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Timothy McInerney

Klincksieck | « Études anglaises »

2013/2 Vol. 66 | pages 250 à 266

ISSN 0014-195X
ISBN 9782252038895

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

https://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-anglaises-2013-2-page-250.htm

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Timothy McINERNEY

Race and nobility in the works of Johann Reinhold and Georg Forster

This article considers the "racial" theories of Johann Reinhold Forster and his son Georg, two naturalists from the Royal Society who, in 1778, made the extraordinary claim that skin colour and physical features were directly linked to social rank. Employing the empirical methodology of Carolus Linnaeus, Johann Reinhold argued that the Tahitian nobility's "civilised" lifestyle rendered them physically similar to Europeans, while the lower classes had degenerated into a darker, inferior "race." Taking a different standpoint, his son Georg claimed that the same racial degeneration was the result of European-style social inequality. Both theorists applied their racialised vision of social rank to a European context, making their research a curious, yet crucial, element in the beginning of racism in the English-speaking world. This study thus explores the links between rank and race in the eighteenth century, above all the European traditions of hereditary nobility and pure blood.

Cet article examine les théories « raciales » de Johann Reinhold Forster et de son fils Georg, tous deux naturalistes et membres de la Royal Society. En 1778, ils avancèrent une idée extraordinaire : la couleur de la peau et les caractéristiques physiques des hommes étaient directement liées au rang social. S'appuyant sur la méthode empirique de Carl von Linné, Johann Reinhold soutenait que le mode de vie « civilisé » de la noblesse tahitienne la rendait physiquement similaire aux Européens, tandis que les classes inférieures avaient dégénéré, se transformant en une « race » inférieure, plus sombre ; quant à son fils Georg, il maintenait que cette même dégénérescence raciale résultait d'une inégalité sociale de type européen. Les deux théoriciens appliquèrent leur vision racialisée des différences de rang social au contexte européen, leur recherche constituant un étape curieuse mais cruciale de l'émergence du racisme dans le monde anglophone. Cet article explore ainsi les liens entre rang et race au XVIIIe siècle et, au premier chef, la tradition européenne de la noblesse héréditaire et du sang bleu.

In 1778, Johann Reinhold Forster, a naturalist from the Royal Society of London, claimed to have identified a caste of hereditary "nobility" in the islands around Tahiti who were lighter-skinned and more European-looking than islanders of inferior rank. A passenger aboard

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Cook's third Pacific voyage in 1772, Forster had catalogued a number of "races" in the Polynesian archipelago, whose physical appearance seemed to be directly influenced by their social station. Georg Forster, Johann's son and companion on the voyage, also wrote an account of the physical effects of social hierarchy in Tahiti, claiming that the physical debilitations resulting from wealth discrepancy would one day lead to revolution in Europe. Johann Reinhold's *Observations Made During a Voyage Round the World* (1778) and Georg's *A Voyage Round the World* (1777), mark a key moment in the beginnings of modern racism. Employing the English word "race" as a synonym for human variety, they interpret the multiplicity of Polynesian culture in terms of a linear hierarchy that naturally ascends towards the white European ideal. In their empirical evaluations of human society, physical features become a gauge of civilisation; the human bodies they observe are readable objects, whose shapes, dimensions and colours are to be compared and contrasted. Yet, the Forsters' identification of a physically superior nobility also illustrates the importance of *civility* in the eighteenth-century discourse of human variety. Their light-skinned Tahitian élite not only showcase the extent to which New World cultures were being explained in terms of Western hierarchy, but also highlight the racialised thought underlying European notions of social rank. Indeed, the Forsters' equation of idealised nobility with physical superiority offers an unusually clear insight into the relationship between the tradition of "pure" noble bloodlines and the major contemporary theories of human variety. Through an analysis of the Forsters' interpretation of élite ranks in the South Pacific, as well as the conclusions they drew for racialised blood purity in Britain itself, this article considers the extent to which noble traditions of linear bloodlines and uncontaminated noble "race" influenced the development of human variety theory, and ultimately, the development of modern race theory.

Civility in Human Taxonomies

When he created the genus *Homo* in 1735, the Forsters' mentor, the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus, became the first Western theorist to define the human being in the language of natural philosophy. In Britain, the Royal Society had exhaustively categorised every plant and animal they could find, "with the single and solitary exception of the natural history of Man himself" (Blumenbach 299). Their hesitancy, indeed, was understandable: the graded orders of natural philosophy were defined by observation—in Linnaeus's terms, an account of "number, figure [shape], proportion, and situation"—but they paled against the theosophical breadth of earthly matter (*Elements* 251). The Great Chain of Being, a Neoplatonist concept that envisaged the full plenitude of existence as a vast ladder from the earthly to the divine, was at its height in Britain during the eighteenth century (Lovejoy 183).

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Humanity was generally considered to be a mid-point on this cosmic chain, since it incorporated both earthly and spiritual essence. Above Man, angels and cosmic bodies rose in a hierarchy towards God, while below Him a chain of animals, plants and minerals decreased in divine essence towards black earth. More importantly, however, not all Men were equal: the various ranks of social hierarchy were as much a reflection of the great spiritual chain as was the order of plants and animals. The monarch was considered closest to God, with each descending social rank standing slightly further down the scale. To define humanity in terms of observation alone, thus, audaciously disregarded the spiritual complexity of Man, and, in the case of the genus *Homo*, ignored the hand of God entirely.

Nevertheless, the empirical definition of mankind in Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* irrevocably introduced humanity into a new plane of reality. To be baptised into the language of natural philosophy was to be redefined according to the rules of observation. Just like the Great Chain, claimed Foucault, "natural history must . . . presuppose . . . [a] continuous network of beings," it is "not merely the discovery of a new object of curiosity; it covers a series of complex operations that introduce the possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations" (162, 172). Indeed, Foucault claimed that the Linnaean model was exemplary of naturalist discourse in the eighteenth century, since his very act of naming was both an act of empirical description and systematic ordering (Foucault 148). The genus *Homo* only existed in so far as it could be observed and compared with other observable entities; it was not ranged on a spiritual chain of being, but on a printed table of empirical comparison. In the *Systema*, Man figured alongside the great apes under the taxon *Anthropomorpha*, or "manlike." Furthermore, it undermined contemporary assumptions of biblical monogenesis by dividing humanity into four different varieties: the *europeanus albescens* (white European), *asiaticus fuscus* (brown Asian), *americanus rubescens* (red American), and *africanus niger* (black African). Though Linnaeus's empirical creature had as many critics as it did admirers (the French naturalist Buffon being the most prolific), the genus *Homo* had opened the floodgates for mankind to be considered as part of the 'continuous network' of natural order—giving the very notion of human variety a fresh theoretical dimension, and paving the way for a new generation of human scientists (Sloan 359).

Once the genus *Homo* became the species *Homo sapiens* in 1758, Linnaeus assessed his four human varieties in terms of *civility*. Like their physical appearance, the varieties' civilisational aspects served to define them against each other. In this way, a certain colour of skin could become concordant with a certain construct of civility. Furthermore, since the *europeanus albescens* was generally assumed to sit atop the varietal hierarchy, the ostensible proximity of a variety's civility to that of Europe further entrenched the notion that physical appearance

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denoted one's level of development. For example, Linnaeus describes the *e.albescens* as tending towards tight-fitting clothes, the *a.fuscus* as opting for loose-fitting clothes, the *a.rubescens* as tending to wear no clothes at all, and the *a.niger* as abandoning clothes in favour of "anointing" himself with grease. Concordantly, the white European tends towards lawful government, the Asian tends towards opinion-based government, the Amerindian is "governed by customs," and the African is "*governed* by caprice" (9). The fact that these diminishing capacities for European civility are attributed to progressively darker skin tones effectively establishes a corporeal hierarchy, transforming cultural preconceptions into pseudo-scientific "fact," while claiming the traditional Western sense of cultural hierarchy as something empirically observable.

Linnaeus was certainly not the only theorist to consider civility as a factor in human variety. In fact, in an age when the inheritance of acquired traits was widely accepted, civility and way of life were obvious explanations for the different physicality of human populations (Davidson 86). Even Buffon, who advocated a purely climatic gradation of individual skin colour, contended that the dark skin of the Hottentots resulted from their custom of body painting in black mud (293). In 1774, Oliver Goldsmith explained that two populations sharing the same climate sometimes differ physically because of "the natives bathing oftener, and leading a more civilised life . . . We find the peasants of every country, who are most exposed to the weather, a shade darker than the higher ranks of people" (72, 89). Similarly, in 1775 the German physician Johann Blumenbach claimed that: "skin varies wonderfully in colour according to the kind of life [a people] lead. The face of the working man . . . exposed to the force of the sun and the weather, differs as much from the cheeks of a delicate female, as the man himself does from the dark American. . .". He even goes on to recount that European anatomists frequently find that "the corpses of the lowest sort of men . . . [come] much nearer to the blackness of the Ethiopians, than to the brilliancy of the higher class of European" (108). The medical community, too, had identified civility or the lack thereof, as a factor in common maladies. In the 1730s, George Cheyne had claimed that the more civilised ranks tended to have finer "nerve fibres," leading to a catalogue of fashionable nervous disorders amongst the élite. David Hume had agreed that not only the nerves, but the: skin, pores, [and] muscles . . . of a day labourer are different [from] those of a man of quality: so are his sentiments actions and manners. The different stations of life influence the whole fabric, external and internal; and these . . . arise [from the] principles of human nature" (111).

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Nobility, Breeding, and the "Incoherence" of Race

"The strength and persistence of racism. . ." claims Margaret Hunt, "actually thrives on incoherence" (341). Indeed, much race scholarship concerns itself with precisely this: the sheer ambiguity of the concept. The idea of "race" as we understand it today—that is to say, the "major groupings of mankind, having in common distinct physical [or ethnic] features"—did not emerge until the end of the eighteenth century, with Blumenbach's assertion of "five human races" first appearing in 1775 ('race, n.6'. *OED Online*; 302-3). Instead, in the early modern period *race* was an extraordinarily broad concept that could be applied to disparate group distinctions. In the eighteenth century, notes Roxann Wheeler, "savagery, civility, and Christianity were the major concepts that embodied racialised understanding" (310). The word *race* could describe tribes, nations, and classes of people, as well as species, varieties and groupings of animals and inanimate matter. It was commonly used as a synonym for *generation*, and could even describe the succession of social station or office: in 1720, the *Independent Whig* referred to a "race of bishops . . . popes . . . and priests," while C.H. Elliot's *Republican Refuted* of 1791 featured a "race or generation of . . . legislators" ("race, n.6". *OED Online*).

The most common signification of *race*, however, was the concept of linear bloodlines, or as Johnson's *Dictionary* defined it, "family ascending" (589). Nobility was, in this respect, a uniquely "racialised" institution in eighteenth-century Britain, fusing political power and social rank with notions of genealogy and inherited corporeal integrity. Noble families presented themselves, so to speak, as an isolated *strain* of humanity, whose carefully cultivated bloodlines were under constant threat from contamination from intermarriage with the non-noble. Even within the British tradition of primogeniture, wherein only the eldest heir could claim an honorific title, family name amply distinguished the noble from the commoner: practically every British peer in the eighteenth century was directly connected to a network of about 400 families, whose illustrious names bespoke magnificent wealth and generations of elitist governance (Wilson 159; Mingay 23; Cannon 24). Bloodline was, ideally, a prerequisite of title; genealogies were essentially a way of speaking the noble body as a historical, cultural, and spiritual receptacle, where the glories of the past could be disseminated, be it symbolically or literally, through the blood. In this regard alone, claimed Hannah Arendt, eighteenth-century nobility promoted a kind of "race-thinking before racism." The "English brand of race-thinking" in particular, she noted, "was almost obsessed with inheritance theories and their modern equivalent, eugenics" (162, 177). Certainly, for eighteenth-century human scientists seeking to prove a point about heredity or the isolation of family lines, European nobility offered an ideal field for comparison. "[Physical] distinctions become more considerable by

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time," remarked the Scottish-educated Philadelphian Samuel Stanhope Smith in 1788,

> . . . after families have held for ages the same stations in society. [Distinctions] are the most conspicuous in those countries in which the laws have made the most complete and permanent division of ranks. What an immense difference exists, between the chiefs and the commonality of the highland clans? If they had been separately found in different countries . . . some writers would have ranged them in different species. (85)

That considered, the racialised dimension of noble bloodlines was nonetheless very different from the biological concepts of modern-day race theory. Noble 'blood' was as much a *spiritual* phenomenon as it was a physical one; it was no less linked to the idea of a great chain of being than was any other rank. Furthermore, the inherent qualities of 'good race' needed to be cultivated and refined by way of an appropriate lifestyle. Indeed, the remarkable eighteenth-century concept of 'breeding' had an extraordinary capacity for summoning the influence of both "hereditarian" and "environmentalist" factors—not to mention spiritual providence and natural order—in order to justify noble superiority (Davidson 1). For instance, one of the most common supporting arguments for the institution of nobility in the early modern period was the fact that nobles were generally born into a lifestyle of spectacular wealth, ample leisure time, and finely tuned education—rendering them relatively unbiased and well-instructed rulers. During the seventeenth century, the churchman Richard Allestree had interpreted this argument as proof of *divine providence*: God had chosen noble families to rule, and had thus provided them with all the tools to do so (8). In 1750, the jurist William Blackstone interpreted the same argument so as to show how the elite ranks of nobility were an essential building block of the *social order*, creating and preserving "that gradual scale of dignity, which proceeds from the peasant to the prince; rising like a pyramid from a broad foundation" (158). Likewise, when David Hume asserted that day labourers are *physically distinct* from men of quality, he had evoked this very same idea of natural equilibrium: "Men cannot live without society," he writes immediately afterwards, "and cannot be associated without government. Government makes a distinction of property, and establishes the different ranks of men (111).

Interestingly, the tradition of noble blood is often even more similar to modern race theory in this tendency towards arbitrary justification than it is in its fixation with pure bloodlines. Using the body as a physical signifier of superiority, both old *race* (family ascending) and the various pre-emptors of new *race* (human variety) depend on their capacity to liberally pluck evidence from different domains in order to support a pre-existing prejudice. "Race is the ultimate trope of difference," claims Henry Louis Gates Jr., "because it is so very arbitrary in its application" (*qtd. in* Hunt 340). Both race and nobility are essentially imaginary

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subdivisions of humanity that can only become real through a vast discourse of overlapping and often contradictory assertions. Like nobility, indeed, race can only function "within particular belief systems . . . it is used metonymically to stand for and magnify the difference between slave and owner, the colonised and the coloniser, indigenous peoples and invaders, serfs and lords, poor and rich" (Hunt 340). All that considered, it is perhaps not so difficult to understand why the noble template of human deference and the varietal theories of human hierarchy had obvious parallels for the Forsters in Tahiti.

Race and Rank in Johann Reinhold Forster's *Observations*

When Carolus Linnaeus discovered that Johann Reinhold Forster had been chosen to replace Joseph Banks on Cook's third voyage to the Pacific, he wrote personally to congratulate him. "Never, I swear, have I known a man more noble and generous", he exclaimed, ". . . you are a natural-born scientist . . . [the king] could not have chosen a more outstanding man" (Forster 1982, 53). Forster, a devout follower of Linnaeus, had started his career as a dissenting minister in his native Germany, where he claimed partial descent from the Lords Forrester of Scotland (Brockhaus 191). In London, he joined the Royal Society and soon became one of its most esteemed members, despite his notoriously bad temper. "From him," his son Georg would later write, the British admiralty

> expected a philosophical history . . . free from prejudice and vulgar error, where human nature should be represented without any adherence to fallacious systems, and upon the principles of general philanthropy; in short, an account written upon a plan which the learned world had not hitherto seen executed. (G. Forster 5-6, *qtd. in* Gray 1)

To be sure, the Forsters did not disappoint. Johann and Georg compiled meticulous catalogues of animal, plant, and human life in the South Pacific that would go on to bring them international recognition (Ackerknecht 84). Setting themselves apart from their contemporaries, they were discriminatingly empirical in their research. Though many theorists had studied the Polynesian languages, for instance, Johann Reinhold drew up vast tables of the vocabulary used in different islands, so he could trace the various linguistic (and thus, he conjectured, historical) influences between them. Both father and son compiled extraordinarily detailed accounts of the cultures they encountered, as well as the modes of interaction between the explorers and the islanders, which became a major influence for later travel literature and ethnographical studies. "Through my famous teacher and friend Georg Forster," wrote the contemporary ethnographer Alexander Von Humboldt, "began a new era of scientific expeditions, the purpose of which is comparative ethnography and geography" (*Kosmos*, Stuttgart, 1874, *qtd. in* Ackerknecht 85).

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Perhaps the greatest documentary influence on Forster was Louis Antoine de Bougainville's Pacific travel account *Voyage autour du Monde* (1771), which Forster had translated into English in 1772. Indeed, it was from Bougainville that Forster borrowed the term *race* to describe the different Tahitian populations. "The inhabitants of Tahiti consist of two races of men," reads Forster's translation of the *Voyage*,

> . . . seemingly mixing without distinction. The first . . . produces men of the greatest size . . . I have never saw [*sic*] men better made and whose limbs were more proportionate: in order to paint a Hercules or a Mars, one could nowhere find such beautiful models. Nothing distinguishes their features from those of the Europeans: and if they were cloathed . . . and were less exposed to the sun at noon, they would be as white as ourselves . . . The second race are of a middle size, have frizzled hair as hard as bristles, and both in colour and features, they differ but little from mulattoes. (249)

Bougainville had also identified a clear system of rank in Polynesia, writing of *les rois* and *les grands*, as well as *les gens du peuple*, *les esclaves,* and *les valets*. Captain Cook, on an previous voyage, had noted a similar hierarchy of "chiefs," "middling sorts," and a "lower class," while his then botanist Joseph Banks had written of the island's kings, barons, yeomen, gentlemen and villains (Oliver 752-53). Unlike Forster, however, Bougainville had made no explicit link between Tahiti's evident social hierarchy and its multiple races—on the contrary, Bougainville's races "mix without distinction." Though he sometimes notes that the chiefs and their families are physically larger than other islanders, and that the upper ranks are more extensively clothed (a supposed factor in preserving lightness of skin, as he mentions above) physical stature and social station are not overtly paired. Rather, he suggests, the two races on the island had probably resulted from the practice of abducting darker-skinned women from neighbouring islands as trophies of war (230, 254).

Johann Reinhold, on the other hand, sees the social disparity of the islanders as the *cause* of their physical differences. There are not two, but three distinct races, he says, in the Polynesian archipelago: "[the O-Taheitee and the Society isles] no doubt contain the most beautiful variety of the first race," he claims, they have the lightest skin and the most beautiful, athletic physiques (J. R. Forster 1996, 303). The "second race" is "black and slender" and lives mostly in New Caledonia, while the "third race" is darker still, and is found somewhat further afield in the Friendly Isles. On every island, however, the three races tend to settle into three main social ranks: *Arree, Manahouna*, and *Tow-tow*, corresponding to upper, middle and lower ranks. The races become darker-skinned and less European-looking, in short, as they descend the social ladder. Even in the Friendly Isles, he notes, whose population is mostly "of a darker hue than the *commonality* of the Society Isles . . . the better sort of people . . . approach near to the complexion of

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the O-Taheitian fair ones" (emphasis added 157). In fact, within each major racial group, he finds individuals who "form gradations toward the other race;" as they descend the social ladder:

> [T]he common people are most exposed to air and sun . . . [they] do all kinds of dirty work; they exert their strength in agriculture, fishing, paddling, building of houses and canoes; and lastly, they are stinted in their food. From these causes, they degenerate . . . towards the second race, but always preserve some remains of their original type; which in . . . the better sort of people, appears in its full lustre and perfection. (154)

The *Arees* (élite) thus represent, for Forster, the *original* body type of the islands, while the lower orders have transformed into something inferior. Commonality, as much as nobility, becomes racialised to the extent that one's exact shade of skin colour becomes a brand of social rank. This should not come as a surprise to the European reader, suggests Forster, who is all too familiar with the deformative effects of hard industry on the "muscular fibres in young men". He advises the reader to "cast an eye on the wretched objects, who, from their infancy, toil in confinement, and observe their distorted, disproportionate limbs, their ghastly faces, and their puny, stinted size" (179). The British, it seems, are no more immune from degeneration "towards the second race" than the Pacific Islanders.

Unlike the British, however, the Tahitian "better sort" seem to be *aware* that their race and their rank are connected, deliberately avoiding degenerative climatic influences. The "lower ranks of people . . . who all go naked," notes Forster, "are much exposed to the air and sun: hence they become thin and slender; for even their bones are not strong, but solid and hard." Meanwhile the "better sort of people . . . carefully study and endeavour to keep themselves cool, and avoid as much as possible, an exposure to the heat of the sun, [they] are succulent, fleshy, and fat" (180). One of the physical qualities that Forster finds most sophisticated about the Tahitian élite is that the women tend to have high-set, "European" breasts, which

> . . . are not so flaccid and pendulous as is commonly observed in negro women . . . and some of the women of the lower sort at the Society Isles. . . . [T]he women of the Aree [better sort] never have them so pendulous and long. (181)

Claude Rawson notes that this particular body ideal had been long associated with civility, while "pendulous" breasts were a regular trope of comparison between savage humanity and primates (100). In his 1777 painting of the Tahitian princess Poeda, John Webber, the official artist of Cook's third voyage, took similar care to give his subject's breasts the "dignified and sensuous amplitude of a European tradition of portraiture typically reserved for goddesses and great ladies" (103). Forster, by attributing this civilising signifier only to the *Arees*, and

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furthermore highlighting its absence in both Tahitian commoners and "negro women," is making a broad racialised statement that has significance far beyond Tahiti. He believes the Tahitian noblewomen have acquired idealised European bodies because they dress in European-style clothes: "I should rather ascribe [this difference in breast shape]," he goes on, "to the greater *relaxation* of the body in the women of the lower class,

> who are more exposed to the air and sun, than those of the Aree tribe. The gentle constriction of the upper part of the body, by the finer sorts of cloth in which the O-Taheitean women of quality gracefully wrap themselves, contributes likewise to keep the breasts high. . ." (emphasis added 181).

The references to the human typology of Linnaeus's 1758 edition of the *Systema* in this paragraph are clear. Linnaeus had similarly described the African body as: "phlegmatic [and] relaxed," while the 'shameless' female was said to "lactate profusely" (9). The *Europeanus albecens*, likewise, had been noted for its tight-fitting clothing. Civility is not just a hallmark of European race, Forster intimates, it is a fundamental element of its maintenance.

Johann Reinhold's description of a fat, succulent, fleshy, tall, long-limbed, delicately featured, and white-skinned Tahitian élite makes for a striking impression of the island's 'better sort'. It becomes all the more interesting, however, with the benefit of historical hindsight. Douglas L. Oliver records that there *was* a lighter-skinned caste of people on the island of Tahiti in the eighteenth century, not because they constituted a separate ethnic group, or even a separate social class, but because they were subject to the practice of *ha'apori*, which translates as "to make fat and delicate by keeping out of the sun" (158). Members of this hereditary caste were considered *taboo*, and were subject to a broad range of ritualistic treatment. Often they could not walk on common ground, for instance, as they would render it *taboo* in their wake, and thus forbidden to others, requiring them to be carried everywhere. As it was *taboo* for them to feed themselves, they had to be hand-fed by others. And, in order to bleach their skin and fatten them up for *ha'apori*, they were often confined to their dwellings for months at a time, with rich food and provisions brought to their doors. Captain Cook, apparently ignorant of the latest trends in human variety theory, had already documented this aspect in naïve and, ironically, much more accurate terms in 1769: "Fairness was highly esteemed," he wrote in his journal, "The *arii* spent as much time as possible in the shade, and a sort of incarceration or strict seclusion was ritual before certain great events . . . though not merely to foster the desired colour, certainly" (123).

Johann Reinhold's projection of European hierarchy onto Polynesian culture does not only allow him to explain unfamiliar practices such as *ha'apori* in Western terms, but permits him to apply the conclusions he draws from Tahiti to European society. The social ranks of Europe, he

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claims, do not display the same racial distinctions as in Tahiti, because the Europeans'

> constant intercourse with foreigners, makes it impossible to preserve the purity of races without mixture; and pity it is, that the guiles of art and deceit are so great in one sex, and curiosity, levity and lewdness, are so common in the other, that they contribute still more to make the preservation of races precarious. This depravation prevailed so far, that even OMAI became the object of concupiscence of some females of rank. (167)

This charged passage, perhaps an insight into Forster's notorious temper, is particularly revealing. Forster, the ex-dissenting minister, is here linking his theories of racial degeneration with sexual and moral profligacy; racial purity, it seems, is also a feature of virtuous lifestyle. His reference to "OMAI," and the "concupiscence" he inspired, is equally telling. Omai was a *Tow-tow* (lower sort) islander, who had been presented to the British court by Cook as a Tahitian prince. This dismayed the Forsters, who had planned to enlighten British society with a "real" Tahitian noble. "[Omai] seemed to be one of the common people," Georg later wrote, "as he did not aspire to the captain's company, but preferred that of the armourer and the common seamen . . . His colour was . . . the darkest hue of the common class of people, and corresponded by no means with the rank he afterwards assumed" (G. Forster 211). Regardless, Omai was rapturously received into London's high society as a Tahitian royal, and soon became something of a celebrity in London. Such a reception, claimed Georg in 1777, only showcased the evident degeneration of Britain's own élite: "O-mai has been considered either as remarkably stupid, or very intelligent," he wrote acerbically in the *Voyage*, "according to the different allowances which were made by those who judged his abilities" (10). Thus, when Johann Reinhold declares that the "depravation" of European race-mixing has "prevailed so far," that "even OMAI" has incited the lust of "females of rank," he is identifying racialised "depravation" in the fact that noblewomen could be sexually attracted to a member of the lower orders. The elite of British society are unable to perceive Omai's inherent social inferiority, even though it is *racially manifested* through his dark skin and exotic features. This lack of rank instinct, for Forster, calls the racial integrity of the British élite into question.

Indeed, Johann Reinhold's template of racial purity in Tahiti holds serious consequences for his European readers. The only reason the Dutch in South Africa have not yet transformed into Hottentots, he claims, is because, like the Tahitians, they have preserved their traditions of European civility (181, 183). In the southern nations of Europe, the constancy in "food . . . mode of dressing and living. . ." and the fact that the inhabitants "do not promiscuously intermarry with negroes. . ." is the only safeguard against the degeneration of their character and complexion (183). Ultimately, however, the most powerful declaration

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of race-degeneration in Europe would not come from Johann Reinhold, but his son Georg—for whom the Tahitian élite were not a rustic ideal of racial purity, but a symbol of corporeal rank injustice.

Race, Rank and Revolution in Georg Forster's *Voyage*

Though originally appointed to Cook's voyage as draughtsman to Johann Reinhold, Georg Forster went on to become decidedly more celebrated, and indeed more influential than his father. In fact, Georg published his own account of the journey, *A Voyage Round the World*, a full year before Johann Reinhold. Only eighteen years old when the voyage began, he was prodigious; by the age of thirteen he had already become fluent in Russian, had published a translation of Michael Lomonossof's *Russian History*, and was an honorary member of the London Society of Antiquaries (G. Forster II, 678). He was also a political radical: eventually, he would go on to become one of the founders of the revolutionary Mainz Republic, dying as an exile in Paris in 1794 (Gray, part 1). Indeed, the radical sympathies that run through the *Voyage*, give his narrative a considerably different perspective to that of his father. His documentary account of human variety in Tahiti is generally in accord with Johann Reinhold's, but his conclusions are, at times, diametrically opposed.

In Tahiti, Georg sees the islanders as a vision of European Antiquity: "It requires a more than ordinary quantity of food to satisfy stomachs of unusual dimensions," he writes, "Accordingly, we find that the men at the Siege of Troy, and the chiefs of Taheitee, are both famous for eating. . .

> *there is even a similarity in their political constitution. The chiefs . . . are powerful princes, and the common people are so little noticed in the Iliad, . . .* [as] *the* Tow-tows *in the South Sea. What I have said here is sufficient to prove, that men in a similar state of civilisation, resemble each other more than we are aware of. . .* (378)

Indeed, just like the demi-god heroes of Homer, states Georg, the Tahitian élite "are so much superior in stature and elegance of form, that they look like a different race" (378). Here, Georg's choice of terminology is crucial. *Looking like* a different race is, of course, by any definition, not the same thing as *being* a different race. Moreover, Georg consolidates this sentiment with a footnote, reminding the reader that Louis de Bougainville had been "*led* by this difference of appearance to assert that [the chiefs and the common people] *really were* two different races" (emphasis added, note 1, 378). It is hard to imagine that Georg was unaware of the extent to which his father had subscribed to Bougainville's notions of a "real" racial divide; in any event, Georg's rejection of this idea is fundamental to his own varietal theories.

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For, while Georg agreed with his father that lifestyle could dramatically affect physical appearance, he saw these effects as the influence of corruption and inequality rather than a corporeal manifestation of civilised order. In place of the word *race*, he uses the term "class," rejecting the idea that the Tahitians' bodies have become appropriated to their rank, and, instead, stressing the fact that social injustice has had an adverse effect on their bodies. When he meets with the king of Tahiti, one of the "the fairest of his people," whose hair is described as "lank . . . light brown, turning into reddish at the tips, or being what is commonly called, sandy. . .," Georg passionately warns the reader that these "European" features may be a mark of civility, but are not a signifier of virtue. The countenance of this same king, he claims "was mild, but unmeaning [i.e. vacant], and rather expressed some kind of fear and distrust at our first meeting, which . . . are often the characteristics of lawless power" (I.169). The classes of *Aree*, *Manahouna*, and *Tow-tow*, he writes, "bear some distant relation to those of the feudal system of Europe" (I.200). Furthermore, while he and his fellow shipmen could easily trust the "middle-class" *Manahounas*, Georg records that they quickly learnt to beware of "the specious politeness of the court and courtiers, who fed our hopes with empty promises" (I.170).

Georg sees European social structure everywhere in Tahiti. At one point, he describes witnessing an event he understands as courtly entertainment. This, in reality, was most likely a particular gift ritual that involved Tahitian women ceremonially hanging offerings of bark-cloth from their waist (Oliver 158-59). In Georg's eyes, however, the *Aree* women have dressed themselves up in a strangely exotic version of European court fashion. He even describes their headpieces as rustic versions of a European periwig:

> *Their dress . . . consisted of . . . a piece of blue European cloth, closely wrapped around the breasts so as to resemble to close dresses which our ladies wear; a kind of ruff . . . rested on their hips . . . and from thence a great quantity of white cloth descended to their feet, forming an ample petticoat . . . the neck, shoulders and arms were left uncovered, but the head was ornamented with a kind of turban, about eight inches high, made of several skains of plaited human hair. . .* (216)

Despite these apparent tendencies towards European culture, however, Georg argues that the Tahitians have only begun their descent into a European-style social structure. Their relatively simple life, he claims, had softened their rank distinctions: "there is not [in Tahiti] that disparity between the highest and the meanest man, which subsists in England between a reputable tradesman and a labourer" (200). Nevertheless, an end to this idyllic situation seems well in sight: the escalating idleness of the chiefs, teamed with the islanders' inevitable development of agriculture, means that their society will eventually drift towards the venal injustices of Europe. Though the *Tow-tows* do not yet feel the weight of

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their labour, claims Georg, "yet by insensible degrees it will fall heavier upon them, as the number of chiefs must naturally increase … because the chiefs are perfectly unemployed" (200). European civility will not lighten *all* Tahitians' skin, claims Georg, rather it will worsen the corporeal disparity between their social ranks. The elite will grow more idle and luxurious, as the poor will become physically disfigured: they will grow ill-shaped, and their bones become marrowless" he writes,

> [the sun] will blacken their skins, and they will dwindle away to dwarfs [*sic*], by the more frequent prostitution of their infant daughters to the voluptuous pleasure of the great. That pampered race, on the contrary, will preserve all the advantages of an extraordinary size, of a superior elegance of form and features, and of a purer colour by indulging their voracious appetite, and living in absolute idleness. At last, the common people will perceive these grievances, and the causes which produced them; and a proper sense of the general rights of mankind awakening in *them will bring on a revolution*. (200)

This remarkable paragraph turns Johann Reinhold's racialised discourse on its head. It is a twilight vision of Western hierarchy, where *Europeans* are actually degenerate Tahitians, and it is the mismanagement of their own, precious, "civilisation" that has led them there. Beauty, fairness and great stature are no longer hallmarks of superior race, but the fruits of greed and idleness. Indeed, the "races" of Tahiti are re-imagined as the foreshadowings of Europe's rigid and inequitable rank hierarchy. Georg's foreseen revolt is an uprising of the socially and physically deformed against a caste of people so bloated and pampered by lifestyle that they "*look like* a different race." For him, the racialised Tahitian body is ultimately a *political* object; the coming revolution, conversely, is an almost biological phenomenon.

Legacy

The Forsters had built on the traditions of previous explorers to reinvent Tahiti as a grand test case of race and rank. For Reinhold, Tahitian race stood in for everything Europeans had lost through rank intermingling; for Georg it was an omen of the racial disaster that was European rank distinction. The racialised body was, in both cases, malleable, manipulable, and ultimately subject to European concepts of equality, order, and hierarchy. Certainly, the Forster's accounts of Tahiti bridged an important gap in the rhetoric of human variety. Samuel Stanhope Smith, writing in the 1780s, used the example of the Forsters' noble "Eerees" to support his general thesis that slaves in the United States became more European looking depending on whether they worked in the field or as domestics (85, 91-2). As late as 1813, over forty years after the voyage of the *HMS Resolution*, James Prichard Cowles confidently recounted the findings of the Forsters to support his own racial theories in *Researches into the Physical History of Man*.

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He wrote of two principal classes of islanders in Tahiti, one of which were "savages . . . without any difference of ranks. Their physical character … approximate to [that] of the negro," while other was "an elevated rank of people who are distinguished . . . from the lower orders . . . their form and complexion approach considerably towards those of Europeans" (250). One of Prichard's anonymous reviewers concluded that "civilisation appears, indeed, to be the most permanent cause of change in the complexion" (*qtd. in* Augstein 87).

Above all, the Forster's intepretations of Tahitian nobility foreshadowed the same contradictions that would come to define the modern notion of race: something at once fixed and alterable, providential and aberrant, but something, above all, that held a *threat*—be it the threat of extremity or the threat of assimilation. The same set of threats to social order implicit in ideas of base contamination of noble bloodlines (for Johann Reinhold) and the escalating luxury of an idle élite (for Georg) are here explored as elements of a racialised humanity—wherein the hereditarian traditions of nobility become instrumental to identification of racialised human strains. So often the unwitting prognosticator of his own future, a young Georg Forster lamented the untold damages of the human scientists like himself: "the itch of tracing the pedigree of nations has lately made such havoc in history. . ." he writes in the *Voyage*, "that the learned must sincerely wish, it may never become a contagious distemper" (200).

Timothy McINERNEY
Université de Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle
Prismes EA 4398

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