



Racial Boundaries in Europe in the Eighteenth Century: A Historiographic Perspective

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Abstract

The historiography of race in Europe is almost silent about the hardening of racial boundaries in the eighteenth century. Most of the literature on the concept of race in the twenty-first century states that in the eighteenth century, Europe became increasingly obsessed with racial categories, but these writings do not explore the reasons that made this possible. This paper seeks to examine the literature to address this conundrum. I contend that together with gender and sex, race became a category for building social hierarchies when Europe increasingly became urbanized and cosmopolitan with a considerable non-European population in the eighteenth century. Science was used to create racial lines and to deepen sexual differences even in the wake of calls for equality for all.

Keywords: *Eighteenth Century; Race, Europe; Europe; Boundaries*

Introduction

The concept of “race” has been one of the most complex and most queried by scholars. Its *longue durée* history has received shifting perspectives from the fifteenth century to the present. Tracing the epistemological foundation of race in Europe, Staffan Müller-Wille in his article, “*Race and History: Comments from an Epistemological point of view*” (2014), noticed that the historiography of race is normally framed by two discontinuities. One that begins the story by emphasizing race as an invention by European naturalists and anthropologists, and the other that ends the story by advocating the demise of race as a viable biological concept after World War II replacing it with population-genetic conceptions of human diversity. Not satisfied with these two frameworks, he suggests a third framework that views race as a mental tool.¹ Although Müller Wille’s analysis is helpful, his focus was on epistemology of race rather than its ontology. I assert that for an in-depth historiography, both perspectives are very important. But this is a staggering task to accomplish since Europe has an immense and multifarious history. One can only concentrate on an aspect of this rich history. This paper explores the literature on the

¹ Staffan Müller-Wille, “Race and history: Comments from an epistemological point of view,” *Science, technology, & human values* 39, no. 4 (2014): 597.

historiography of Europe in the eighteenth century seeking to unearth reasons for the hardening of racial boundaries in that century as compared to earlier centuries.

Silvia Sebastiani in *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and Limits of Progress* (2013) highlighted aspects of the historiography of Europe. He asserts that the interest in the New World, the salvage and the problematic relationship between Europe and otherness increased significantly in the postcolonial context of the 1950s. This started with UNESCO publication in 1952 of *Race et histoire* by Claude Levi- Strauss and was also followed by *Tristes tropiques* in 1955. In the same year, Antonello Gerbi published *The Dispute of the New World* in which he investigated the process of self-recognition of European consciousness in the face of otherness. For Sebastiani, the two authors, employing diverse methodologies, approaches and perspectives, portrayed a continuity between the discovery of the New World and the emergence of the Third World. This view became crucial references for research into the process of engagement between Europe and the non-Europe. So, from the 1970s, historiographical debate began to focus on the race/ Enlightenment pairing seeking to contrast literature that did not see the presence of any racist ideas in the intellectual universe of the Enlightenment.²

Sebastiani continues that among the pioneering work in the English- speaking world was Richard Popkin, who argued that the transformation of Enlightenment humanism was rather translated into racial hierarchies, depending on three factors: the biblical idea of man as made in the image of God to the process of secularization, the movement from naturalist theories to the description of difference between human types based on ideology and moral terms and the question of justification of slavery. This followed after some few years with George Mosse's *Towards the Final Solution*, in which he argued unequivocally that the eighteenth-century Europe had been the cradle of modern racism. Later on, the relationship between the idea of race and slavery was confirmed in the works of Giuliano Gliozzi who posited that a colonial ideology had always been part of the European intellectual attitudes towards non-Europeans.³ Accordingly, the Enlightenment discourse of man affirmed and simultaneously denied the unity of humankind. This paradox became pervasive in the science of man in the eighteenth century. This was witnessed in Michele Duchet's analysis about the origins of science of man in the early 1970s as well as other literature that followed in the milieu of racial boundaries.

Nancy Stepan in her monograph, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800-1960* (1982) contends that by the late eighteenth century, the two most important factors that led to the obsession of race in the European mind were the existence of black slavery in the colonies of Europe and the emergence of the modern, biological and human sciences. She elucidates that on the one hand, racial slavery of blacks since the fifteenth century led to the explosion of black population in Europe. By the eighteenth century, blackness came to be associated negatively with degraded conditions of slavery and 'race' increasingly became a primary form of self and group identification. On the other hand, the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century abolition movement provided another context for the emergence of science for the human race.

Although the abolition movement was to stage a moral protest against enslavement, the religious and moral foundation was contested between the years of 1775 and 1833. Within this period and beyond, the ethical theory that was to emphasize equality gave way for anatomy to reopen Aristotle's question of the 'natural' slave. The underlining effect was that, nature was used by the anti-abolitionists and later, the abolitionists to fatally decide what was to be a moral issue.⁴ Although Stepan's focus was the racialization of science in the nineteenth century, her background information in the introduction is important in connecting aspects of race in the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century and in assessing the

² Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: race, gender, and the limits of progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

³ Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 12.

⁴ Nancy Stepan, *Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), xii-xiii.

hardening of racial boundaries in Europe. Other works that focused on the eighteenth century gave further details.

Racial Theories, by Michael Banton, first published in 1987, further opened up the scope from focus on race and science to include other disciplines. He explored how race as a variable concept served in a myriad of disciplines including the social sciences. He divided the history of race into three phases: a first phase (before the eighteenth century), where race was loosely used without any systematic scheme of reference; a second, in the eighteenth century, during which the very idea of race assumed a permanent category and a third, where it was superseded by population genetics. Banton contends that, in their attempt to account for the difference between humans such as skin color, the authors, Bufforn in 1762 and Linnaeus in 1735 sometimes used the word 'race' loosely, to designate a group of people, but race was not essential to any of their explanations.⁵ Thus, Banton argues that these scholars built their categorization on a false assumption. In as much as Banton addresses the conceptualization of race, as Stepan showed, there were also underlying factors that influenced Bufforn and Linnaeus's use of race in such fashion.

Remarkably, other scholars picked this up. In her "The anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science (1990)", Londa Schiebinger primarily focused on the anatomists and their influence on race and sex difference in the eighteenth century. Here, Schiebinger diverts from earlier historians who studied race and sex separately to examine both categories simultaneously by seeking to unearth how social hierarchies structured scientific debates. She asserts that anatomists who were interested in racial differences were also interested in sexual differences.⁶ Hence, race was not studied in isolation. Unlike Banton, who presented race as an 'illusion,' Schiebinger shows how race was enforced by social norms and vice versa. In detailing how science assumed prominence, she contends that the eighteenth century was an era of classification as new and strange specimens of plants, animals, and humans flooded Europe due to voyages of discoveries and empire building.

The major question then, was to unearth how humankind would be divided? In answering this question, Anatomists (mostly European men) although declared their neutrality, wrote natural history from their own points of views. The scientific community was the first to conduct studies seeking similarities between Blacks on the one hand and Women on the other hand, who they regarded as subordinates to European men. For this reason, they most rarely compared black men to white women, but compared these subordinate groups to the standards of white male. Consequently, when they examined physical properties such as color, hair, skull, and beard, they looked for how each group, including Africans and white females they measured, were subordinates to the European male.⁷ Schiebinger observes that one of the ways in which race intersected with sex was that women were often seen to shape racial characteristics.⁸

Continuing her search on social hierarchies and race, Schiebinger notes that one of the ways in which social hierarchies shaped scientific characteristics was in the area of education. In order to ascertain that Women and Blacks lacked native intelligence and proponents of equality, they collected samples of learned European women and learned Africans and gave them equal tasks to find an exceptional Woman or Black who excelled in science. This particular experiment, as well as others of their kind, proved that both European women and Black men have native intelligence as European males, but both of them "were excluded (except for exceptional cases) from the power and prestige of public life. Both were seen as unwelcomed outsiders."⁹ As to the Black woman, neither her race nor her sex,

⁵ Michael Banton, *Racial theories* (U K: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5-8

⁶ Londa Schiebinger, "The Anatomy of Difference: Race and sex in eighteenth-century science." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23, no. 4 (1990): 392- 404.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Schiebinger, "The Anatomy of Difference," 392.

⁹ Schiebinger, "The Anatomy of Difference," 404.

recommended her for reward. Furthermore, based on the concept of race, European women were ranked above minority men. Moreover, the advantage of being male did not outweigh the disadvantages of race in any significant way. By studying racial and sexual variations in the skeleton, Soemmerring stated explicitly that European men, and more specifically, the Germans, were the standard of excellence. Similarly, by studying sex and race, Anatomists used European male as the standard of excellence.¹⁰

Another important revelation Schienbinger points out is the influence of the broader political developments on the study of women and blacks. Like Stepan and Sebastiani, Schienbinger reiterates the ambivalence created out of the Enlightenment's notion that all men are by nature equal. She argues that, in the late eighteenth century, women and minorities living in Europe were believed to have enjoyed privileges reserved for elite European males because of notions of equality, but this was short-lived. For instance, in France and its colonies, all freemen of color were awarded full legal rights in 1791. So, slavery was abolished in 1794 only to be reinstated in 1802. Consequently, the 1791 "Declaration of the Rights of Woman" did not materialize as expected. The right of the African and Woman to enjoy equality was taken as a matter of anatomy rather than ethics. Schienbinger concludes that, although anatomists declared their neutrality, their project was framed by social concerns. "The French National Convention was able to quote directly from anatomy textbooks to justify denying women civil rights."¹¹

Stepan and Schienbinger provide us with salient information for assessing the hardening of racial boundaries in the eighteenth century. What is immediately evident is that race was added to sex and gender as foundations for building social hierarchies when Europe increasingly became urbanized in the eighteenth century. Science was largely used to create racial lines even in the wake of equality for everyone. Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex...* (1990), though analyzed how gender hierarchies influenced scientific notion of sex differentiation, also highlighted some aspects of the influence of science on racial boundaries. He notes that biological research had considerable misogynistic bias on women not only to 'rationalize' or 'legitimize' distinctions of sex, but also of race.¹² He further argues that new theories of the body in the eighteenth century referred to as 'Scientific race' were either to demonstrate separate creation of various races (polygenesis) or simply to document biological differences simultaneously, when movement towards "natural equality" was at its peak. At this period, there were claims that negroes had stronger coarser nerves than Europeans because they had smaller brains, and such facts showed that they had inferior cultures. At the same time, some also held the view that, the uterus naturally disposed women towards domesticity.¹³

Besides her article in 1990, Schienbinger published her book: *Nature's Body: Gender and the Making of Modern Science* (1993), to elaborate on her article and to understand how gender ideals molded science and how science shaped and certified gender ideals. In addition, she sought to identify ways in which sexual differences intersected with racial differences and vice versa. Similarly, as she argued earlier in her previous article, Schienbinger emphasizes that eighteenth century contours of racial and sexual science followed broader political struggles. Firstly, for the purpose of entrenchment of scientific traditions, European medical men centered their studies of race on males. Secondly, new justifications were needed for slavery and for the continuous disenfranchisement of males of different skin color who had equal property holdings. Moreover, when it came to the underlining issue of sexual differences, they focused on European women since the greatest political challenge came from their own country women. Similarly, the question of wielding enormous political power also induced Anatomists unfavorable analogies between Men of the lower classes of their own countries and Blacks.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Schiebinger, "The Anatomy of Difference," 405.

¹² Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (U S A: Harvard University Press, 1990), 21.

¹³ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 155.

¹⁴ Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's body: Gender in the making of modern science* (USA: Beacon Press, 1993), 183.

Furthermore, in the 90s, some scholars decided to extend research of race across time and space to investigate the myriads of ways some scientists came by their racial scientific conclusions. Ivan Hannaford's book *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (1996), is monumental in this realm. He argues that, until after the Reformation, there was very little evidence of a conscious idea of race. However, this view changed between 1684 and 1815. Within three stages, the idea of race emerged in the modern era. The first stage from 1684-1815 saw major writers dealing explicitly with race as an idea of ethnic grouping, rather than as a race or order. In the second stage, 1815-70, the map of Europe was reconstructed into its 'natural origins' while the third stage, 1870- 1914 dealt with the highest point in the idea of race.¹⁵ Hannaford gives comprehensive developments in the idea of race focusing on how the Enlightenment thinkers traded with Greek ideas and how they formulated their own.¹⁶ A central argument Hannaford leaves us with, is the very view that race emerged during the Enlightenment as a result of "the insouciant and deliberate manipulation of texts by scientists and historians abandoning earlier paradigms of descent, generalization, and right order."¹⁷ In this regard, just as Banton, Hannaford views race as a *false idea*. Although other scholars have put it more into the socio-political fabric of the European society, Hannaford gives us a broader view about race and its emergence.

Four years after Hannaford's monumental work, *The Idea of Race* edited by Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott, was published to present the layers of European thinking about race and to examine some of the contemporary debate there off. They argue that, irrespective of the fact that slavery played a role in the general conceptualization of race, the hardening of racial lines in the eighteenth century was not to justify slavery. For the authors, the rigorous scientific concept of Europe in the late eighteenth century was due to an obsession with classification and an obsession with the causes of Black skin.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the Scientists, mostly Anatomists, many more Philosophers and Social Scientists took turns to document their views on race especially in the eighteenth century, before its further development in the 19th century. For example, Immanuel Kant's essay "Of the Different Human Races" in 1775, argued against the inherited polygenesis and showed the concept of race as a valuable way to organize the many materials about distant peoples who were new to European scholars. G. W. F. Hegel later on in his lectures on the Philosophy of History, also declared his support for colonialism, which Kant had some reservations for. Hegel argued that World History began with the Caucasians. Other races either had provisional or structural role or no role as in the case of Africans.¹⁹ Bernasconi and Lott continued to assert that many of these Enlightenment Philosophers neither travelled nor knew much about many other people elsewhere. Therefore, their views on race and sex difference were based on missionary documentations and happenings in Europe. In this way, the eighteenth century promoted the solidification of the concept of race as a category of differentiation. In tracing the development of the concept of race, the anthology doubted whether to associate Francois Bernier with the scientific concept of race although he is thought of as the first to use the term as a distinctive combination of physical traits. This detail about Bernier is addressed by Pierre Boule. In "Francois Bernier and the Origins of the Modern Concept of Race (2003)", Boule observes that before Bernier's approach to race as broad human categories characterized by distinct physical traits in 1684, the term was conceived differently. As early as the fifteenth century, the term race with many other contemporary borrowings entered French usage from the Italian (*Razza*). It was used at first to loosely define required features in breeding animals that were used for hunting and warfare purposes. Later, it was then applied to humans who possessed similar inherited qualities. With its first application to the kings and his descendants who shared peculiar attributes of the monarch, the term then applied broadly to other old noble families by the 1550s. In other words, the term

¹⁵ Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The history of an idea in the West* (Pennsylvania: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996), 187.

¹⁶ Hannaford, *Race: The history of an idea in the West*, 187-189.

¹⁷ Hannaford, *Race: The history of an idea in the West*, 6.

¹⁸ Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott, eds., *The idea of race* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), viii.

¹⁹ Bernasconi and Lott, eds., *The idea of race*, x.

applied to groups of lineages, but not physically defined differentiations between human groups and species.²⁰

This conception of race changed in the 1680s. Boule contends that, building on his youthful libertarian contacts and his medical training as well as numerous travels, Bernier gave a different conceptualization of race.²¹ Contrary to categorizing race in terms of color, which marked anthropological discourses from the eighteenth century, rather, his perception was more idiocentric, having much to do with personal canons and aesthetics, particularly relating to the type of women he found attractive. Bernier noticed four or five species or races with noticeable differences which gave bases for his justification for a 'New Division of the Earth.' His first race included people from Europe, those living around the Mediterranean coast of Africa, Arabia, Persia, India and Siam. For Boule, Bernier, the use of race in 'New Division of the Earth' diverted from its earlier application to lineage to a fundamental focus on racial distinctions and fixed physical features.²²

Although Bernier's views on race did not openly suggest a hierarchy of the various groupings, detailed descriptions referring to the very ranking from "We Europeans to the Samoeds" and by describing others as "*ugly animals*" suggested a degradation of these groups and their values. Most of the Enlightenment Philosophers and Scientists reinforced these ideas of racial distinctions and fixed physical features through fixed laws of nature and natural science. Boule further asserts that polygenesis is closely linked to eighteenth century racist thought in Europe, as clearly notable in the works of Voltaire. But, prior to that, its growing popularity in the late seventeenth century coincided with the generalization of Black Slavery, linked to the sugar plantation system. Africans were thought of as stupid and if even they could reason, they gained that capacity from their practice with monkeys.²³ Boule also emphasizes the connection between racial boundaries and slavery as well as European explorations and discoveries. But as Bernasconi and Lott noted, race was not to justify slavery because slavery had been in existence since centuries ago.

Silvia Sebastiani's monograph, *The Scottish Enlightenment...* (2013), further explores how race and gender served in the Scottish Enlightenment. As part of her discussion on Enlightenment and race, she argues that distinction between people before the eighteenth century was made in terms of culture rather than nature. There was no need for race to justify slave exploitation. For her, the eighteenth-century views on race by Hume inspired Adam Smith's economic and utilitarian critique of slave labor and thus, did not justify the slave trade in any way.²⁴ Although her perspective sounds compelling, it has ignored many other historiographical works that focused on the eighteenth century, perhaps, because of her focus on the Scottish Enlightenment. Furthermore, her analysis did not trace the shifting trajectories of the term 'race' from its emergence till the eighteenth century and how such shifts were shaped by socio-economic engagements between Europeans and the 'others.' In this scheme of things, her work, thus, did not include how socio-political tendencies affected the deepening of race in Europe as Schienbinger and others of her kind explored.

In 2013, Deborah Cohen published her monograph, *Family Secretes: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* to investigate family secrets of British national who worked in India in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries by virtue of their mixed-race children. She noticed that before the late eighteenth century, what separated India and Britain in the minds of observers were climate and cultures, but not skin color. However, by the late eighteenth century, race played a significant role in shaping relationships. Racial categories hardened to the extent that keeping a white mistress was one thing, but a

²⁰ Pierre Boule, "François Bernier and the origins of the modern concept of race," *The color of liberty: Histories of race in France* (2003): 11.

²¹ Boule, "François Bernier and the origins of the modern concept of race," 17.

²² Boule, "François Bernier and the origins of the modern concept of race," 16.

²³ Boule, "François Bernier and the origins of the modern concept of race," 11-19.

²⁴ Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 13.

“black” was something else. In 1780, Governor-General Lord Cornwallis enacted legislation to prevent mixed-race people from higher reaches of company civil and military service. Thus, by the 1780s, British fathers who were proud of their mix-children in India could not be happy with their children’s success in Britain. British had become inhospitable for these children than they had ever imagined.²⁵ Many other examples of works that included race in Europe within this period concluded that, racial categories hardened in the eighteenth century, but did not give details about the reason(s) for this. Perhaps, they were silent because earlier works had already discussed them.

Similar to Cohen, Jennifer Palmer’s *Intimate Bonds....* (2016), examined household relations across lines of race in France and in its colony, Saint-Domingue. She establishes that intimacy shaped the institution of slavery. Furthermore, family formed a platform to resist racial categorization.²⁶ The household provided place for fluid interracial coexistence through intimate relations. Moving further, she reveals that before the 18th century, race and slave status were not firm, but fluid constructs opened to interpretation and reinvention. Interracial connections through intimate relations paved the way for racial negotiations and explorations. At that time, family and household relationships facilitated the creation of resistance to race as an emerging category. But as she later noted, this was soon to be thwarted in the eighteenth century. There was a shift in racial boundaries in the eighteenth century. Dark skin was increasingly equated with enslaved status. This stiffening of racial lines caused new forms of resistance as well as new norms and hierarchies.²⁷ But similar to Cohen, unfortunately, comprehensive reasons for the change of racial expressions was not fully explored.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has shown that the concept of race and its application in European societies was extensively explored although with many variations. In one of the earlier works, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, Ivan Hannaford presented race as an idea that emerged during the Enlightenment period. But its *longue durée* history extended back into the fifteenth century. Generally, from the fifteenth century to the end of WWII in the modern era, there were three stages in the conception of race in Europe. Examining these shifting trajectories of the concept helps to relate the concept to the socio-political atmosphere within the eighteenth century. The shifting trajectories came largely as a response to the many socio-political events experienced in Europe. Apart from the Scientific Revolution which started in the sixteenth century and was at its peak in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment was one of the most profound in the eighteenth century. There was also the emergence of Philosophers popularly known as the Enlightenment Thinkers who criticized the old regime and advanced new ideas about government, economics, religion and submitted proposals for the improvement of human conditions and the reform of society. They emphasized rationalism, and also promoted the use of science.

Consequently, race was used similar to gender in the eighteenth century. By the sixteenth century, Europe had embarked on explorations into many parts of the world enslaving Africans and other people from other regions and taking them to their colonies and the ‘New World’. Some also ended up in Europe. What is salient here is that as Europeans travelled and encountered many other people, attempts were made to differentiate between those people and themselves. According to Boule, this started with Francois Barnier and his publication in 1684. He and others who followed later on formed their perspectives from the people they met and their perception they had of them. However, in exploring the social and political events that shaped race as a social category in Europe, care must be taken not to address Europe as a monolithic whole. Experiences pertaining to race applied differently across specific

²⁵ Deborah Cohen, *Family secrets: Shame and privacy in modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27-33.

²⁶ Jennifer Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.

²⁷ Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*, 5-6.

states and regions. Nevertheless, the main events that led to early contacts of Europeans with the rest of the world were exploration of discoveries and enslavement. Intimate Bonds and other works that studied transatlantic connections between Europeans and peoples of color from other regions as well as books that explored the subject offered us a glorious opportunity to analyze how racial lines gradually hardened up.

To sum this up, I observe that by the eighteenth century, racial enslavement had brought non-Europeans, especially Black Africans to Europe and its colonies. At the same time, there emerged notions of equality and freedom from the Enlightenment discourse. In order to entrench political and educational opportunities in favor of European men, race and sex were used to set boundaries. While race was used to deny non-Europeans from these opportunities, sex was employed to deny European women from same socio-political opportunities. As Schiebinger showed, instead of treating the ambivalence of equality as an ethical issue, science, especially anatomy, was used to harden racial boundaries and sexual differences. Thus, the eighteenth century saw aspects of anatomical research that were skewed towards racial and sexual differences. It is not out of place that some authors later, loosely described these aspects of science as '*racial science*' and '*sexual science*.'

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