

## A Debate on Natural History and Race

*led by Thomas Jefferson, Comte du Buffon, and Frederick Douglass*

VIRGINIA, 1788. *The opinions advanced by the Comte du Buffon about the inferiority and weaknesses of the American animals in relation to the European ones led Thomas Jefferson to invite the French naturalist to America to personally show him the greatness and strength of the American moose, among other species.*<sup>1</sup>

**JEFFERSON:** Welcome to America, monsieur Buffon! I was very pleased to learn that you had accepted my invitation to come see by yourself the wonders of the New World.

**BUFFON:** *Bonjour!* I kindly appreciate your interest in my work, Mr. Jefferson. I was told about your dissatisfaction concerning my conclusions on the differences between the European and the American species, which I observed to exist in smaller size and to have degenerated in this place.<sup>2</sup>

**JEFFERSON:** Indeed, monsieur Buffon. Please accompany me in this walk around the land of Virginia, which shall change your opinion on the bulk and health of the animals that we possess here.

**BUFFON:** With pleasure, Sir (*they start walking*). Nonetheless, I believe that what is crucial to discuss is the impact of the environmental factors on the differences between varieties of the same

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<sup>1</sup> This is historically inaccurate, since Buffon never traveled to America and the two men never met. However, Jefferson and Buffon were contemporaries and maintained correspondence, and Jefferson was indeed very interested in proving Buffon wrong about his claims on the American species. He even shipped a seven-foot tall moose that was collected in Vermont and sent to Paris so that Buffon could admire its bulk (Keith Thomson, *Jefferson, Buffon, and the Moose*, *American Scientist*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2008). It also makes sense that they meet in Virginia given that this is where Jefferson lived during this time.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

species. My hypothesis concerning why your animals are inferior is that heat is friendly, and moisture adverse to the development of quadrupeds, and I do not see your species challenge this assumption.<sup>3</sup>

**JEFFERSON:** I believe you are not attentively observing this scenery that opens in front of us. Do you see this immense moose? Do you see this strong elk? Do you...

**BUFFON:** Oh, Lord! I see something more – there is an American Indian in that spot. Shall we also make him object of our observations? I believe so, as you might have read in my book *Histoire Naturelle* that I describe how this savage has weaker organs, no vivacity, and no enthusiasm for his female, among other traits.<sup>4</sup>

**JEFFERSON:** Undoubtedly! A lover of Natural History myself, I study gradations in all races of animals, and Man is no exception. However, I also disagree with you on this point. The causes of the differences of the American Indian with respect to the whites are to be found in circumstance, not in nature. For example, when an Indian woman is married to a white trader, she produces as many children as white women.<sup>5</sup>

**BUFFON:** I see that you correctly acknowledge the importance of the external factors in studying the features of the Native Indian. However, look at this other variety of human that I see in this landscape: the Black man. Are then his attributes determined by his condition of slavery instead of his own nature?

**JEFFERSON:** Not quite, monsieur Buffon. In this variety of the human species I have observed no trace of imagination or reason, despite them having had more circumstantial advantages than the Indians.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

(A figure approaches the two men, which turns out to be Frederick Douglass)<sup>7</sup>

**DOUGLASS:** Allow me to interrupt, gentlemen. I was walking in these lands and could not keep from listening to your conversation. Mr. Jefferson, I believe your arguments show a blatant contradiction between the external circumstances of Man and his own nature. How can you justify the distinctions of the Native Indians based on their external circumstances but affirm that the Black man is naturally inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination? Does not his utterly unjust condition of slave explain the “barbarian” image of the Black man?<sup>8</sup>

**BUFFON:** While you, Mr. Jefferson, are right in studying Nature using systematic observation and reason, as I myself have done in my *Histoire Naturelle*, I agree with Mr. Douglass on this point, for one of the premises of my classification of the Natural world is the importance of the surrounding conditions of the species, which others such as Linnaeus very incorrectly miss in their examination.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Jefferson, there is a metaphysical mistake in your approach to the classification of human species regarding the Black man: there are many nuances to be taken into account, Sir, and one cannot judge the whole by a single part.<sup>10</sup> It is circumstances that have prevented the Black to use their full capacities. I myself have studied the inhabitants of West Africa and concluded that they are inferior to other varieties of mankind due to the heat and air of the African tropics.<sup>11</sup>

**JEFFERSON:** I am stating facts, gentlemen. Black men have not been found capable of understanding Euclid or producing poetry. The Native Americans, in worse external conditions, have been seen crafting figures on their pipes, and some slaves of the ancient Romans produced

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<sup>7</sup> This is also historically inaccurate since Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was not a contemporary of Buffon and Jefferson. However, we allow this chronological discrepancy for the sake of creating a fruitful dialogue that contrasts different ideas.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Effect of Circumstances upon the Physical Man*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Buffon notoriously disagreed with the Linnaean binomial system of classification, which he regarded as arbitrary and childish, as explained in his *Histoire Naturelle*.

<sup>10</sup> Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte du Buffon, *Initial Discourse*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Dain, *The Face of Nature*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

great works.<sup>12</sup> These factual observations can only lead us to conclude that the Black man must remain enslaved, for he is not able to operate in society with the white. Their color and faculty differences are seemingly an obstacle to their emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

**DOUGLASS:** Did Banneker not show you with his Almanac that Black men are equally capable of producing intellectual work, if only given a change of circumstances?<sup>14</sup> Have I myself not proven that a once enslaved black man can become a stellar orator? If these facts do not convince a man of the age of the Enlightenment, I then ask you to consider the moral and religious reasons that support black emancipation. You, who defends human rights and equality in society, should understand that human rights must be defended for all and every variety of the human family, because mankind is one. To say that there is no unity among the human species is insulting to the wisdom of God.<sup>15</sup>

Alas, your arguments are nothing but the failure of the rational study of Nature carried out by the Enlightenment – to use observation and reason to define a normative social order.<sup>16</sup> Where did your empathy and compassions go when your cold eye decided to make Man an object of Natural history, depriving him of his humanity? Are we not all children of God? A diverse origin does not disprove a common nature. Mr. Banneker also set forth this argument in the letter than he sent you along with his Almanac – that you, as a Christian, must acknowledge that our Father blessed us all with the same sensations and faculties.<sup>17</sup>

**JEFFERSON:** The question whether God made the blacks a distinct race or if this has happened as a product of time and circumstances, as you two claim, is indifferent to my central argument.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Here Douglass is referring to the famous letter than Benjamin Banneker sent to Thomas Jefferson in 1791, which is considered the beginning of the African American responses to Jefferson's *Notes*, which continued with David Walker, James W. C. Pennington, and James McCune Smith, among others (Britt Rusert, *The Banneker Age: Black Afterlives of Early National Science*. Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Effect of Circumstances upon the Physical Man*, (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Dain, *The Face of Nature* (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Banneker, *Letter to the Secretary of State*. (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

What I observe when I study the Black man with the eyes of a Natural Historian is that the blacks are inferior to the whites both to the body and to the mind. Do you agree that there exist different qualifications in varieties of the same species, and that these shall be considered when organizing our society?

**BUFFON:** You are repeatedly making the same mistake, Mr. Jefferson, which is also the error that Linnaeus made in his classification. You are classifying the different varieties of human species with very simplified and general observations which can be misleading, instead of carrying out a detailed description and study of the characteristics and external factors of each variety. Moreover, physical truths change over time due to their circumstances, but you present a static view on the human varieties.<sup>18</sup>

**DOUGLASS:** But, can you hear yourselves, gentlemen? This debate is ill-posed and set forth in the wrong premises. Do you not see that Natural History ought not to be taken this far? You started your conversation discussing the differences between the moose and the elk, and without blinking an eye you extended these observations to the Indian and the Black people to make claims about how to rule our society. Mr. Jefferson, you are misusing the intellectuality and power of Natural History to turn it a mere tool of your political discourse to justify your racist and classist political structures. You attempt to have a one-to-one debate with Mr. Buffon to present yourself as a *lover of Natural History*, when in fact what you are is a governor of Virginia, and your alleged scientific conclusions are nothing more than disfigured scientific arguments that solely intend to perpetuate the brutal and uncivilized condition of slavery of the Black people in this country.

*(Jefferson leaves the two men in a bitter gesture)*

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce Dain, *The Face of Nature* (Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

**BUFFON:** I feel deceived, Mr. Jefferson. I work only for the advancement of Natural History and do not wish to procure arguments in favor of the permanence of slavery, which perpetuates the degeneracy of humans and animals in America already caused by climate conditions.<sup>19</sup>

*Au revoir! Je dois partir pour le Jardin du Roi.*

*And there Jefferson stood, alone in his lands of Virginia, contemplating the “objects” of Natural History: the moose, the elk, the Native American, and the Black man. For one brief moment he looked into the eyes of the Native American and the Black man and felt a connection with his fellow human companions – the unity of mankind that Douglass had told him about.*

*But then he shook his head and walked to his Monticello plantation packed with slaves.*

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<sup>19</sup> While some of Buffon’s work was used by some texts on racist science, his discussions on the Black man actually included a strong antislavery discourse, as he believed that everywhere in the world people could improve their circumstances and themselves (Bruce Dain, *The Face of Nature*. Cambridge: HS100 Editions, 2015).

## Works Cited

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