

# The Birth of 'Race'

By Vincent Vilmain

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**Retracing the genealogy of the idea of human 'races', Claude-Olivier Doron returns to the role of the Enlightenment, and particularly Buffon, in the emergence of monogenistic racial thought. He examines how the idea of 'race' and the affirmation of universalism appeared concomitantly.**

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Reviewed: Claude-Olivier Doron, *L'Homme altéré. Race et Dégénérescence* (Paris: Champ Vallon) 592 p.

## Approaching 'race' through the notion of degeneration

In this complex and fascinating study of the relationships between 'race' and the idea of '*dégénérescence*', Claude-Olivier Doron returns to the definition of a notion – 'race' – with often-elusive contours and content. The author quickly equates *dégénérescence* and *degeneration* (both translated in English as 'degeneration'), due to the almost synonymous use made of the two terms when they first appeared in the nineteenth century, particularly in the writings of the alienist doctor Benedict-Augustin Morel; when he does distinguish between the two, *dégénérescence* is understood as the product of *dégénération*. This process presupposes the existence of an original type and of processes of deterioration. However, while degeneration requires distinguishing between an initial state and marks of differentiation, it does not necessarily imply separation into different species; a 'deteriorated' man is still a man. The main value of Claude-Olivier Doron's work lies here, in his analysis of this discourse about decline and in his study of how differences are essentialised – or not – through the idea of 'race'.

While the author admits in his introduction that, when it comes to the use of the term ‘race’, the book will necessarily be something of a mosaic, he bases his arguments on several assertions. ‘Race’ is not just a scholarly tool justifying rejection or hatred of the other, no more than it is just a tool for domination. It is neither malleable nor ‘irrational’ because it is based on a category of knowledge within a specific discipline: natural history. In this context, Claude-Olivier Doron also refuses any definition of ‘race’ grounded in a polygenistic approach – in other words, where the biological differences established by ‘race’ are deemed original, radical, and definitive, as he considers this too restrictive. Instead, he prefers a more dynamic approach that can be reconciled with monogenistic theories, which, unlike polygenism, claim that mankind has a single origin, but which therefore require the notion of degeneration in order to explain visible differences among humans.

His work is based on the following assertion: the concept of ‘race’ was born in the eighteenth century within a particular discipline (natural history), from the combination of 1) a taxon (race) that had, thus far, been confined to classifying domestic animal species and remained vague and controversial in terms of its application to mankind and 2) a genealogical rationale borrowed from sources as varied as the tables of nations in the Bible (Gen. 10) or other such religious texts, lineages of nobility, zootechnical practices used in agronomy and breeding, and descriptions of populations in travel writing. These genealogies regularly refer to the idea of degeneration or *dérogance*<sup>1</sup>, although they ascribe different causes to it. This thinking about the deterioration of humans’ physical and moral characteristics constitutes a fundamental difference between polygenism and monogenism. In the latter, while deterioration explains differences within the species, this is a secondary conclusion, after having first affirmed the human nature of the subject being observed. Conversely, for polygenists, deterioration makes no sense and observation leads them to posit, like Voltaire, an immediate and implacable difference of species. Of course, this did not prevent monogenistic racial thinking from creating its own pathways to racism and Claude-Olivier Doron’s book offers a few well-chosen examples in this regard.

While this presentation is attractive, in many ways, because it addresses the need to consider ‘race’ on both a synchronic and diachronic level, it far from solves all the aporia ‘race’ raises. Ultimately, Claude-Olivier Doron remains quite vague about the actual definition of this subject, which he describes alternately as an idea, a notion, or a concept, in both the plural and the singular. Is it absolutely necessary to distinguish the ‘natural history’ approach to ‘race’, as analysed in this book, from the approach taken by more recent historiography focusing on the hypothesis of a constitutive chain extending from Spain in the late Middle Ages to the colonies of the New World and then to contemporary Europe? Rather than trying to determine the contours and content of this idea of ‘race’, would it not be more appropriate to think in terms of a paradigm or even a racial ‘moment’ and to strive to understand the fascination that ‘race’

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<sup>1</sup> Derogation of nobility or the loss of its privileges.

held for scientists and intellectuals from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, as well as the discursive power this category managed to wield? Moreover, while horizontal racial classifications pose major problems in terms of both premise and methodology, vertical or genealogical racial theories are pure speculation because, throughout the 'golden age' of 'race' (1750-1950), no scientific means were available to explain the mechanisms of generation and heredity. And yet (with the exception of polygenistic thinkers such as Bory de Saint Vincent who rejected any genealogical concern as meaningless), the search for racial origins was, without a doubt, the question that most fascinated 'raciologists'.

## Of genealogy in 'race'

Claude-Olivier Doron very aptly describes the omnipresence of genealogy from the late Middle Ages onwards. The genealogical principle was key in Christian religious conceptions, because the original sin to be redeemed was passed down by Adam to his many descendants. However, it was also at the heart of constructions of the nobility's identity. Finally, it was crucial in breeding practices, particularly for horses, and Claude-Olivier Doron rightly notes the symbiotic relationship that sometimes existed between a noble rider and his mount. As European horizons expanded, genealogy was increasingly used to describe the origins of the populations in the 'discovered' lands, in relation to the success of Anniius of Viterbo's work.<sup>2</sup> Gonzalo de Oviedo, not without ulterior motives, also linked American Indians to the same ancestor he ascribed to the Spanish – Hesperus. A century and a half later, Diego Andres de Rocha was still defending that position. Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the origins of American Indian populations also led to other suggested genealogies, founded on the Bible.

In all these areas, relations of filiation were characterised by the risk of deterioration. In Christianity, the Fall affected mankind and nature (as the latter was inextricably linked to the former) and was even partly conceived as irreparable, in a process of senescence destined to be perpetuated until the end of time. Among the nobility, *dérogance* was a sword of Damocles, given the high risk of not being of the same quality as ancestors from the golden age. Finally, in breeding too, practitioners noted the difficulty of maintaining the qualities of one species. However, in all cases, when there was degeneration, the process was not irreversible. Better observing religion could limit the effects of decline. The nobility would never really disappear, although it might wane. And the determinism of lineage was never absolute. Henri II's 'stud farm of page boys',<sup>3</sup> as Brantôme described it, produced 'quality noblemen' thanks, on the one hand, to rigorous selection and, on the other, to 'good education', which included experience of war. Degeneration was therefore viewed as both a law of nature but also the result

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<sup>2</sup>In 1498, Anniius of Viterbo (1432-1502) published *Antiquatum Variarum* in 17 volumes, claiming to have unearthed many lost books from Antiquity, including by Berossus, famous for his genealogy of the Ancient East. The forgery would only be discovered a century later, without completely putting paid to its success.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre de Bourdeille abbé séculier de Brantôme, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Société du panthéon littéraire, 1838 [1665-1666]), vol. 1, 'Les vies des hommes illustres et grands Capitaines Français de son temps', p. 307.

of poor 'breeding'. As for breeding and agronomy treatises, which developed as a genre in the Early Modern period, they also linked the fear of degeneration to techniques to solve it.

Having outlined these different genealogical matrixes, Claude-Olivier Doron gives pride of place to Buffon, viewed as the main craftsman of the alliance between anatomical-classificatory reasoning and genealogical principles. Going against Linné, the French naturalist, with his *Natural History*, put forward a complete theory of degeneration in which races appeared conceived both as permanent varieties within the species and as deteriorated versions of an original human type, under the threefold influence of climate, food, and manners. Far from being fixed, Buffons' races could potentially regenerate.

## Was racial thinking reactionary thinking?

Monogenist racial thinking therefore emerged at the heart of the Enlightenment. Claude-Olivier Doron examines how the idea of 'race' and the affirmation of universalism emerged concomitantly. Could 'race' be a reaction to the egalitarian principle contained in most late-eighteenth-century declarations of rights? Here again, the difference between polygenism and monogenism is only partly satisfactory. However, it does offer a political perspective that is quite clearly differentiated. Partisans of the notion of 'race' resulting from deterioration mostly defended the idea that 'race' could be perfected. Therefore, they did not break with the core of Enlightenment thought – the notions of perfectibility and progress.

The universal was therefore not an established fact but a future horizon. However, the paths leading there remained to be defined. When differences in status were abolished by political decision, 'race' was often wielded as an argument to contest that decision, either in its essence – arguing that races were fundamentally unequal – or in its implementation, arguing that a transition was necessary. Therefore, just like the conversion of Jews in Spain in the late Middle Ages, the emancipation of slaves was often considered insufficient to make them free, including by some of its proponents. The stain of slavery might disappear with time, but most authors imagined a transition period over an unstipulated amount of time. This tendency prevailed from the very start of modernity. Those opposed to enslaving the American Indians, such as Joseph Acosta or even Francisco de Vitoria, nevertheless believed that they should submit to the service of their betters, for their own well being, arguing that, like children or the mentally ill, they did not have full *dominium* over themselves due to their deteriorated nature. The fate reserved for these individuals in the 'humanisation' processes envisaged was little better than slavery, somewhere between constraint and relegation.

Therefore, even in its non 'Fixist' conception, 'race' was a paradigm that put an end to equality in the present, pushing it back to a hypothetical and rarely defined future. Moreover, whereas part of the Enlightenment considered that mankind, as a species, could improve

through cultivating the mind – a conception not that far from missionary theories of improving the soul through true religion – at the end of the eighteenth century, the idea became established that improving the soul was inextricably linked with improving the body. However, the inability to manage to physically regenerate races considered inferior was viewed as a clear impediment to universal equality. Certain liberal thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century turned away from the heart of their doctrine for this reason. This was the case, as Claude-Olivier Doron shows, for Charles Dunoyer and Victor Courtet de L'Isle. Dunoyer introduced natural history into liberal political conceptions and claimed that it was not laws or governments that stood in the way of peoples' freedoms, but rather their racial potential which was insufficient and prevented them from developing the faculties that could lead them to freedom. Courtet de L'Isle added that racial cohabitation within the same society would necessarily translate into unequal ranks because different races did not have equal faculties. If race was not a reaction to the universal, then the inclusion of 'race' in universalism can be considered as expressing a limited form of universalism.

However, not all raciology sank into pessimism. The progress of science and medicine, concomitant with the emergence of a strong centralising power, established the biopower so dear to Michel Foucault. At the same time, a number of theories were devised to address the obstacle that inferior races represented on the path to universality, paving the way for a raciology of expansion. From Charles Vandermonde to Théodule Ribot, and including Louis Robert and his *Mégalanthropogénésie*, a certain number of theorists drawing inspiration from zootechnics (creating or improving domestic animal species through selection and artificial cross-breeding, which Claude-Olivier Doron considered the main matrix for race and then for eugenics) suggested a plan for the overall improvement of the species, by mixing races. Some called for the 'elimination' of inferior races, drawing inspiration from Cornelius de Pauw's claims that the strongest race prevailed when races were mixed<sup>4</sup> (a theory that was far from consensual) and that four generations were enough to eradicate the degenerated 'race'. The terms 'reduction' and 'redemption' used by Ribot had great symbolic weight. They referred to Christian vocabulary and to a certain logic of conversion. For many theologians, the fact that religions had diversified and heathenism had persisted was proof that the world was deteriorating. However, this could be limited by converting heathens to Christianity and thereby limiting the effects of decline. In the sixteenth century, Vitoria described the fraternal obligation to remove barbarians from sin. In the nineteenth century, the Christian's burden seemed to have become the White man's burden, as the means for 'reduction' and the face of redemption had taken on a new perspective and colour.

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<sup>4</sup> Cornelius de Pauw (1739-1799) published texts about the origins of civilisations that brought him great fame in the second half of the eighteenth century. In particular, he contributed to popularising the *casta* paintings from Spanish America.

# Race and the meaning of history

In point of fact, Claude-Olivier Doron's book goes far beyond simply studying the link between the concepts of race and degeneration, because he also examines the sudden emergence of the idea of progress.

From its inception with Buffon and the eighteenth-century naturalists, the notion of degeneration was filled with a certain ambiguity. To some extent, it took up the norms of Christian discourse describing the fall, albeit only partial, of humanity. And yet Buffon did not necessarily consider degeneration negative. For example, the degeneration of certain species (plants or animals) was fortunate for mankind. Similarly, unlike Rousseau, Buffon stated loudly and clearly that humans had to 'degenerate' from their natural state, considered to be a state of total barbarity, in order to move towards civilisation.

This raises the question of reversing the inclination of history – from degeneration to progress – which, to my mind, is the most fundamental epistemic break in the transformation of natural history into anthropology. Claude-Olivier Doron reminds us how humanism progressively freed itself from the Christian pattern of the perpetual fall of man and nature and, with Fontanelle and Feijoo, used the development of absolutism in the seventeenth century to claim that man could do as well as in the past if not better, because saying mankind degenerated from century to century meant belittling the King in his temporal action. Only the general laws he fixed prevailed and mankind adapted to them.

If the 'White' man will forever be the standard, then what is his place in the order of things? Is he at the origin of everything or is he the goal? While Buffon and then Blumenbach framed the white race as the original race, Turgot and the Scottish Enlightenment reversed this perspective. The notion of the golden age of race, from a far away past, was left to the myths of the sort of pessimistic racial thinking Gobineau would go on to develop. For Lacépède or Prichard, the original man, in all his barbarity, was necessarily black and the whitening of the species went hand-in-hand with various civilising processes begun by human populations and likened by Prichard to a sort of self-domestication. This finalist evolutionism sidelined the notion of degeneration, reduced to an individual, accidental, and irreversible process within race as evidenced by Morel's theories. However, this radical change did not at all shake beliefs in races of unequal value. At most, it led to the emergence of new key notions in anthropology, such as atavism, to explain phenomena perceived as steps backwards in the history of race.

Claude-Olivier Doron's book is extremely rich and often underpinned by relevant and striking analysis. In particular, it brilliantly renews our approach to the idea of genealogy in the construction of race as an object. Moreover, in a number of ways, it stands apart from recent

historiography on 'race'. In France, this is embodied by Jean-Frédéric Schaub's recent essay,<sup>5</sup> which, following George M. Fredrickson, argues that the emergence of this idea cannot simply be reduced to the scientific revolution and instead has much to do with the dynamics at work in the Iberian world at the turn of the Early Modern period.

However, Claude-Olivier Doron does not return to the classic historiography that draws such tight links between 'race' and science either, and his own stance sometimes seems a bit mysterious. The challenges he raises will undoubtedly give rise to constructive reactions, though, and he himself will no doubt further specify his own positions and chronology in the many publications announced in this book.

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<sup>5</sup> J.-F. Schaub, *Pour une histoire politique de la race* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).