Colonialism and the Emergence of Racial Theories

Renato G. Mazzolini

From the fifteenth century, increasing numbers of west Europeans either travelled along the coasts of Africa, India and the Far East to explore and trade, or migrated to the new-found lands in the Americas and the Pacific to conquer, colonize and evangelize. These activities involved the exchange of goods and the exploitation of the territories where the Europeans settled. The people they encountered were subjugated and often decimated by wars, epidemics and the destruction of their former ways of life. In their endeavour to render the lands acquired in the Americas economically fruitful, the Spaniards and Portuguese, and later the British, French, Dutch, Danes and Swedes, imported from West Africa a labour force they thought suited to those new environments. From the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, sub-Saharan Africans were subjected to a capitalist trade which produced one of the largest forced migrations in history, as well as a new phenomenon: colour-based slavery, which was unlike previous systems of slavery in the Mediterranean world.¹

When western European scholars of the sixteenth century learned about the peoples encountered by travellers, they tried to explain their differences in appearance, habits and temperament by appealing not to racial theories, which did not yet exist, but to ancient theories of climate and of constitution.² Doubts arose, however, over the explanatory power of those theories when scholars noticed that the skin colours of the inhabitants of Africa and America at the same latitude did not correspond. The climatic theory also could not explain the presence among the people of the Congo of very white individuals who were soon named albinos. More generally, the seventeenth-century development of a mechanistic conception of bodily functions called into question the constitutional theory of the four humours.³ Even the religious belief in the original

unity of the human species, postulated by the book of Genesis, was thrown into doubt, owing to the difficulty of explaining how the inhabitants of America had arrived there. Could they have originated from a different Adam? This speculation led some scholars to reinterpret Genesis and to question the unity of humankind.

In the past fifty years, historians of colonialism and race have studied the dispossession and exploitation of indigenous peoples by west Europeans, and paid attention to colonial sexual relations. The expansion of Europe was not only a matter of Christianity and commerce, it was also a matter of copulation and concubinage. While the policies of the colonial powers generally prevented the intermixture of populations, mixing is well documented for Latin America and colonial Virginia. The low social status to which the offspring of those ‘mixtures’ were relegated shows the power that their colonizers established over the indigenous people and the imported slaves.

This chapter addresses four major questions rarely discussed by colonial historians, but much debated by European scholars of the period. They concerned human generation, reproduction and descent and were influential both in shaping what was then called the ‘natural history of man’, our physical anthropology, and in developing the racial theories of the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth. Special attention will be given to the inheritance of skin pigmentation, since skin colour was the main physical trait of the peoples mentioned by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travellers. It was used to establish rank as well as legal and religious rights within the colonies, and by natural historians in Europe to classify human groups.

Who Generated the Inhabitants of the Americas?

The doctrine of the unity of the human species, reinforced by the teachings of the late scholastics, was based on Genesis, which all Christians considered to be revealed truth. After the human nature of the inhabitants of the New World had been established in heated controversy among Spanish theologians and jurists, the main challenge was to explain their descent and migration from the Old World, where all men had descended from the second Adam, Noah. According to Spanish friars of the sixteenth century, who saw analogies with Jewish practices in Aztec religion, the Indians descended from the Lost

---

6 Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire*, p. 364.
Tribe of Israel. However, some scholars had different opinions, and maintained that the inhabitants of the New World must have come 'from a different Adam'. Amerindians were difficult to fit into the framework of biblical revelation. In a devastating analysis of Genesis in 1655, the French theologian Isaac La Peyrère formulated a theory of twofold creation, one of all men, the so-called pre-Adamites, who were unstained by original sin, and one of Adam, the progenitor of the Jewish people alone. He maintained that Amerindians were pre-Adamites who had survived the Great Flood. Notwithstanding harsh criticism by Protestants and Catholics alike, La Peyrère's theory gained support among some scholars, who considered both Amerindians and black Africans to be pre-Adamites.\(^7\) This view of the origin of the human species undermined canonical beliefs and reinforced the idea that there might exist a humankind parallel with, and alien to, the one elected by God and the sole object of sacred history. In everyday colonial life this notion justified subjugation, exploitation and segregation on the grounds of difference in origin and descent.

**Why Are the Ethiopians Black?**

The question ‘Why are the Ethiopians black?’ began to be investigated systematically during the seventeenth century. Numerous dissections of the bodies of sub-Saharan Africans were performed, and in 1677 the Dutch physician Johannes Pechlin, following a conjecture put forward in 1665 by his Italian colleague Marcello Malpighi, demonstrated that the ‘black pigment’ (that is, granules of melanin) was contained in what is now called the Malpighian layer of the epidermis. But what caused this pigment? Some authors distinguished between theological and physical causes. Those who advocated the former identified black people either as descendants of Ham’s son, Canaan, who had become black as a consequence of Noah’s curse, or as descendants of Cain who had inherited the mark (interpreted as blackness) impressed upon him by God, and had survived the Great Flood. Although no textual evidence supported these interpretations, they were used to legitimize slavery. The physical causes examined were: climate, sperm, bile, blood, the conditioning of the fetus by the mother’s imagination, chemical substances purportedly produced by the body and not excreted through respiration, the nervous fluid and the ancient disease leprosy.

Notwithstanding the variety of explanations put forward, most theories agreed that blacks begot blacks, and whites begot whites, and attributed this fact to seminal matter. As the Portuguese traveller Odoardo Lopes put it in the late sixteenth century, the black colour ‘did not spring from the heate of the Sunne, but from the nature of the seede’.\(^8\) Several decades later, the English physician Thomas Browne added that if black


people were ‘transplanted’ to other climates they would still preserve ‘their hue both in
themselves, and also their generations; except they mixe with different complexions’. He
considered ‘the tincture of the skin as a spermatical part traduced from father unto son,
so that they which are strangers contract it not.’ As late as 1768, when arguing against
the climatic theory put forward in 1749 by the naturalist Buffon, the philosophe Voltaire
reiterated that black people ‘transplanted’ from Africa to the Americas always ‘generat-
ed blacks like themselves’, since their blackness was ‘inherent and specific.’

Why Do Black Couples Sometimes Beget White Children?

Travellers and missionaries, however, reported a puzzling phenomenon: cases in the
Congo of black couples begetting white children. This also happened on several planta-
tions from which reports were sent to the Académie royale des sciences in Paris and the
Royal Society in London. Scholars were incredulous. Some thought that those children
had been generated by a mixed white and black couple; others that the children had
returned to the original colour of mankind, which was assumed to be white. The per-
plexity grew when travellers reported the same phenomenon in India, in the Moluccan
Islands and among the Cuna Indians of the Panama Isthmus. ‘In Spain we call them
Albinos’, wrote the historian Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola in 1609, adding that
they were as white as Germans and had poor eyesight.

The main discussion of albinos took place in Paris after Mapondé, a 4-year-old
child from Cabinda (Angola), was shown in 1744 at the Académie royale and in several
Parisian homes (Fig. 25.1). Some of the most influential intellectuals provided descrip-
tions, including the natural philosopher Pierre Louis de Maupertuis in the anonymous
Dissertation physique à l’occasion du nègre blanc (Physical dissertation occasioned by
the white negro). This constituted the first part of his Vénus physique (Physical Venus)
of 1745, a work which put forward a new theory of generation. He first disputed prefor-
mation theories, which held that embryos already existed preformed in either the eggs
or the animalcules, by pointing out that mulatto skin was neither black nor white, but a
mixture of the two. This suggested that both parents contributed seminal matter to the
process of generation. Then, on the basis of information concerning Senegalese families

9 Thomas Browne, Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or, Enquiries into very many received Tenents, and commonly
11 Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola, Conquista de las Islas Malucas al Rey Felipe III (Madrid, 1609), p. 71.
12 Renato G. Mazzolini, ‘Albinos, Leucoæthiopes, Dondos, Kakerlakken: Sulla storia dell’albinismo dal 1609
al 1812; in Giuseppe Olmi and Giuseppe Papagno (eds.), La natura e il corpo: Studi in memoria di Attilio
Zanca (Florence, 2006), pp. 161–204.
13 Maupertuis, Vénus physique (1745), p. 75; see also Nick Hopwood, ‘The Keywords “Generation” and
into which albino children had been born, Maupertuis suggested that albinism could be inherited even if only one ancestor had been albino. He also endorsed the hypothesis of a certain Monsieur du Mas who had long lived in the Far East and surmised (correctly) that albinism is a disorder of the Malpighian layer of the skin.

In several works, Voltaire maintained that albinos constituted a distinct species, since he could not conceive that blacks might generate whites, while the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus classified them as troglodytes. It was only in 1776 that the Swiss naturalist Marc-Théodore Bourrit acknowledged that albinos existed in Europe as well.
In 1784, by dissecting the eyes and skin of an albino man who had died in Milan’s Ospedale Maggiore, the eye surgeon Francesco Buzzi established that albinos did not constitute ‘a specific species’, and that du Mas had been right. In 1786 the Göttingen professor of medicine and natural history, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, reached a similar conclusion by a complex induction based on dissection of the eyes of albino rabbits. The only substantial difference between the two authors was that Blumenbach held albinism to be hereditary, while Buzzi did not. In later works Blumenbach insisted that albinos were ‘patients’, and that albinism was further proof of the unity of the human species since it occurred all over the world.\(^{14}\) The enormously influential ideas of Voltaire and Linnaeus were thus defeated, and the English surgeon William Lawrence could write in 1819: ‘So far is this variety from being peculiar to the Negro, or even to the torrid zone, that there is no race of men, nor any part of the globe, in which it may not occur.’\(^{15}\)

**Classifying Humans by Colour**

The classification of human groups by their skin colour characterized the first natural histories of man published during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\(^{16}\) But selection of the colours was slow and often controversial. Skin colour was the main physical trait mentioned by travellers. It was also one of the markers used in the Mediterranean by merchants to describe the slaves they intended to sell, and by slave owners as an aid to identification when they ran away. The surprising feature of both kinds of descriptions is that the terminology used to indicate the various nuances of skin pigmentation was extremely rich. It is documented by the collection of travel accounts published in many editions by the Italian geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio during the second half of the sixteenth century.\(^{17}\) Note, however, that the term ‘yellow’ was not used to describe the hue of the Chinese; this was a later invention.\(^{18}\)

European intellectuals had long grasped that humans exhibit differences in skin pigmentation as, after all, was apparent in Europe itself. They tended to codify such differences into categories based on colour. But the variety of terms used to describe skin colour, and the different ways in which they were employed, reveals much about the way these differences were perceived and understood.

differences in broad chromatic categories. As the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno wrote in 1590: ‘The species of men are of many colours: the black progeny of the Ethiopians, and the red offspring of America.’ The description of Amerindians as ‘red’ was a generalization drawn from selected sources. It became customary only during the second half of the eighteenth century, but was rejected by several scholars who compared the untanned arm of a north American Indian with their own.

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the process of codifying differences into broader chromatic categories, by combining the geographical distributions of populations and their supposed complexions, temperaments and constitutions, took paradigmatic form in the classification drawn up by Linnaeus in the tenth edition of his *Systema naturae* (1758–9), where the varieties of the human species were classified thus:

- **American** red, choleric, erect.
- **European** white, sanguine, brawny.
- **Asiatic** sallow, melancholy, rigid.
- **African** black, phlegmatic, relaxed.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant propounded a similar scheme in a text of 1775, revised in 1777. He adopted Buffon’s rule to define a species, that is, fertile progeny. Kant postulated that the skin colour of the original human stock was ‘white of brunette colour’, and that as humans had migrated to different climates they had adapted by developing hereditary characters from predispositions unified in the original stock. Kant thus distinguished four races of men:

- **First race** Noble blond (northern Europe) from humid cold.
- **Second race** Copper-red (America) from dry cold.
- **Third race** Black (Senegambia) from humid heat.
- **Fourth race** Olive-yellow (Indians) from dry heat.

### Classifying Human Mixtures

The notion of ‘species of men’, ‘varieties of men’ or ‘races of men’ emerged mainly from the combination of skin colour with geographical distribution. But what happened

---

when different populations mixed and had offspring? Among European scholars interested in the natural history of man, this question became a topic of investigation only during the second half of the eighteenth century, although it had been an administrative problem for the Spaniards and the Portuguese from the beginning of their conquests.

In 1533 the Spanish Crown ordered that the fathers of the many abandoned natural (illegitimate) children, or ‘mestizos’, born from intimate relations between Castilians and Indian women, be found and compelled to support their offspring. A scandalized Jesuit, Nicola Lancilotto, wrote to the founder of the society, Ignatius Loyola, in 1550 concerning the licentiousness of Portuguese men in India: ‘There are innumerable Portuguese who buy droves of girls and sleep with all of them, and subsequently sell them.’ A manuscript census, probably written between 1550 and 1570, shows that the archbishopric of Mexico comprised 9,495 Spaniards, 10,593 black slaves, 2,000 ‘mestizos’ and 1,050 ‘mulattoes’. The accuracy of the figures may be questioned, but they do show an extraordinary increase in the slave population and in the number of ‘hybrids’, as they were sometimes called, which is documented in many other sources. The census also shows that the inhabitants of the region were subdivided into categories: Spaniards, black slaves, mestizos and mulattoes.

In 1580 another Italian Jesuit, Alessandro Valignano, classified the inhabitants of Portuguese India in a similar way. For the Portuguese, as for the Spaniards, the question was whether countrymen born abroad, as well as ‘half-breeds’, could be admitted into religious orders. By the end of the sixteenth century, the general answer was ‘no’, but the debate continued through the seventeenth century.

The Spanish colonial government in Central and South America and the Catholic church – which was responsible for baptisms and marriages – gradually established an administrative system known as the ‘sistema de castas’. This consisted in the classification of a newborn child on the basis of his or her ancestry. The terminology used by this system had local variations, but this did not alter its importance, for it allowed or precluded access to certain careers and to religious orders depending on membership of a given caste. In his Politica Indiana, published in 1647, the jurist Juan de Solórzano Pereira discussed the tensions within the caste system and expressed a much contested view: that the ‘criollos’, individuals born in America but of Spanish ancestry, had the same rights as the ‘Españoles’ residing in America but born in Spain. They too, he added, could pursue ecclesiastical careers. ‘Mestizos’ and ‘mulatos’ also had the same right of

access as Spaniards to offices and religious orders provided they were the offspring of a legitimate marriage. But they seldom were. He observed that the number of illegitimate mestizos and mulatos was steadily increasing, and that they were potentially dangerous because they refused to work in the mines like the poor ‘Indios’, thus aggravating the conditions of the latter. Illegitimate mestizos and mulatos were not to be privileged in any way, because they were the offspring of lust and were themselves vicious: an evaluation that endured for centuries.\(^{28}\)

The caste system was illustrated, from the late seventeenth century, in numerous cycles of paintings produced in Mexico.\(^{29}\) They usually began with a Spanish man and an Indian woman, a Spanish man and a black woman, and an Indian man and a black woman, and depicted four successive ‘crosses’ from each pair, some of which are shown in Fig. 25.2. Other paintings showed more complex crosses, such as that producing a ‘coyote’, a person with Indian, African and European blood in his or her veins. These paintings also reveal a parallel between social structure and skin colour: the higher a Spaniard rose in the social hierarchy, the whiter the complexion of his wife had to be. Unfortunately, these Mexican cycles of paintings were unknown to non-Iberian scholars of the eighteenth century, because, with very few exceptions, foreigners were forbidden to travel to Central and South America. But the system was not exclusive to Spanish America, for it was maintained or adopted in a less formalized way also in the British and French West Indies.\(^{30}\)

Non-Iberian scholars came to know the Spanish caste system mainly through the 1758 French translation of a book by the Jesuit José Gumilla, who provided the following scheme for white–black crosses:

1. European × negra [black] → mulata, 2/4 from each parent;
2. European × mulata → quarterona, 1/4 of mulata;
3. European × quarterona → octavona, 1/8 of mulata;
4. European × octavona → puchuela, completely white.\(^{31}\)

Gumilla knew that crosses were more complex, but did not elaborate because his purpose was to maintain that, according to the Catholic church, ‘quarterones’ and ‘octavones’ must be considered ‘blancos’ (white), and only the Indios and mestizos newly converted.

Building on Gumilla, Blumenbach, a strenous supporter of the unity of the human species, described four generations of human mixed breeds when discussing the question of pigmentation in his epoch-making doctoral dissertation *De generis humani*

\(^{29}\) Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, CT, 2004).
Figure 25.2 Las castas, anonymous late eighteenth-century paintings: (a) From Spanish Man and Negro Woman a Mulatto Woman, (b) From Spanish Man and Mulatto Woman a Morisco, or quarteron, (c) From Spanish Man and Morisco Woman an Albino, (d) From Spanish Man and Albino Woman a Negro Throwback. Each panel 36 × 48 cm. © Museo de América, Madrid.
*varietate nativa* (On the natural varieties of mankind) of 1775. He drew the conclusion that whatever might be the cause of human skin colour, the intermixture of human varieties demonstrated that colour was changeable and could never be considered a feature constituting a diversity of species.

In an influential essay of 1777, Buffon described four mixed generations of white and black people, mainly in relation to skin colour. This was his simplified scheme of ‘four generations mixed in order to make the colour of Negroes disappear’:

1. White × black → mulatto, half white, half black;
2. White × mulatto → quarteron, tanned;
3. White × quarteron → octavon, less tanned than the quarteron;
4. White × octavon → a perfectly white boy or girl.

The inverse scheme demonstrated how ‘to blacken whites’:

1. Black × white → mulatto with long hair;
2. Black × mulatto → quarteron, 3/4 black and 1/4 white;
3. Black × quarteron → octavon, 7/8 black and 1/8 white;
4. Black × octavon → a perfectly black boy or girl.

Yet Kant, in his last attempt to clarify his notion of race, an essay of 1788, argued that Nature seemed ‘to permit the melting together’ of races, but not ‘to favour it, since thereby the creature becomes fit for several climates but not suited to any one of them to the degree achieved by the first adaptation to it’. Races differed from varieties because only their characters were unfailingly hereditary.

Non-Iberian scholars learned about the social system in which this population ‘interbreeding’ was embedded only in 1811 when Alexander von Humboldt published his *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne* (Political essay on the Kingdom of New Spain). In Mexico and Cuba, Humboldt studied the social effects of the caste system, describing Mexico as a country where inequality reigned: all economic and political power was in the hands of the whites, and the *Indios* and coloured *castas* did all the hard manual labour. He concluded that they would never progress given the conditions of absolute inequality in which they were forced to live. Much the same could have been concluded of other countries.

---

During the early history of colonial Virginia, for instance, marriages of white men and Indian women were not uncommon. Owing to the imbalance of the sexes among Europeans, these were seen at times as a strategy for attaining a peaceful coexistence with the natives and as a means to favour colonialism. White female servants were also known to marry black men. However, after the extermination of even peaceful Indians during the rebellion of 1676, following the example of Barbados, the main labour force in Virginia changed: white indentured servants were replaced by increasing numbers of black slaves. On the grounds of their 'abominable mixture and spurious issue', marriages of whites with blacks, mulattoes or Indians were outlawed in 1691. Children were to take the status of their mother. A white mother giving birth to a mulatto child was severely fined, but the child was free. Since slaves were considered property, the offspring of a black or mulatto slave woman and a white man took the status of the mother and was therefore a slave. Considering the possibility of emancipating a slave, Thomas Jefferson, the former Governor of Virginia, wrote in 1787: 'When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture', that is, sent away, lest his blood 'stain' that of his master. In Virginia's plantations, segregationist practices were imposed. But sexual relations still occurred: planters continued to assert their rights to sexual property even over their own offspring.

Conclusion

Racial theories and racial classifications were mainly elaborated not in the colonies, but by west European scholars who seldom left their own shores. Only at the end of the eighteenth century were racial theories imported to flourish in the United States, where the question of colour was pre-eminent in daily life. But the practices of what we now call 'racism' – a twentieth-century coinage – were fully developed in the colonies from the sixteenth century onwards without having a proper name.

Between the end of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, as the movement for abolition of the slave trade and of slavery won its first victories in England, the term 'race' slowly replaced 'variety'. Most authors conceived races as stable natural entities, and the inheritance of skin pigmentation provided the main phenomenon on which their conceptions were based. However, they no longer distinguished races by skin colour alone; they did so also by hair type and Petrus Camper's facial angle, which measured the projection of the upper jaw and teeth, as well as the shapes of skull and pelvis and other canons of European aesthetics, intellectual capacity, moral


virtues and vices, political practices and level of civilization. By the 1850s, belief in a common origin of all mankind (monogenesis) was giving way to that in the independent origins of human races from several ancestors (polygenesis). Furthermore, during the 1820s, historians used the concepts of race and racial struggle to explain great European historical events; they interpreted the French Revolution as a clash between descendants of the Franks and of the Gauls. Because of its scientific appeal, race replaced religion in creating clear-cut barriers between the populations of an earth dominated by whites. In the preface to his *Races of Men*, the Scottish anatomist Robert Knox declared in 1850: ‘Race is everything: literature, science, art, in a word, civilization, depend on it.’ A new ideology was born.

But what about the offspring of those now called ‘hybrids’, ‘racial crossings’ or ‘interracial mixtures’? Lawrence, a declared supporter of the unity of the human species, wrote in 1819: ‘the intellectual and moral character of the Europeans is deteriorated by the mixture of black or red blood: while, on the other hand, an infusion of white blood tends in an equal degree to improve and ennoble the qualities of the dark varieties’. In British and French colonies, people of mixed parentage were excluded from higher military and government offices, just as the Spaniards and the Portuguese had excluded them from religious orders at the end of the sixteenth century. Testifying to this continuity of exclusion are the many sources which portray ‘half-breeds’ as trouble-makers and individuals torn between different cultures and loyalties: a threat to order and empire. In the long run, however, and notwithstanding the tragedies they suffered, mixed-race people may well be considered the lasting but unintentional contribution of colonialism to proving the unity of the human species, and a visible refutation of the notion of race as a stable natural entity.

37 Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology*, p. 300.