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'When wild in woods the noble savage ran': The European Discourse of American Utopianism, 1748–1783

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'in the beginning, all the world was *America*, and more so than that is now'
(John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1690)¹

Denizens of the Brave New World

It was John Dryden who, in *The Conquest of Granada* (1670), first coined the phrase by which the New World's 'natural man' would come to be known throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

I am as free as Nature first made man,
Ere the base laws of servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.²

A key development in the conceptualization of the New World during the eighteenth century was a shift away from seeking the utopian ideal exclusively in nature, to seeking it primarily in the native savage himself. Much of this transition in utopian thinking can be attributed to the impact of the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, notably his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755). Ironically, however, the popular idea — notionally derived from the *Discourse* — that the North American continent was a pristine natural environment inhabited by 'noble savages', arose from a fundamental misinterpretation of Rousseau's work. In fact, Rousseau himself never put the natural man at the centre of his analysis of the failings of contemporary society. Nor did he ever use the phrase 'bon sauvage' in print. No matter how detrimental civil society may have been to man, Rousseau maintained, it is only by leaving the state of nature and becoming a social being in the fullest sense that man can realize his own nature as man — i.e. become a citizen. According to Rousseau, the state of nature may be man's *original* state, but it is not his *natural* state. Or, as he put it in *The Social Contract*: man 'ought incessantly to bless that happy moment in which he

¹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* ... (London: Printed for Awnsham Churchill, 1690).

² John Dryden, *The Conquest of Granada* ... (In the Savoy: Printed by T. N. for Henry Herringman, 1672), Part I, Act I, Sc. 1.

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century that it unwittingly acted as a catalyst for the utopian-primitivists and, more importantly, for the radical wing of the French Enlightenment. Their collective outrage resulted in a deluge of utopian treatises vindicating the New World.

Anti-Utopian Utopia

In this chapter I want to explore the proposition that the American degeneracy controversy, which emerged as one of the Enlightenment's most contentious debates, was less a dispute about climate, soil and population than about conflicting ideologies of progress.⁶ It is my contention that by offering utopian representations of America and the American Indian, Rousseauesque agrarian-utopians and progressive *philosophes* alike had brought about a radical rupture between the social reality of the day and perceptions of an alternative future society — privileging the latter. By contrast, being deeply invested in the infallible progress of European civilization, the supporters of the degeneracy thesis had adopted a dismissive stance towards the New World. In fact, by purposely grounding their belief in the continued superiority of European society on an argument for America's doom, the degeneracy theorists can be said to have embraced the discursive format of an anti-utopian utopia.⁷ The disputants in the degeneracy controversy squabbled over fossil sizes, fertility rates and climate conditions, but it was the American Indian who emerged as the litmus test for the viability of the entire continent.

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Both positions vis-à-vis the idea of progress in Europe and America had far-reaching repercussions for the way in which the conflicting sides approached the concept of history. The utopian-primitivists espoused the concept of an *ideal* history, which allowed them to imagine the social reality of the future. Their less starry-eyed counterparts adhered to an idea of history as a human construct and as a series of innovations: hence, they based their interpretation of contemporary European society and their vision of its future progress on the necessity of historical *evolution*. If history appeared as the promise of utopia with the former, utopia emerged as the promise of history with the latter. Thus it came to pass that the eighteenth century's belligerent polemic between the defenders and

⁶ For other approaches to the degeneration debate, see Gilbert Chinard, 'Eighteenth-Century Theories on American as a Human Habitat', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 91.1 (1947), 27–57; Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900*, rev. and trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973); *Was America a Mistake? An Eighteenth-Century Controversy*, ed. by Henry Steele Commager and Elmo Giordannetti (Columbia: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); and Robert Lawson-Peebles, *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America: The World Turned Upside Down* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 31–43.

⁷ I adopt the concept from Bronislaw Baczko's 'l'utopie anti-utopique'. See Baczko, *Lumières de l'utopie* (Paris: Payot, 1978), p. 192.

detractors of the viability of the New World triggered a seismic tremor in European *mentalité*. The resulting shock waves in turn caused a tectonic shift in the continent's political unconscious. At the level of actual social and political practice, the fundamental encounter between utopianism and the idea of progressive, evolutionary history ushered in the great revolutions of the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸ That same confrontation between utopians and 'anti-utopian' utopians gave rise to the idea of 'America' as a distinct and radically new geopolitical domain. This 'new hemisphere', in Diderot's phrase, was neither a regressive outgrowth of European civilization, nor some millenarian scion to Europe's despotism.

At the heart of my overall argument, then, lies the thesis that the radical rupture ('*grand déchirement*') between American and Europe noted by Diderot was not inaugurated in the New World, but in the *Old* World.⁹ By 1750, the *philosophes'* agenda of rationalization and secularization had effectively overthrown Europe's theological hegemony of revealed religion and Church authority. The systemic changes ripping through European society broke the mould of traditional thought patterns. This 'epistemological rupture' released into the social imagination the possibility of alternative futures and experimental socio-political orders. For the first time, the plurality of the nation state's cultural experience and political engagement was debated in a common participatory form. By the time the American colonies declared themselves independent, the radical Enlightenment's break with the past had already set the New World adrift from European history. That is to say, it was only because radical philosophy had first disrupted Europe's shared core of faith and authority that the architects of the American Revolution were able to conceptualize and create 'a totally and intirely [...] New System of Things and Men' (in Thomas Pownall's phrase).¹⁰ Emerging as the eighteenth century's dominant oppositional discourse, it was the radical Enlightenment that projected a utopia on to the New World, in order to argue for sociopolitical change in the Old World. Occupying that ideal and essentially discursive space, American settlers subsequently set out to build an improved version of the Old World in ~~that~~ the New World. The release of 'America' from European history 'marks the birth of political modernity' in the Old World, and the beginning of exceptionalism in the New World.¹¹

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⁸ In practice, both schools of thought fed off each other. While the discourse of utopianism absorbed and modified themes associated with the idea of progress and reform, the discourse of historical progress in turn adapted and transformed utopian themes.

⁹ Abbé Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 3rd edn, 10 vols (Geneva: Chez Jean-Leonard Pellet, 1781), IX, 230.

¹⁰ Thomas Pownall, *A Memorial Addressed to the Sovereigns of America* (London: Printed for J. Debrett, 1783), p. 54.

¹¹ Gregory Claeys, introduction to *Radicalism and Reform: Responses to Burke, 1790–1791*, vol. 1

The Return of the Vanishing American Indian

It was a view widely held during much of the early modern period that political power originated from a pre-social and pre-political natural condition — the 'state of nature'. Differences between the various theorists of the origin and nature of political power hinged mainly on the degree to which they believed men would have to renounce their 'natural liberty' in order to obtain 'civil liberty'. In his *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes had famously expounded the bleak thesis that the state of nature was, in effect, a state of war. 'In such condition', he asserted, ~~using a rhetoric of negation of all the European achievements,~~ 'the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.'¹² According to Hobbes, 'the savage people' that had recently been reported to exist 'in many places of America' were living in precisely 'that brutish manner'. The discovery of the American Indian confirmed Hobbes in his conviction that only by giving up all natural liberty and putting all political power into the hands of absolute authority could man ward off the state of nature. It followed for Hobbes that the dissolution of government would result in the disintegration of the social order and thus a return to the state of war.

Locke disagreed with Hobbes about the state of nature, ~~but also~~ plotted its demise, albeit for different reasons. In his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) he posited that the essential aim of the state of nature was the preservation of 'life, liberty, health, and limb'. Since no one ~~was~~ likely to harm another for fear of retaliation, the state of nature is a 'state of perfect equality', in which 'every one has the executive power of the law of Nature'. However, 'self-love' and ill-natured passions will inevitably upset this natural equilibrium.¹³ Humankind will therefore voluntarily leave the state of nature, first to form communities (the social state) and then to form a government (the political state). Identifying natural rights as the right to 'estate', John Locke designated the right to property as an extension to the right to self-determination and freedom of action. Labour was the origin and justification of property. Whatever a man 'mixed his Labour with', was his. From this Locke extrapolated that the purpose of government in civil society was the protection of property. In thus rationalizing the concept of individual rights and the new constitutional settlement in Britain, Locke was crucially guided by the colonial experiment that was then under way in the Americas. For Locke, America represented the original 'state of nature'. 'In the beginning', he observed, 'all the world was *America*, and more so than that is now; for no such thing as Money was any where known. Find out something

of *Political Writings of the 1790s*, ed. by Gregory Claeys, 8 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1995), I, p. xvii.

¹² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ... (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), p. 62.

¹³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, sections 4–15 ('Of the State of Nature').

that hath the Use and Value of Money amongst his Neighbours, you shall see the same Man will begin presently to enlarge his Possessions'.¹⁴ Thus, America was assimilated into the development of the colonial system and global mercantilist capitalism.

If Hobbes and Locke adhered to the teleological view that civil society was preordained to transcend the state of nature, Rousseau inverts their position: it is in the very 'establishment and perfection of societies', he asserts, that we find 'the reasons for [the] diminution of our species, which has been noticed by many philosophers'.¹⁵ Dismissing their assumption that because 'man has no idea of goodness, he must be naturally wicked', Rousseau argues that Hobbes and Locke, in effect, project on to the natural man the social and political evils of contemporary society. Rousseau famously retorted that man becomes corrupt only through the gradual process of moving into society. Contrary to what is often thought, however, Rousseau never claimed that man in the state of nature was a 'moral' being. In fact, terms like 'wickedness' and 'justice' are simply irrelevant in Rousseau's pre-political society. If the state of nature was pre-social and pre-political, it was also very much pre-moral. ('Sauvage' in 'l'homme sauvage' means 'wild', 'uncultured', and hence does not have the connotations of brutality and fierceness that the English word 'savage' has.) Humans were 'good' merely in the sense that they were self-sufficient and thus not subject to the vices of political society. Beyond that, what distinguished humans from mere 'brutes', was their capacity for free will and their 'faculty of self-improvement' — their 'perfectibility'. Influenced by recent zoological and anthropological discoveries, Rousseau depicted his 'savage man' as little more than an ape. However, if savage man's desire never goes beyond his physical wants ('food, female, and sleep'), he is also satisfied relatively easily. As a result, primitive man is generally content and is even possessed of certain 'social virtues', notably a natural disposition to 'compassion' or 'pity'.¹⁶ It is particularly Rousseau's insistence on the original man's capacity for compassion and empathy that gave rise to the widespread misconception that his 'l'homme sauvage' was in fact 'noble'.

Rousseau stated at the outset of his *Discourse* that it was his aim 'to judge rightly of the natural state of man'.¹⁷ Contrary to common belief, Rousseau's essay was not an attempt to reconstruct the original state of man, but to rediscover the original man in modern, civilized man. The essential difference between the two, Rousseau argued, was that whereas 'the savage man lives within

¹⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* ... (London: Awnsham Churchill, 1690), pp. 243–70.

¹⁵ Rousseau, *Works*, VII, 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185, 167–70, 188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Query: in note 16,
should 'p.' be 'pp.'?

himself [...] social man constantly lives outside himself, studying only how to live in the opinion of others, insomuch that he seems to receive the consciousness of his own existence merely from the judgment of others concerning him'.¹⁸ Yet despite having put philosophy, morality and civilization between himself and his primitive ancestor, social man had little to show for himself but 'a frivolous and deceitful external appearance; honour without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness'.¹⁹ In the *Discourse* Rousseau argues the need to strip social man of the accretions of civilization and to restore his 'natural inclinations'. Only in this way could social man be released from the false consciousness that concealed his alienation from himself and from his fellow men. Although he emphasized that he had no ambition to study man 'in the embryo-state of his species', many of Rousseau's contemporaries overwhelmingly interpreted this to mean that Rousseau was trying to retrace Hesiod's 'golden race of mortal men' that once existed at the dawn of mankind. Even the frontispiece of the first edition of Rousseau's *Discourse* shows the figure of a man who has just discarded his urban outfit and who, having turned his back on the walled town and its elegantly attired citizens, is wending his way towards the far beyond, where naked figures can be seen lounging in front of a row of huts or wigwams. The caption appropriately reads, 'Il retourne chez ses Égaux' (FIGURE 1).²⁰

The thought of curing society's ills by returning to nature continued to haunt the imagination of generations of European writers and thinkers. Instead of looking for the 'natural man' in themselves, they began to search for him in the wild — and by all accounts nature did not get much wilder than in the New World. In the decades following the 1763 Peace of Paris, which consolidated Britain's hegemony in North America, increasing numbers of British travellers of one kind or another struck out for America's western wilderness hoping to catch a glimpse of a real-life specimen of Rousseau's 'savage man'. When their accounts of America's pristine wilderness and its natural inhabitants reached audiences in Europe, many believed they recognized in them the very 'state of nature' that Rousseau had written about in his *Discourse*. Rousseau's 'immense forests, whose trees were never mutilated by the axe' became the American wilderness; his 'savage man' became the American Indian. And when Rousseau (erroneously) avouched that 'the savages of America [...] have still continued savage' because they had never known the arts of metallurgy and agriculture,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 244. The text has 'beside himself' for 'hors de lui', which is more properly translated as 'outside himself'.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 245.

²⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi des hommes* (Amsterdam: Chez Marc Michel M. Rey, 1755).

FIGURE 1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi des hommes* (Amsterdam: Chez Marc Michel M. Rey, 1755), frontispiece.

many ignored the fact that he meant just that: that the American Indian was a savage.²¹

In the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, views of the American Indian became uncomfortably poised between nature and civilization. The conceptualization of the native in the eighteenth century reflected the two main modes of thought: the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on rationalism, empiricism and scientific inquiry; and the reaction against it, notably the cult of sensibility and, from the 1760s onwards, the early onset of Romanticism. Both movements inspired their own brand of utopianism, which in one of its manifestations involved the desire to imagine, establish or discover an ideal society in the pristine natural environment of the New World. Both, too, developed a concept of the noble savage as the contented inhabitant of this untouched paradise. There was one crucial difference: while empiricist rationalism tended to be idealist and highlight the New World's potential to be brought into the light of civilization and reason, Romanticism tended to seek the ideal society in the moral purity of a quondam pastoral garden. However, although approaching the ideal society from different directions, both empiricism and Romanticism offered a perfectionist conceptualization of the world that was essentially timeless. From this ensued a fundamental paradox in eighteenth-century utopian thought, which left its mark on virtually all accounts of America that portrayed it as an idealized economy of paradise and the noble savage (Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* would be a seminal example).²² For if the noble savage lived in an earthly paradise and if American land, as analogue of this paradise, was susceptible of perpetual improvement, then the American Indian, as analogue of the noble savage, would gradually have to take on the character of a civilized man — and, hence, cease to be a 'noble savage'. As long as he was an exemplar of a timeless paradisiacal order, the noble savage was sacrosanct; as the American Indian and a subject in historical time, he was doomed.

People's Paradise or Continent of Doom?

The American degeneracy debate had its origin in New World demographics. Many travellers to the American continent had been struck by the low population density in the New World in comparison to that in Europe, Asia and Africa. It

²¹ Rousseau, *Works*, VII, 158, 212–13.

²² J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London: Thomas Davies and Lockyer Davis, 1782). By contrast, because they steadfastly refused to idealize the New World and its original inhabitants, many dystopian accounts of America, notably those produced by scores of anti-Jacobin writers during the 1790s, avoided falling into the paradox. For a detailed account of the 1790s' anti-Jacobin New World bashers, see Wil Verhoeven, *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789–1802* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), particularly Chapters 8 and 9. See also the essay by Joseph Bartolomeo in this volume.

was Montesquieu who first offered a comprehensive theory of the causes of relative population growth. In Book XVIII of *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) Montesquieu explored the correlation between population size and the manner in which men procure their subsistence. He arrived at the proposition that countries 'are not cultivated in proportion to their fertility, but to their [civil] liberty'.²³ Thus, the code of civil laws commensurate for a nation that is attached to trade and navigation will be much more extensive than that for a people that is contented with cultivating the land; for the latter it will be more extensive than for a people that lives by their stocks and herds; and for those more than for a people that merely lives by hunting. Somewhat counter-intuitively, Montesquieu attributed the fact that there were so many small savage nations dispersed throughout America to the relative fertility of the earth. While the barrenness of the earth 'renders men industrious, sober, inured to hardship, courageous and fit for war', he argued, the fertility of a country 'gives ease, effeminacy, and a certain fondness for the preservation of life'. Because the fertility of the soil in America spontaneously produced 'many fruits capable of affording them nourishment', the natives were content to 'cultivate a spot of land round their cabins', while hunting and fishing completed their basic dietary needs. The result was that in America land had remained virtually uncultivated. Yet at the same time the land seemed to satisfy only basic needs. This led Montesquieu to formulate his 'law' of relative population density:

As the produce of uncultivated land, is to the produce of land improved by culture; so the number of savages in one country, is to the number of husbandmen in another: and when the people who cultivate the land, cultivate also the arts, the number of savages is to the number of this people, in a compound proportion of the number of savages to that of the husbandmen; and of the number of husbandmen to that of men who cultivate the arts.²⁴

Unlike Rousseau, who a few years later in his *Discourse* would advance the thesis that the accumulation of property and the division of labour were detrimental to liberty and civil virtue, Montesquieu contended that men by their labour, 'their care, and the influence of good laws have rendered the earth more proper for their abode'. It was those countries that 'the industry of men' had rendered habitable and that stood 'in need of the same industry to provide for their subsistence', that were most likely to have 'a mild and moderate government'. Perhaps the most significant legacy of Montesquieu's humanist treatise is the understanding that the universal 'spirit of laws', which underlies all man-made laws, reflects 'the general spirit of mankind' — not merely soil, subsistence and climate: 'Men are influenced by various causes, by the climate, the religion, the

²³ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws ... by Mr. Nugent*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (1750; London: J. Nourse, and P. Vaillant, 1752), I, 388.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 389, 392–93.

laws, the maxims of government, by precedents, morals, and customs; from whence is formed a general spirit which takes its rise from these'.²⁵

Montesquieu's observations on the native population of the New World might have remained safely swaddled in the abstractions of natural law, had it not been for the publication, one year after Montesquieu's treatise, of Buffon's *History and Theory of the Earth* (1749). Adding volumes while constantly revising earlier ones, Buffon would continue to expand his ambitious project to write a comprehensive natural history of the earth until 1779, when he gave final shape to his cosmological schema in *The Epochs of Nature*. Accompanied by countless charts, tables and maps and adorned with hundreds of copper plates, Buffon's thirty-six-volume *Natural History* was a goldmine for printers, with countless editions and reprints appearing in several European languages well into the nineteenth century.²⁶ Several luxury abridged editions were embellished with illustrations. The extraordinarily wide dissemination of Buffon's studies of the earth, minerals, animals and man transformed the contemporary population debate from a moral into a scientific dispute. However, by eliminating from Montesquieu's 'general spirit of mankind' all psychological and moral factors in the development of human societies and concentrating instead on food and climate as the key determining factors in human development, Buffon offered a seriously reductionist, mechanistic approach of demographics and natural viability.

Buffon's comments on America are scattered throughout the thirty-six volumes of his encyclopedic *Natural History*, which brought together a vast range of facts and claims about natural history throughout the world. Initially, Buffon's observations on the American savages were part of his general treatment of 'varieties of the human species'.²⁷ Thus, he attributed the small size of the native population in America and their 'universal want of civilization' to the continent's unfavourable natural conditions and the fact that the natives were a 'new people' on the continent.²⁸ Those same adverse natural conditions had had an equally detrimental effect on all animal species native to the New World. It was only in his discourse on 'Animals common to both Continents' (originally published in 1761) that Buffon finally offered the explanation for the alleged universal degeneracy of species that would set Europe's natural historical community ablaze:

In this New World [...] there is some combination of elements and other physical causes, something that opposes the amplification of animated Nature: There are

²⁵ Ibid., I, 390-91, 418.

²⁶ An additional eight volumes were published after Buffon's death by his friend and assistant Lacépède.

²⁷ Buffon, *Natural History*..., trans. by Smellie, vol. III, section IX.

²⁸ Ibid., III, 169.

obstacles to the development, and perhaps the formation of large germs. Even those which, from the kindly influences of another climate, have acquired their complete form and expansion, shrink and diminish under a niggardly sky and unprolific land, thinly peopled with wandering savages [...]. It is easy to discover the cause of the scattered life of savages, and of their estrangement from society. They have been refused the most precious spark of Nature's fire: They have no ardour from women, and, of course, no love to mankind [...]. Hence no union, no republic, no social state, can take place among them. The physical cause of love gives rise to the morality of their manners. Their heart is frozen, their society cold, and their empire cruel [...]. Everything must be referred to the first cause: They are indifferent, because they are weak; and this indifference to the sex is the original stain which disgraces Nature, prevents her from expanding, and, by destroying the germs of life, cuts the root of society.²⁹

Buffon was not the first to make assertions about American degeneracy. In 1748 a Spanish naval officer, Don Antonio d'Ulloa, had claimed that the human species in America was degenerate as a result of a long history of colonization, slavery, the mining of resources and the subjugation of the natives. It was also unsurprising to d'Ulloa that there were no large mammals in America and that the continent was rife with noxious insects and poisonous reptiles.³⁰ Yet opponents to the theory of degeneracy were quick to accuse Buffon of being a European supremacist. In all fairness to him, Buffon never actually claimed that degeneracy was *inherent* to any biological species found in America, including the American savage. If the continent's natural conditions were unpropitious to the evolution of civil society there, Buffon attributed the universal degeneracy of all mammals solely to the climate, which he claimed was too damp and cold. Despite popular belief, Buffon at no point argued that the American continent was doomed. Unlike Europe, America was 'a new land, still untouched by the hand of man': but that did not mean that it could not be brought to prosperity.³¹ A champion of progress and civilization, like most Enlightenment thinkers, Buffon's main purpose in the *Natural History* was to demonstrate that Nature was *not* the kind, nurturing mother of lore. On the contrary: nature needed the intervening hand of civilized man to be curbed and pummelled into shape. Nature was civilization's natural enemy, not its redeemer. Unlike the American savage, who was the passive servant of wild nature, the civilized man would aspire to be its master. Far from being doomed, therefore, America one day might well be rendered ~~in~~habitable and civilized by the industry of man. Indeed, Buffon went so far as to prophesize that

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²⁹ Ibid., v, 129–31.

³⁰ Don Antonio d'Ulloa, *Relación histórica del viaje a la América meridional*, 5 vols (Madrid: A. Marin, 1748). A French translation appeared in Paris in 1752; an English translation in London, 1758.

³¹ Ibid., v, 136, 139.

some centuries hence, when the lands are cultivated, the forests cut down, the course of rivers properly directed, and the marshes drained, this same country will become the most fertile, the most wholesome and the richest in the whole world, as it is already in all the parts which have experienced the industry and skill of man.³²

It can be inferred that as America's lands were being brought into cultivation, the American Indian would in due course become civilized as well.

In his culminating treatise on 'The Epochs of Nature' (first published in 1779), Buffon considerably played down the issue of the putative degeneracy of species in North America. But by then the thesis proposed in the earlier discourse on 'Animals common to both Continents' had become firmly stuck in the minds of natural historians and general readers alike.³³ It was the Dutch *philosophe* Cornelis de Pauw who to a large extent had been responsible for the rapid dissemination of Buffon's thesis in Europe. De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* sparked an unprecedented debate about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the natural world ~~on the New World~~.³⁴ First published in Berlin in 1768–69, the *Recherches philosophiques* was soon translated into German, Dutch and Swedish, and went through many editions in French (including three that were supposedly printed in 'London', although more likely in Berlin).³⁵ An abridged version in English was published in 1789 (and reprinted in 1795). The book's wide exposure in the European print markets quickly established De Pauw as an authority on America and the American Indian, despite refutations published by, amongst others, Dom Pernety, librarian to Frederick II, as well as by Buffon himself.³⁶

→ in
→ Americas

Carefully selecting passages from Buffon's *Natural History* that were unfavourable to America while dismissing Buffon's partial vindication of the Indian, De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques* is a reductionist reworking of Buffon's reductionist hypothesis. Climate, and climate alone, governs 'the means

³² Ibid v, 139. We are now aware of the environmental costs of this prediction.

³³ See Jacques Roger, *Buffon: A Life in Natural History*, trans. by Sarah Lucille Bonnefoi, ed. by Leslie Pearce Williams (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 418–21.

³⁴ See Henry Ward Church, 'Corneille De Pauw and the Controversy over his *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Américains*', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 51 (1936), 178–206.

³⁵ A two-volume French edition appeared under a false London imprint in 1770; two further (three-volume) editions in French appeared in 1771, again under a false London imprint.

³⁶ Joseph Antoine Pernety, *Dissertation sur l'Amérique et les Américains contre les Recherches philosophiques de M. de P***** (A Berlin: [n.pub.], 1770). De Pauw promptly refuted Pernety's *Dissertation* in the third volume of a new edition of his *Recherches philosophiques*, entitled *Défense des Recherches philosophiques sur les américains, par Mr. de P***** (A Berlin: chez George Jacques Decker, Imp. du roi, 1770). Buffon disputed De Pauw's condemnation of the American natives in his 1777 supplement to 'The Varieties of the Human Species'. For other attacks on De Pauw, see Church, 'Corneille De Pauw ...', pp. 194–206.

of attaining to civilized life', De Pauw maintains: 'climate has governed [civilized man] full as much as reason; the different degrees of heat and cold have clearly inspired legislators with opposite ideas; on comparing the legislative codes of the Temperate, with those of the Torrid Zone or its neighbourhood, all is contrast, nothing analogous'.³⁷ De Pauw follows Buffon, asserting that the cold and damp climate in the New World has had a universally detrimental effect on all species of animals and plants there, particularly in terms of their propagation. America's inclement climate has reduced the American Indian to 'a degenerate species of the human race, spineless, impotent, without physical strength, without vigour, without elevation of mind'.³⁸ However, he ~~put~~ ^{out} Buffon by maintaining that the climate in America was endowed with a spirit that was deliberately and perversely evil towards mankind — 'un climat ingrat & contraire à l'espèce humaine'. Not only did animals transported to America degenerate, as Buffon had claimed: even Creoles, or Europeans born in America, inevitably succumbed to the degenerative influence of the climate, De Pauw insisted. Relying on evidence provided by d'Ulloa, Linnaeus and others when none was to be found in Buffon, De Pauw contended that the Creoles were not only physically weaker than Europeans, but that they were also incapable of any intellectual achievement. Thus, he averred, the academy of the St. Mark in Lima had never produced a single graduate who was able to write a book, even a bad one, while the Jesuits at the University of Santa Fé had reported that out of two thousand students, 'no master, no philosopher, no physician, no scientist of any reputation' had ever graduated.³⁹

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There can be little doubt that De Pauw intended his *Recherches philosophiques* to be an uncompromising dismissal of the American continent and its native inhabitants. That said, it cannot be denied, either, that much of the criticism levelled at him was based on a partial and tendentious reading of his book.⁴⁰ Polemic, provocative and at times presumptuous, De Pauw was admittedly more extreme in his claims than Buffon, more sensationalist in his approach, and more offensive in his choice of words. Unlike the naturalist Buffon, however, De Pauw laid no claim to being a scientist dedicated to collecting empirical data. He was a moral philosopher, whose primary interest was to discover what the empirical, scientific data told us about the natural order from which man had evolved into

³⁷ [Cornelis de Pauw,] *Selections from Les Recherches Philosophiques sur les Américains of M. Pauw. By Mr. W*** [Daniel Webb]* (Bath: Privately Printed by R. Crutwell, 1789), p. 8. De Pauw devotes the entire first part of his treatise to the climate in America ('Du Climat de l'Amérique, de la complexion altérée de ses habitants, de la découverte du nouveau Monde &c.').

³⁸ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, or mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine. Par Mr. de P***. Avec une Dissertation sur l'Amérique & les Américains, par Dom Pernety*, 2 vols (London [false imprint, probably: Berlin], 1770), I, p. xiii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 164, 166–67.

the social and moral being he was now. Yet in spite of their different scholarly agendas, both Buffon and De Pauw were ultimately furthering the same Enlightenment project. It is a fallacy to believe that their American degeneracy thesis was premeditated anti-Americanism. Rather, their cultural pessimism vis-à-vis the New World was the reflection of a deep-seated fear — which was widespread among Enlightenment champions of reason and civilization — that mankind would slip back into a primordial ‘state of nature’, should the march towards moral perfection ever be abandoned. When De Pauw described America as ‘that miserable country’, he meant just that: there was nothing romantic or idealist about the ‘state of nature’ in the New World.⁴¹ And when he depicted the American Indian as a ‘child of nature’, De Pauw did so not in the primitivist sense erroneously attributed to Rousseau, but in the sense of what Rousseau had actually claimed about original man in the pre-political, pre-moral state of nature:

The American, strictly speaking, is neither virtuous nor vicious. What motive has he to be either? The timidity of his soul, the weakness of his intellects, the necessity of providing for his subsistence, the powers of superstition, the influences of climate, all lead him far wide of the possibility of improvement; but he perceives it not; his happiness is, not to think; to remain in perfect inaction; to sleep a great deal; to wish for nothing, when his hunger is appeased [...]. In his understanding there is no gradation, he continues an infant to the last hour of his life.⁴²

What most of his critics have failed to note ~~was~~ that De Pauw in no uncertain terms attributed much of America’s ‘misery’ to the activities of the European colonizers, rather than to the natives. Notably, he takes Spain and Portugal severely to task for having instigated what amounts to the systematic eradication of millions of innocent Indians. De Pauw saves most of his venom for the Jesuits. Devoting a long chapter in Volume II to their activities in Paraguay, De Pauw accuses the Jesuits of baptizing the Indians only to reduce them subsequently to slavery, stripping them of their ‘natural’ freedoms and putting them to work like animals. De Pauw’s bitter indignation against the Jesuit missionaries is still resonant: ‘Using religion as an instrument of despotism, which is the most calculated and therefore the most heinous crime imaginable: it is mocking God in order to tyrannize men’.⁴³ Nor was De Pauw more favourably disposed towards Bartolomé de las Casas. The Spanish-born Dominican missionary and

⁴⁰ For a more nuanced reading of De Pauw’s *Recherches philosophiques*, see Klaas van Berkel, “‘That Miserable Continent’: Cultural Pessimism and the Idea of ‘America’ in Cornelis de Pauw”, in *Revolutionary Histories: Transatlantic Cultural Nationalism, 1775–1815*, ed. by W. M. Verhoeven (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 135–51.

⁴¹ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques*, II, 177.

⁴² [De Pauw,] *Selections from Les Recherches Philosophiques sur les Américains of M. Pauw*, pp. 15–16.

⁴³ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques*, II, 356.

historian may have been fully aware of the injustice that was being done to the Indians, but De Pauw utterly detested his campaign to alleviate the sufferings of the Indians by introducing African slaves into the New World to replace them.⁴⁴ The institution of slavery was the worst of all tyrannies, according to De Pauw, and his condemnation of the practice is one of the central concerns in his *Recherches philosophiques*. He estimated that more than ten million slaves had been transplanted from Africa to America, where they had 'lived and expired in humiliation, in pain, in servitude, in a country unknown to them, which they had cultivated with their own hands in order to enrich their masters'. The Spanish, the Dutch and other Europeans nations had adopted the atrocious practice invented by the Portuguese, and De Pauw denounced them all for their crime against humanity: 'the most sacred rights of man were defended by none and betrayed by all'.⁴⁵

Despite the many rebuttals published at the time, De Pauw had a considerable following in Europe. Frederick the Great of Prussia was sufficiently impressed with De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques* to offer him membership of the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences — although the *roi philosophe's* enthusiasm for a treatise that argued the decay of America may have in part been motivated by his concern about German emigration to America. De Pauw was also granted honorary French citizenship on 26 August 1792. He was in distinguished company. Others so honoured included the English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the Swiss educational pioneer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the radicals Thomas Paine and Joseph Priestley, the leaders of the anti-slavery campaign Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, the German poet and playwright Schiller, as well as the leaders of the American Revolution, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. Furthermore, in a move that signalled their recognition of De Pauw's philosophical inquiry into the Americans, the editors of the *Encyclopédie* invited De Pauw to contribute a number of articles to the *Supplément de l'Encyclopédie* (1776), including one on America.⁴⁶

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The Revolution of America

Although his treatment of America was less sensational than that of De Pauw, the impact of the Abbé Raynal's history of the East and West Indies was even greater and longer lasting. The *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770) was in fact a collaborative effort typical of the sceptical spirit of scientific inquiry of the *encyclopédistes*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 120–21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., I, 29, 93.

⁴⁶ See R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959–64), II, 54.

With anonymous contributions by, among others, Diderot, the *Histoire* was a thinly disguised attack on political and religious despotism. Thus, the *Histoire* was highly critical of Europe's colonizing activities in the New World, particularly the institution of slavery, the system of trade monopolies and the missionary work carried out among the Indians. In addition, it denounced the Inquisition ('that greatest reproach to humanity') and the general 'spirit of fanaticism' that pervaded both Christianity and Islam.⁴⁷ The *Histoire* also staunchly defended social and scientific progress and disparaged the romantic primitivism attributed to Rousseau.

Raynal's *Histoire* went through some thirty to fifty editions between 1770 and 1820, each containing new supplements, revisions and retractions. The first English translation of 1776 went through three editions in the space of just two years, with three further editions, both abridged and expanded, appearing in Edinburgh, and two pirated editions appearing in Dublin. The 1780 edition — ~~again~~ translated by John Justamond, a Fellow of the Royal Society — appeared in London in 1783, ~~with~~ several reprints: one each in Dublin and Edinburgh, and no less than five in London. Raynal's treatise on the two Indies was one of the most popular histories of the latter part of the eighteenth century. Raynal's original (1770) edition of his *Histoire* closely followed Buffon and De Pauw. Thus, Raynal duly depicts the New World as fatally in the sway of hostile Nature, with the continent's 'frozen and severe' climate allegedly having had the same debilitating influence on the Indians. As a result, the natives are 'degraded in all the tokens of manhood'.⁴⁸ Because the 'lively and powerful sentiment of love' is 'the first band of society', the New World's 'radical vice' of male sexual impotence has not only caused the native population in America to remain relatively small, but has also prevented communities from progressing beyond their pre-social and pre-political state of nature. However, Raynal believed — like Buffon — that the continent was not entirely doomed. Settlers in the British colonies in America, particularly in the city of Philadelphia, were animated with a spirit of liberty and religious freedom that allowed them to employ 'all the resources industry can make use of'.⁴⁹ Thus, for a brief moment, the *Histoire*'s contributors' unwavering belief in the perfectibility of man overcame their pessimism. They even went so far as to prophesize that one day an enlightened civilization would arise from the poisonous morasses of the New World:

Let us wait till education may have corrected the insurmountable tendency of the climate towards the enervating pleasures of luxury and sensuality. Perhaps, we

⁴⁷ Abbé Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Trans. J. Justamond, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell, 1776), I, 22; *Ibid.*, I, 133.

⁴⁸ Raynal, *History* (1776), IV, 173–74.

⁴⁹ Raynal, *History* (1776), VII, 308.

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shall then see that America is propitious to genius, and the arts that give birth to peace and society. [...] Perhaps, another Newton is to arise in New Britain. From English America without doubt will proceed the first rays of the sciences if they are at length to break through a sky so long time clouded.⁵⁰

The 1780 revised and expanded French edition of the *Histoire* retains much of the gloomy account of the natural conditions, climate and Indian population in the New World. This makes it all the more remarkable that in a new section added to Book XVIII (chapters 38 to 52), it suddenly sets out 'to dispel [the] fatal prejudice' that the British settlers in North America 'were degenerated, and unable to elevate their minds to any complicated speculations'. Published at a time when France's military intervention was about to tip the balance in America's favour during its armed conflict with Britain, the author of the new section heaps praise on Benjamin Franklin for promoting the natural sciences in the New World and on Thomas Paine for firmly establishing 'the rights of mankind, and the rights of nations [...] in original writings', which, the author asserts, 'will be the delight and the consolation of the most distant ages'.⁵¹ Earlier editions had given wide exposure to the degeneracy thesis, so many readers of the third (1780) French edition of the *Histoire* are likely to have been wrong-footed by this apparently incongruous celebration of the New World. They would have been taken aback even more by the outspoken support expressed in the new section of Book XVIII for republicanism in general and for the American Revolution in particular.

This sudden political radicalization of the *Histoire* can largely be attributed to Diderot's involvement in the project.⁵² Diderot's interest in the American cause for liberty and independence was first aroused in 1769, when the French publication of John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* had somehow escaped the attention of the censors. Diderot praised the pamphlet in a review: 'Je ne connais aucun ouvrage plus propre à instruire les peuples de leurs droits inaliénables, et à leur inspirer un amour violent de la liberté.' Dickinson's *Letters* did not at the time lead Diderot to articulate a doctrine of popular sovereignty; yet it did persuade him that the struggle of the American colonies against Britain's arbitrary despotism would one day have profound implications for the constitutional arrangements in countries far beyond the North American theatre. When news of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence reached

⁵⁰ Ibid., IV, 343–44. This passage was most probably written by Diderot.

⁵¹ Abbé Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies. Revised, Augmented, and ... Newly Translated from the French*, by J. O. Justamond, F.R.S., 8 vols (London: W. Strahan; and T. Cadell, 1783), VII, 407.

⁵² See Anthony Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot's Political Thought after the Encyclopédie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1973), pp. 205–28. On Diderot's contributions, see Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des deux Indes ou l'écriture fragmentaire*, pp. 94–97.

Paris in August 1776, Diderot realized that his prediction — made in 1769 — that the ‘grande querelle’ between Britain and her colonies could only end in a ‘rupture’, was soon to be fulfilled.⁵³ Seeing his dream of brutal despotism buckling under the enlightened will of the people rapidly becoming a historical reality across the Atlantic, Diderot immediately set out to expound his anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist principles. Soon he would be one of the American colonists’ most outspoken apologists in France. Writing under the safe cover of anonymity in Raynal’s third edition of the *Histoire*, Diderot championed the budding United States as ‘the *antithesis* of empire: local self-government instead of despotic rule from a distant *métropole*; and open trade and industry based, at least in part and in the North, on free labor as opposed to exploitative forms of commerce involving monopolies or slavery’.⁵⁴

British readers had even more reason than those on the continent to be flustered by the *Histoire*’s impassioned espousal of the cause of the American Revolution. Appearing at a time when the Government and many among the populace were still dismayed by the recent loss of the American colonies, Raynal’s defence of America’s struggle to shake off ‘the yoke of Great Britain’ was widely regarded as French interference in Britain’s imperial affairs. Indeed, the new text went far beyond exonerating the American colonies in their row with the mother country: in fact, it constituted nothing less than a complete departure from the degeneracy thesis. Thus, far from undermining civilization in the Old World, the ‘new hemisphere’ emerges from the expanded Book XVIII as Europe’s enlightened ‘other’ — indeed, as the future redeemer of the Old World’s own decline:

The New Hemisphere must one day be detached from the Old. This great evulsion is prepared in Europe, by the ferment and by the clash of opinions; by the overthrow of our rights, which constituted our courage; by the luxury of our courts, and the misery of our country places; by the everlasting hatred there is between effeminate men who possess every thing, and robust, and even virtuous men, who have nothing to lose but their lives. It is prepared in America, by the increase of population, of cultures, of industry, and of knowledge. Every thing is tending towards this separation, both the progress of evil in one world, and the progress of good in another.⁵⁵

What appeared to be Raynal’s remarkable *volte face* may have disappointed cultural pessimists in Britain, but it was welcomed with enthusiasm by British

⁵³ Diderot, ‘Sur les lettres d’un fermier de Pensylvanie aux habitants de l’Amérique septentrionale’, in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by J. Assézat and M. Tourneux, 20 vols (Paris: Garnier frères, 1875–77), IV, 88–89, 86.

⁵⁴ Guillaume Ansart, ‘Variations on Montesquieu: Raynal and Diderot’s *Histoire des deux Indes* and the American Revolution’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70.3 (July 2009), 399–420 (p. 402).

⁵⁵ Raynal, *History* (1783), VII, 554–55. With the exception of the *Monthly Review*, the *History* attracted dismissive comments from the London journals.

friends of the American Revolution. It was no coincidence that the supplement to Book XVIII had actually first appeared in Britain two years before, in March 1781. The London bookseller Lockyer Davis, a known supporter of the Whig cause to reconcile Britain and the colonies, published an extract from the original French version of the supplement to Book XVIII in the form of a pamphlet entitled *Révolution de L'Amérique*.⁵⁶ Under a separate imprint Davis simultaneously published an English translation of the pamphlet (somewhat different from the translation that would later be appended to Book XVIII of the 1783 edition of Raynal's *History*). In the Advertisement to *The Revolution of America*, the 'translator' claims that the French text is an authentic 'additional part' to Raynal's *Histoire*, and expresses his 'patriotic' hope that by publishing 'this exquisite little piece' from such an 'illustrious historian' 'before the rising of Parliament from the present session, some proper and efficacious steps will at last [...] be thought of, towards closing the unnatural, the shameful, and distressful breach, between the mother-country and her colonies'.⁵⁷

Most commentators and bibliographers have taken Raynal's authorship of *The Revolution of America* for granted.⁵⁸ Yet although the *Révolution de L'Amérique* reprints the bulk of material contained in chapters 38 to 52 of Book XVIII of the third edition of the *Histoire*, Raynal himself vehemently denounced the pamphlet as a fabrication that did not reflect his true views on the crisis in the relationship between Britain and her American colonies.⁵⁹ While Raynal may not have produced the actual pamphlet, he did write eleven of the fifteen chapters of Book XVIII that are reproduced in the pamphlet (chapters 38 to 41 and 46 to 52). The remaining four chapters had been written by Diderot (chapters 42 to 45). It was probably this division of labour that lies behind Raynal's denial of authorship. While Raynal had provided a largely descriptive account of the historical events leading up to the rebellion and the military operations conducted during the War of Independence, Diderot's contributions to the 1780 edition offered a rigorous analysis of those events in term of a general theory of revolution as a means of social and political rejuvenation. Accordingly, where Raynal's approach to the subject was fairly neutral and empirical, Diderot, by contrast, came out in enthusiastic support of the colonies' bid for independence and of the doctrine of popular sovereignty in general. Fearing a clamp down by

⁵⁶ [Abbé Raynal?], *Révolution de L'Amérique. Par M. l'Abbé Raynal ...* (A Londres: Chez Lockyer Davis, 1781). A second imprint appeared in Paris and a third in The Hague. Yet another French edition appeared in Dublin in 1781.

⁵⁷ [Abbé Raynal?], *The Revolution of America. By the Abbé Raynal* (London: Printed for Lockyer Davis, 1781), pp. iii–iv, vi.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Manuela Albertone, 'The French Moment of the American National Identity: St. John de Crèvecoeur's Agrarian Myth', *History of European Ideas*, 32 (2006), 28–57.

⁵⁹ Chinard, 'Eighteenth-Century Theories on American as a Human Habitat', 56, n. 16.

the French authorities, it was presumably Diderot's uncompromising radicalism that persuaded Raynal publicly to disavow the *Révolution de L'Amérique*. His concerns were justified. Originally published in the Netherlands, the *Histoire* had been banned from being imported into France. It was especially Diderot's contributions to the third edition that made the Parliament of Paris condemn the book in 1781, on the grounds that its indictment of royalty, attacks on the tyranny of the Church and praise of the English settlers in America made it democratic propaganda. It was burned by the public executioner and an order was given for the arrest of the author, whose name had not appeared in the first edition, but was printed on the title page of the Geneva edition of 1780. Raynal escaped to Spa, and thence to Berlin.

Even so, in the case of the pamphlet's English 'translation' published by Lockyer Davis, there are legitimate reasons for assuming that the 'Real Whigs', Dissenters and other British libertarians, had had a hand in producing this document as part of their campaign to stoke up the extra-Parliamentary controversy over American independence.⁶⁰ Thus, quickly dropping all pretence of being a *savant* of any kind, the translator/narrator of *The Revolution of America* adopts a blatantly anti-government stance, frequently resorting to language that is explicitly treasonous:

The mother-country had found herself engaged in expensive and cruel wars. Tumultuous and enterprising parliaments had disturbed her tranquility. She had fallen into the hands of ministers corrupt and bold; unhappily disposed to raise the authority of the throne upon the ruin of all the rights, and all the powers of the people.⁶¹

Siding with the patriots in their struggle against the British oppressors, the translator is proud to act as their ambassador: 'Liberty only can absolve us. Liberty, and perfect liberty, is the only object worthy of our labours and our dangers'. The American cause being a cause for universal liberty and justice, the opprobrious label of 'rebels' is in the eyes of the translator a mark of honour and respect:

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the pro-independence campaign in Britain between 1763 and 1783, see Jerome R. Reich, *British Friends of the American Revolution* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998). It remains hard to assess to what extent Raynal shared the Radical Whigs' support for the American cause. We know that on two occasions (in 1777 and 1780) Raynal stayed with Lord Shelburne. Respected by many radicals, Dissenters, colonial rebels and French *philosophes*, Shelburne was a patron of, among others, Joseph Priestley and Richard Price, whom Raynal is likely to have met at Shelburne's. See Anthony Strugnell, 'La Réception de l'*Histoire des deux Indes* en Angleterre au dix-huitième siècle,' in *Lectures de Raynal: L'Histoire des deux Indes en Europe et en Amérique au XVIIIe siècle*, Actes du Colloque de Wolfenbüttel, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Manfred Tietz (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991), pp. 259–60.

⁶¹ [Raynal?], *The Revolution of America*, p. 7.

Rebels! And why? because they will not be your slaves. A people subjected to the will of another people, who can dispose as they chuse of their government, of their laws, of their trade; tax them at their pleasure; set bounds to their industry, and enchain it by arbitrary prohibitions, are bond-servants [...] and their servitude is worse than what they would undergo if governed by a tyrant. Deliverance from the oppression of a tyrant is effected by his expulsion, or his death.⁶²

In a defiant challenge to the British Crown, the translator singles out France as 'in all points of view the empire the most strongly constituted' and hence as best guarantor of the independence of the United States. While George the Third 'saw nothing' as his ministers and mercenaries were trampling the rights and freedoms of his American subjects, Louis XVI 'acknowledged the independence of the United States' (on 14 March 1778) and offered the fledgling nation military assistance.⁶³

The Revolution of America, then, bears all the hallmarks of the increasingly vitriolic pamphlet war that had erupted between the British imperialists and the friends of America. Its choice of topic (the American crisis), choice of enemies (George III, Parliament and despotism) and choice of audience (Radical Whigs and Dissenters) suggest that the text had been prepared for what was a domestic, British debate about the future of the empire. Thomas Paine, for one, immediately had his doubts about the pamphlet's authenticity. In his published response to the pamphlet, 'A Letter Addressed to the Abbe Raynal', Paine noted that there were 'declarations and sentiments in the Abbe's piece' which he had not expected to find there. This could only mean, he volunteered, that, despite the translator's efforts 'to gloss over the embezzlement with professions of patriotism', the text had in fact been purloined from Raynal's printer before the author had had a chance to revise it — merely 'for the sake of profiting by the sale of a new and popular work'.⁶⁴ In fact, it was the Abbé Raynal himself who had contributed to the confusion surrounding the pamphlet's authorship. For in 1780, when the Revolutionary War was still very much in the balance, he had articulated the controversial essay question for the Lyons *concours académique* that put the issue of the viability of the New World at the very centre of the Enlightenment project: 'Has the discovery of America been useful or hurtful to mankind? If advantages have resulted from it, what are the means to preserve and increase them? If disadvantages, what are the means to remedy them?'⁶⁵ To

⁶² Ibid., pp. 85, 43.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 166, 136.

⁶⁴ Thomas Paine, 'A Letter Addressed to the Abbe Raynal on the Affairs of North-America. In Which the Mistakes in the Abbe's Account of the Revolution of America Are Corrected and Cleared up' (Philadelphia, Printed: London, Reprinted, for C. Dilly, 1782), pp. vii, v, vi.

⁶⁵ Abbé Raynal, 'Advertisement from the Academy of Sciences, Polite Literature, and Arts, at Lyons', in [Raynal?], *The Revolution of America*, p. xi.

all intents and purposes *The Revolution of America* was the submission of an author firmly positioned on the American side of the debate.

However, in the final analysis, it is immaterial to what extent Raynal authored *The Revolution of America*. What is of key historical significance is the question he raised in the call for papers he drew up for the Academy of Lyons: What was the fundamental meaning of the discovery and settlement of America for Europe's past and future? Although the question had been raised and debated for four centuries, it had never before been as pertinent as in 1780. When the American colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence and defied the most powerful nation on earth, they had unleashed a socio-political experiment that was as unique as it was ~~improbable~~. If successful, this bold assertion of liberty would split the British Empire in half. By 1780 the American crisis had reached a critical phase, even as the empire was facing questions about the legitimacy of British rule in India, claims for independence in Ireland, and the inauguration of an 'age of reform' at home.⁶⁶ At a time when Britain's rivals, France and Spain, were eager to re-establish themselves at the top of the colonial hierarchy, the outcome of America's bid for independence could well determine the political, economic and moral future of the Old World. The meaning of 'America' had never mattered so much to so many in Europe.

→ implausible

⁶⁶ See R. Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain, 1780-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 7.