation, and was the radical high water mark of the revolution. As James said, it was "one of the most important legislative acts ever passed by any political assembly".

It is certainly true that the proto-proletarian action of the Parisian masses in 1793-94, and their link-up with the overthrow of slavery in San Domingo, went beyond any political ideas of the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th century[13](#). They were still too weak, and capitalist society too undeveloped, for them to be anything but brilliant precursors of later revolutions in which, for brief moments, revolts in the "center" fuse with revolts in the "periphery" and mark a turn in world history.[14](#) It was not in France but in Germany, over the next two decades, that philosophers, above all G.F.W. Hegel, would theorize the actions of the Parisian masses into a theory of politics that went beyond the Enlightenment and laid the foundations for the theory of the communist movement later articulated by Marx[15](#). Nevertheless, nowhere did the radical Enlightenment program of "Liberty- Equality- Fraternity" acquire such concreteness as a program for mass action as in Santo Domingo after 1791 and in Paris in 1793- 1794; Toussaint l'Ouverture had himself studied French Enlightenment thought. Thus the "best of the Enlightenment" is revealed precisely by the actions of people who, influenced by it, were already in the process of going beyond it, with practice (as always) well in advance of theory. This realization of the Enlightenment, as the revolution ebbed, was also the end of the Enlightenment, for reasons too complex to be treated here[16](#). The Enlightenment had foreseen neither the Jacobin Terror nor Napoleon, and could only be salvaged by figures such as Hegel and Marx, who subsumed the Enlightenment into a new historical rationality of the kind defended here.

One strand of the worst of the Enlightenment was realized in the work of Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), laying the basis for an ideology which is still rampant today, and completely entwined, in the U.S. and many other countries, with racism.

Malthus's basic idea, as many people know, was that human population increases geometrically while agricultural production increases only arithmetically, making periodic famine inevitable. Malthus therefore proposed measures for "grinding the faces of the poor" (as the saying goes), opposing a minimum wage and welfare because they encouraged profligate reproduction of the working classes, and welcoming periodic epidemic, famine and war as useful checks on excess population.¹⁷ (In contrast to today's Malthusians, such as the World Bank and the IMF, who preach zero population growth to Third World countries, Malthus also opposed contraception for the poor because the "reserve army of the unemployed" kept wages down.) Even in Malthus' own time, innovations in agriculture had doubled production in England, but Malthus was above all concerned with developing a "scientific" facade for policies aimed at maximizing accumulation and controlling the vast armies of poor people unleashed by the early, brutal phase of the Industrial Revolution.

It would be a travesty to call Parson Malthus an "Enlightenment thinker"; he was already denounced by liberals and radicals of his own time. But his linear view of agricultural production was a direct extrapolation, in political economy, of the linearity and "bad infinity" of Newtonian physics and the Enlightenment ontology. Malthusian man was Hobbesian man: an animal, performing a fixed function in the division of labor in a society with fixed resources. Malthus was not so opaque as to deny invention, but his linear view, which he shared with all political economy (as shall be shown momentarily) concealed the reality, demonstrated many times in history, that innovations in productivity (and not merely in agriculture) periodically move society forward in non-linear leaps, from apples to oranges, so to speak. (In the late 16th century, for example, end-of-the-world cults proliferated over the coming depletion of the forests in Europe's wood-based economy; a century later, inventions in the use of iron had made coal, not wood, Europe's major fuel, obviating the earlier hysteria.) Resources, like human capabilities, are not "fixed", but are periodically redefined by innovation, and major innovation ripples through a whole society, creating the non-linear "apples to oranges" effect.

The same linearity, however, pervaded even classical political economy, with direct Enlightenment sources (most importantly in Adam Smith), from which Malthus may be seen as an early, but significant, deviation. David Ricardo (1772-1823) was praised by Marx as the most advanced political economist, the theoretician of "production for production's sake". (For Marx, by contrast, "the multiplication of human powers", not production per se, was "its own goal".) But although innovation was far more central to Ricardo's economics, he too succumbed to the linearity of his premises. Malthus's bourgeois "end of the world" scenario was overpopulation; for the productivist Ricardo, the unleashed productivity of capitalism would be strangled by ground rent as poorer and poorer soils were used for raw materials. Like Malthus, Ricardo failed to conceive of "quantum-leap" innovations that would supercede the need for specific, limited raw materials. Thus the two major "end of the world" scenarios produced by 19th century economics grew out of Enlightenment, bad-infinity premises that saw even innovation in terms of linear repetition. Ricardo culminated classical political economy's theorization of labor, but the limitations of a bourgeois viewpoint prevented him from grasping the idea of human labor-power, out of which "apples to oranges" improvements in society's relation to nature periodically occur¹⁸.

Marx's concept of labor-power is the concrete realization, in social terms, of the "actual infinity" of pre-Enlightenment thought; it is the nucleus of a rationality beyond the Enlightenment, a rationality centered on the "fishing in the morning, hunting in the afternoon, and criticism in the evening" notion explained earlier, in which man goes beyond a fixed place in the division of labor, "fixed" natural resources determined by one phase of productivity, and the fixity of species in relation to their environment that characterizes

animals. It thereby goes beyond the worst of the Enlightenment, the Hobbesian view of man which, in concrete historical circumstances, fuses with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment race theory.

The preceding, then, was a "theoretical" exposition of the flaws of the Enlightenment world view, (the general world view of bourgeois-capitalist society in its progressive phase), which have disarmed it against race theory and racism, the association of physical features with cultural traits, and even, in their early phase, contributed to them. It has the advantage of going "beneath" the wide array of views for and against slavery and white supremacist race theory held by individual Enlightenment figures to the foundations of a world view they shared, but it has the great disadvantage of posing "theoretically" the evolution of ideas which are in fact the product of a shifting balance of forces in real history.

Marx's realization of pre-Enlightenment actual infinity in his theory of labor power superseded both the Christian idea of humanity and the Enlightenment view of Man in a concrete-practical view of real people in history. But, as stated earlier, if race were merely an idea, it could be overcome by another idea. The connection first made by some Enlightenment figures between biology and culture became socially effective in the 17th and 18th century not as a mere idea but as a legitimation of the Atlantic slave trade, of Western world domination, and in the U.S., the special race stratification of working people as it first emerged in 17th century Virginia; it was deflated neither by Marx's writings, still less by the real movements organized by many of Marx's followers (whose relation to the overcoming of race was often ideologically rhetorical and practically ambiguous, at best.). The biological idea of race has been marginalized, but not made extinct, in official Western culture since the 19th century by anti-colonial struggles and the emergence of former colonies as industrial powers, by the culmination of Western race theory in Nazism, and by the successes of the black movement in the U.S. in the 1960's, with both national and international repercussions. It was also marginalized, within the official culture, by a critique launched in the early 20th century by figures such as Franz Boas and Robert Ezra Park, which began as a distinctly minority view among educated whites and which increasingly drew momentum from these events. Nevertheless, beginning in the late 1960's, and accelerating in the climate of world economic crisis since then, the biology-culture connection and its (usually explicit) racist edge began to make a comeback in the work of Konrad Lorenz, Banfield, Jensen, Schockley, Herrnstein, E.O. Wilson, and more recently in the controversy around Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve*¹⁹. Biological theories of culture (with no racist intent) are also reappearing in the utterances of such figures of liberal credentials as Camille Paglia and Carl Degler.²⁰

The history of the idea of race as the biological determinant of culture after the Enlightenment is far beyond the scope of this article. After the French Revolution, the backlash against the Enlightenment took many forms, but the relevant one here was the intensification of the biology-culture theory of race first developed by some Enlightenment figures, and relative oblivion for the more neutral anthropological use of the term, not linked to judgemental color-coded race hierarchies, developed by others, even if still tainted with a "fixity of species" outlook. But the key point is that when deeply anti-Enlightenment figures such as Count Gobineau²¹ (1816-1882) began the intensification of race theory that pointed directly to fascism, they had already found the concept of race in the Enlightenment legacy. By the end of the 19th century it was common coin in both Europe and America to refer to the "Anglo-Saxon race", the "Latin race", the "Slavic race", the "Oriental race", the "Negro race" etc. with or without (and usually with) judgmental ranking²², and usually assuming a biological basis for cultural differences. (Phrenology, which claimed to determine intelligence by skull shape and size, also remained a respectable science until the end of the

19th century.) The admixture of Social Darwinism after 1870 (for which Darwin is not to be blamed) and the massive land grab known as imperialism created an international climate in which, by 1900, it was the rare educated white European or American who questioned race theory root and branch. Forerunners of The Bell Curve routinely appeared in the U.S. up to the 1920's demonstrating "scientifically" the biological inferiority of the Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews, and influenced the Immigration Act of 1924 sharply curtailing immigration and imposing quotas on such nationalities²³. Eugenics accelerated in popularity in the Anglo-American world from 1850 onward, and Hitler and the Nazis claimed that they took many ideas, such as forced sterilization, from the American eugenics movement. Margaret Sanger, the famous crusader for birth control, was a white supremacist, as were a number of early American suffragettes and feminists²⁴. Some sections of the pre-World War I Socialist Party made open appeals to white supremacy, and the SP right-wing leader Victor Berger was an unabashed racist²⁵.

For many of these post-Enlightenment developments, the Enlightenment itself is of course not to be blamed. Many Social Darwinists, eugenicists, suffragettes, Progressives and socialists ca. 1900 undoubtedly identified with the Enlightenment and thought their ideas of "science", including "scientific" demonstration of the innate inferiority of peoples of color, were an extension of the Enlightenment project, and the preceding discussion shows they in fact had their Enlightenment predecessors. Nevertheless, the early intellectual debunkers of this pseudo-science, such as Boas, were also heirs to the Enlightenment. When the Enlightenment is remembered today, it is not Bernier, Buffon and Blumenbach who first come to mind, but rather Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Kant (as philosopher, not as anthropologist) and Paine, and one could do worse than to summarize their legacy as the debunking of mystification. The Enlightenment contributed to the Western theory of race, and the real separation of culture from biology was the work of post-Enlightenment figures such as Marx, and above all the real historical movement of the past century. Nevertheless, when the Enlightenment is attacked today by Christian, Jewish, Moslem and Hindu fundamentalists for separating religion and state, or by the new biologism of the New Right or the Afrocentrists for its universalism, or by the post-modernists as an ideology of and for "white European males", it is the best of the Enlightenment, the "Liberté- Egalité- Fraternité" of the Parisian and Haitian masses in 1794, and the best post-Enlightenment heirs such as Marx, which are the real targets. Such attacks remind us that, once critique is separated from the limitations of the Enlightenment outlined here, there is plenty of mystification still to be debunked.

Originally Published in Race Traitor #7, 1997. Republished for Libcom from Loren Goldner's website, [Break their Haughty Power](#)

- 1. -One reader of Part One criticized it for Eurocentrism, because it overlooked earlier color-coded racial systems in other cultures, citing in particular the case of the Indian caste system as it was imposed by the Indo-european (formerly called "Aryan") invaders of the subcontinent ca. 1500 BC. Since my argument was that race as an idea could not appear until rationalist and scientific critique up to the mid-17th century had overthrown mythical and religious views of man to arrive at a biological view, this objection seemed highly unlikely. The theoretical foundation of the Indian caste system does correlate the four "varnas" (which means, among other things, color) with the four castes. But the hierarchy of "varnas" in India is inseparable from a similar hierarchy of "purity/impurity" which descends from the Brahmins at the top to the Sudras at the bottom, not to mention the untouchables who are not even included in the system. And "purity" for a caste is connected to action (karma), in this life as in previous ones; thus the Hindu system conceives of someone's birth in the Brahmin

caste as the consequence of "pure" action, and their ability to stay there the result of ongoing "pure" action, (whereas the Sudra have committed "impure" action) something totally different from a race system, where no one acquires or loses skin color by action. As Oliver Cox puts it: "The writers who use modern ideas of race relations for the purpose of explaining the origin of caste make an uncritical transfer of modern thought to an age which did not know it. The early Indo-Aryans could no more have thought in modern terms of race prejudice than they could have invented the airplane. The social factors necessary for thinking in modern terms of race relations were not available. It took some two thousand more years to develop these ideas in Western society, and whatever there is of them in India today has been acquired by recent diffusion." (in *Caste, Class and Race*, New York, 1959, p. 91).

- [2.](#) (Part One of this article, "From Anti-Semitism to White Supremacy, 1492-1676. Pre-Enlightenment Phase: Spain, Jews and Indians" (Race Traitor #7) argued that the first known racist social practices were the "blood purity" laws created against Spanish Jewry in the mid-15th century. As a result, many Jews converted to Christianity where, as so-called "New Christians", they entered the Franciscan, Jesuit and Dominican orders of the Catholic Church where their own messianism mixed with Christian heretical ideas in the evangelization of the peoples of the New World. One widespread view, among many theories taken from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian sources, held that the New World peoples were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. These theories were debated for 150 years until the French Protestant Isaac LaPeyrere published a book *The Pre Adamites* (1655) in which he argued from internal inconsistencies in the Old Testament that there had been people before Adam. While LaPeyrere himself was still completely in the messianic tradition and still believed in the theological assertion of the unity of mankind, others used his theory to argue that Africans and New World Indians were different species. Sir William Petty, in his *Scale of Creatures* (1676), made the link between skin color and culture, thereby theorizing for the first time what had begun in practice in Spain more than two centuries earlier. It is in this way that the idea of race and the Enlightenment came into existence simultaneously.)

Part One defined "race" as the association of cultural attributes with biology, as it first appeared in early modern anti-Semitism in Spain's historically unprecedented 15th-century "blood purity" laws. This association was then transferred to the Indian population of Spain's New World empire, and then generalized through the North Atlantic world to legitimate the African slave trade, which greatly intensified in the late 17th century just as the Enlightenment was beginning. But this evolution did not just happen. For 150 years after 1492, Europeans sifted through all the myths and legends of their Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian past to find an explanation for previously unknown peoples in a previously unknown world. They saw in New World peoples the survivors of Plato's Atlantis, descendants of a Phoenician voyage or King Arthur's retreat to the Isle of Avalon, or finally as the Lost Tribes of Israel. By the mid-17th century, rationalist critique of the Bible and of myth ripped away these fantastic projections, and inadvertently destroyed the idea of the common origin of humanity in the Garden of Eden. By 1676, simultaneous with the multiracial Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia and the Puritan extermination of the Indians of New England in King Philip's War, Sir William Petty articulated a new view, relegating peoples of color to an intermediate "savage" status between human beings and animals.

- [3.](#) Figures who articulated the previously heretical "actual infinity" in the 1450-1650 period, in theological and then philosophical form, were Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza and Leibniz.
- [4.](#) "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them whole relations of society." (Communist Manifesto)
- [5.](#) -Improvements, such as inventions, in the ancient world, were made haphazardly, and were often viewed as curiosities, not something to be socially applied in a systematic way, or were even shunned because of the threat they posed to existing social relations.
6-K. Marx, Grundrisse, (1973 ed.), p. 325.
- [6.](#) Petty's book is the first known Western source which both overthrows the Christian idea of the unity of man and also connects biological features to a color-coded race hierarchy. "Of man himself there seems to be several species, To say nothing of Gyants and Pygmies or of that sort of small men who have little speech... For of these sorts of men, I venture to say nothing, but that 'tis very possible there may be Races and generations of such"...."there be others (differences-L.G.)more considerable, that is, between the Guiny Negroes & the Middle Europeans; & of Negroes between those of Guiny and those who live about the Cape of Good Hope, which last are the Most beastlike of all the Souls (?Sorts) of Men whith whom our Travellers arre well acquainted. I say that the Europeans do not only differ from the aforementioned Africans in Collour...but also...in Naturall Manners, & in the internall Qualities of their Minds." (quoted in M. Hodgen, Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Philadelphia, 1964), 421-422.
- [7.](#) . Petty's book is the first known Western source which both overthrows the Christian idea of the unity of man and also connects biological features to a color-coded race hierarchy. "Of man himself there seems to be several species, To say nothing of Gyants and Pygmies or of that sort of small men who have little speech... For of these sorts of men, I venture to say nothing, but that 'tis very possible there may be Races and generations of such"...."there be others (differences-L.G.)more considerable, that is, between the Guiny Negroes & the Middle Europeans; & of Negroes between those of Guiny and those who live about the Cape of Good Hope, which last are the Most beastlike of all the Souls (?Sorts) of Men whith whom our Travellers arre well acquainted. I say that the Europeans do not only differ from the aforementioned Africans in Collour...but also...in Naturall Manners, & in the internall Qualities of their Minds." (quoted in M. Hodgen, Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Philadelphia, 1964), 421-422.
- [8.](#) -I. Geiss, Geschichte des Rassismus, (Frankfurt, 1988), p. 142. Geiss sees Hume as the first Enlightenment figure (in 1753-54) who specifically theorizes a racist hierarchy of color (p. 149); he does not seem to be familiar with Petty's text. I. Hannaford's Race: The History of an Idea in the West (Johns Hopkins, 1996) surveys the same period, with somewhat different judgements (cf. Ch. 7), and sees the main break occuring with Hobbes.
- [9.](#) In 1780, during the revolution, Pennsylvania, with its large Quaker presence, became the first North American colony to abolish slavery.
- [10.](#) E. Chukwudi Eze's Race and the Enlightenment (New York, 1996) is a useful compendium of little-known texts by Blumenbach, Hume, Kant , Hegel and other figures, mainly expressing white supremacist disdain for Africans and African culture.

In my opinion, these texts mainly demonstrate that Hume, Kant and Hegel expressed the limitations of their time, and in no way shows any race-linked implications of the philosophical works we still read today. (I would be interested in hearing from Race Traitor readers who think otherwise.)

- [11.](#) -Figures such as Hobbes, Locke or Hume were all suspected of radical atheism by the conventional middle-class opinion of their time, still tied to official religion. They were in reality moderates, deeply hostile to radical popular forces, many of which still spoke a religious language. The "left to right" spectrum of the 17th and 18th centuries in no way, particularly in the Anglo-American world, aligns itself neatly with distinctions between the "secular" and the "religious", as the examples such as the Digger Gerard Winstanley or William Blake clearly show. The mainstream Enlightenment always opposed the "antinomian" social radicalism associated with such figures. (Cf. M. Jacobs, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution*, 1976). C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins*. New York, 1963, pp. 120, 138-139.
- [12.](#) -C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins*. New York, 1963, pp. 120, 138-139.
- [13.](#) The great majority of Enlightenment figures limited their political aims to a constitutional monarchy on the post-1688 English model or to a vision of benign top-down reform by Enlightened absolutist despots; the proclamation of a Republic in France in 1791 was the result of the practical radicalization of the political situation there and throughout Europe, not a preconceived application of Enlightenment ideas.
- [14.](#) The radical wing of the French Revolution, the Parisian masses, was crushed in 1794; by the Jacobins, who were in turn overthrown by moderates; after Napoleon's seizure of power in 1799, France restored slavery in all its possessions and lost 50,000 soldiers in a failed attempt to subdue Santo Domingo. In 1848, when capitalism and the proletariat were more advanced, a new French revolution (part of a European-wide uprising) occurred and finally succeeded in abolishing slavery in the colonies, after England had done so in 1834.
- [15.](#) Hegel's fundamental idea that "the real is rational" comes directly out of his analysis of the French Revolution. In contrast to even the best of the Enlightenment, Hegel (having the example of the revolution before him, as the Enlightenment did not) was the first to understand (even if he did not use this language) the "sociological" truth that a social class (e.g. the Parisian proletariat) is not a "category" but an act, and that the "truth" of any social class (i.e. the "real") is not its own day-to-day humdrum self-understanding in "normal conditions" of oppression but the extremity of what it has the potential to become ("the rational") at crucial turning points (generally called revolutions). Hegel's own late conservatism and that of his followers turned the meaning of "the real is rational" into a simple apology for the existing status quo, cutting the radical heart out of Hegel's original meaning of "the real".
- [16.](#) The Enlightenment (at the great risk of oversimplification) conceived abstractly of Man as "natural man", endowed with reason, and endowed with "rights of man" by "natural law". The counterpart of this was a conception of societies as initially formed by individuals who came together in some kind of "social contract"; Enlightenment theory thus assumed individuals who initially existed independently from society and history. Society was the "sum" of such individuals. It was a completely ahistorical view, which is one reason the Enlightenment was so preoccupied with utopias in distant places, in which Man could be portrayed in harmony with (static) "nature", and with New World Indians or Tahitians, who supposedly revealed Man "in Nature",

or with the "wild child" raised outside all social institutions. "All men once lived as they live in America", said John Locke, referring to the American Indian. The Enlightenment was also preoccupied with drawing up constitutions (as Locke did for the Carolina colony in North America, or Rousseau for Poland), as if social institutions were derived from, or could be derived from, "first principles", and were not, as Vico first argued, a factum, the product of activity. Enlightenment social thought had an ideal to realize, a human nature that could be distilled and identified separate from society and history. Thus Rousseau could conceive this ideal of Man as something to approach but never be achieved, the social equivalent of Newton's bad infinity.

- [17.](#) Cf. the invaluable book of A. Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, New York, 1980, particularly Ch. 4. Space does not permit a full discussion of the influence of Malthusian ideology today. I will limit myself to pointing out that John Maynard Keynes, the theoretician of the post-1945 welfare state, explicitly identified himself as a Malthusian. Keynes obviously was not opposed to a minimum wage, welfare measures or contraception; what he shared with Malthus was the idea that the buying power of unproductive classes should be increased to avoid periodic depressions. Malthus and Keynes had in common a "consumer's" view of the economy, assuming that if demand were maintained, production would take care of itself. But the underlying world view of both Malthus and Keynes, as theoreticians of the unproductive middle classes, had the necessary corollary of "useless eaters", which in the austerity conditions of the post-1973 period in the U.S. have mixed with classical racism to produce a "conservative-liberal" consensus for the abolition of America's (minimalist) welfare state. Bill Moyers' reportage on teenage parenting among American welfare populations was classical Malthusian propaganda about the "promiscuous poor" from a "liberal" viewpoint.
- [18.](#) -One may readily understand the distinction between labor and labor power by the recent example of the "new industrial countries" (NICs) such as South Korea. Cases such as this are not merely a question of dropping some factories into a peasant economy. South Korea emerged over 35 years from an extremely poor, predominantly rural, Third World country to one which exports high-quality technological goods and even conducts its own R&D. This was made possible by many things, but among them were the creation of an infrastructure (transportation, communications, energy systems) and above all a skilled work force capable of operation modern factories. South Korea in 1960 had an abundance of in labor, but desperately short of labor-power.
- [19.](#) After being largely marginalized by official culture in the U.S., many of these authors were translated into French in the 1970's where they contributed to the rise of the anti-immigrant National Front, which openly proclaims white supremacy in its public utterances.
- [20.](#) -Paglia attacks 50's and 60's left culturalism for overlooking the "dark" biological side of sexuality; Degler announces his conversion to the "return of biology" in *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought*(New York, 1991).
- [21.](#) Gobineau's book, *The Inequality of the Races*, which became the manifesto of late 19th-century Aryan supremacy, was first published in 1853.
- [22.](#) T. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York, 1963), Ch. XIII, tells the story of Anglo-Saxon race theory. Gossett also traces the history

- [23.](#) A dense survey of this history is in A. Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism* (New York, 1980).
- [24.](#) -Cf. Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States*. (New York, 1975), Ch. 5.
- [25.](#) *ibid.* p. 223-227.