

Chapter 6.

Jefferson in the salons of Paris: a deeper dive.

I would trust these liberal Christians in London and in Boston, with Power, just as Soon, as I would, Calvin or Cardinal Lorrain; just as Soon as I would the Quakers of Pennsylvania; just as Soon as I would Methodists or Moravians; just as Soon as I would Rochefoucault and Condorcet; just as Soon as I would the Economists of France; just as Soon as I would Bolingbroke and Voltaire, Hume and Gibbon; nay just as Soon, as I would Robespierre or Brissot. (John Adams to TJ, Jun. 25 1813, in *PTJ: RS* 6: 227-8).

No Man is more Sensible than I am, of the Service to Science and Letters, Humanity, Fraternity, and Liberty, that would have been rendered by the Encyclopedists and Economists, By Voltaire, D'Alembert, Buffon, Diderot, Rousseau La Lande, Frederick and Catharine, if they had possessed Common Sense. But they were all totally destitute of it. They all Seemed to think that all Christendom was convinced as they were, that all Religion was "Visions Judaicques" and that their effulgent Lights had illuminated all the World. They Seemed to believe, that whole Nations and Continents had been changed in their Principles Opinions Habits and Feelings by the Sovereign Grace of their Almighty Philosophy, almost as Suddenly as Catholicks and Calvinists believe in instantaneous conversion. They had not considered the force of early Education on the Millions of Minds who had never heard of their Philosophy. And what was their Phylosophy? Atheism; pure unadulterated Atheism. Diderot, D'Alembert, Frederick, De Lalande and Grimm were indubitable Atheists. The Universe was Matter only and eternal; Spirit was a

word without a meaning; Liberty was a word without a Meaning. There was no Liberty in the Universe; Liberty was a word void of Sense. (John Adams to TJ, Mar. 02 1816, in *PTJ: RS 9: 527*)

Although in old age Jefferson and John Adams were affectionately reconciled, there was one matter on which they disagreed sharply to the end of their days: the French Enlightenment. In colorful letters (there are many more), Adams denounced every one of Jefferson's French intellectual contacts, without bothering to take sides in the French Revolution. Jefferson never sought to defend them to his combative friend. Many of them were indeed atheists, as Jefferson knew perfectly well. But he approached their work as a scientist, not as a moralist. We have already met the two most important for Jefferson: Buffon and Condorcet. This chapter takes a deeper dive into his intellectual relationship with them, which began before Paris and continued afterwards.

Buffon

Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon (1707-88) was from a background in some ways similar to that of Condorcet. His intellectual development was radically different. He was born in Burgundy to civil-servant parents, who purchased their way into the nobility by using a lucky legacy to buy an estate, which his father later had to sell. When he had become rich through travels with an English aristocrat on the Grand Tour, he repurchased it. Much later and in gratitude for Leclerc's scientific services to France, king Louis XV named Buffon a county, and its owner therefore a count.

The newly rich Leclerc moved to Paris in 1732, using both influence and talent to win election to the royal Academy of Science in 1734. Like his younger contemporary Condorcet, he first made his mark as a mathematician working on the intellectual frontier of the day – calculus and probability. But he soon veered away radically to become an observational scientist. His *Histoire naturelle* was published on an enormous scale. Thirty-six volumes appeared in his lifetime. Although he intended to examine all three traditional ‘kingdoms’ of nature – animal, vegetable, and mineral – only the sections on mammals, birds, and mineralogy appeared in his lifetime.

Buffon was living rent-free in Jefferson’s head before he left for Paris. Buffon was already a fellow of the American Philosophical Society, and fascinated by the flora, fauna, and geology of the New World. Jefferson and Madison shared a fascination with Buffon’s scientific work. In a discussion of Buffon’s ‘theory of Central Heat’ (an attempt to explain the physical geography of Earth), Jefferson showed by means of a sketch that Buffon must be wrong: (Madison to TJ Dec. 12 1783, and reply Jan 01 1784. *PTJ* 6: 378-9 and 436-7).

Jefferson’s only published book -*Notes on the State of Virginia* – originated as a reply to a set of queries sent to each state by François Marbois, secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia, in 1780. Governor Jefferson, as he then was, received the queries for Virginia with great enthusiasm, writing to another French diplomat

I am at present busily employed for Monsr. Marbois without his knowing it, and have to acknolege to him the mysterious obligation for making me much better acquainted with

my own country than I ever was before. His queries as to this country ... I take every occasion which presents itself of procuring answers to. Some of them however can never be answered till I shall [have] leisure to go to Monticello where alone the materials exist which can enable any one to answer them. I am exceedingly anxious to get a copy of *Le grande Encyclopedie*, but am really frightened from attempting it thro' the mercantile channel, dear as it is originally and loaded as it would come with the enormous advance which they lay on under pretext of insurance out and in. You once thought that some means might be fallen on of effecting this importation by some vessel of war and perhaps of making the remittance in tobacco in the same way. Should any such occur I shall be greatly obliged by your availing me of it. (TJ to D'Anmours, 30 Nov 1780. *PTJ* 4: 167)

He does not seem to have got hold of a set of the great *Encyclopédie* then (for tobacco or cash), as the set in his library is of an edition purportedly published in Lausanne in 1781. Soon after returning from France, he acquired a set of its successor, the *Encyclopédie méthodique*. (Sowerby 1952-9 V: 143-150).

Gilbert Chinard (1947: 42) suggests that Marbois' queries originated with Buffon and his colleagues at the *Jardins du Roi* (i.e., the Royal Botanic Garden: the center of French observational science). Certainly they are in the spirit of 18th-century anthropology, which began with unsubstantiated travelers' tales and airy theory but gradually tried to salt these with some facts.

Jefferson's work on the replies to Marbois was rudely interrupted in 1781. The British had forced him out of both Richmond and Monticello, and politicians who disliked him, and who themselves had had to flee to Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley, were trying to set up an inquiry into whether it was his fault (there are contemporary echoes: think of Benghazi). It wasn't, and he was eventually cleared by the Assembly, but meanwhile he retired from the governorship and sat in his other plantation, Poplar Forest, in Lynchburg, VA, drafting his replies. They seem to have been the only detailed replies that Marbois got; certainly they were the only ones to be published, eventually. Jefferson assured Marbois that the work was in progress in March and again in December 1781, when he 'inclos[ed] you answers to the quaeries which Mr. Jones put into my hands'. But he was by no means finished. In fact, he was barely started. (TJ to Marbois 4 Mar. 1781, *PTJ* 5:58; same to same 20 Dec. 1781, *PTJ* 6:141; same to same 24 Mar. 1782, *PTJ* 6: 171).

Jefferson continued to work on what became the *Notes*, determined to get the science and observations right, and to uphold the honor of Virginia and Virginians. As his Virginia included the whole of present-day West Virginia and Kentucky as well as modern Virginia, this was no small task. He took the still unpublished *Notes* with him to Paris, where he increasingly felt that he had to counter the inaccurate pictures of America that were circulating there. He got his needy sidekick Filippo Mazzei to publish a 4-volume *Recherches historiques et politiques sur les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique septentrionale : où l'on traite des établissemens des treize colonies, de leurs rapports & de leurs dissensions avec la Grande-Bretagne, de leurs gouvernemens avant & après la révolution, & c* (Mazzei 1788). Jefferson probably held Mazzei's pen from time to time, and either he or Mazzei added an appendix by Condorcet, which is the only important part of

Mazzei's book. Jefferson got an anonymous English version of the *Notes* printed for private distribution in 1785. A bad French translation was threatened, which led Jefferson to authorise a translation by the abbé Morellet (Jefferson/Morellet 1786), and finally to publish it in English, acknowledging himself as the author, in 1787.

Jefferson also intervened to correct the article *Etats-Unis* in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*. His secretary William Short explained in 1786:

The different parts of the work are allotted to different persons to execute, and as it is impossible to find a sufficient number of learned men fit for and willing to engage in such a work, some of the parts must necessarily be illy executed. That which relates to the different States of America had been committed to a M. de Meunier who is a young man really of talents. He treats the political subjects in general of that work. What he had said under the head of the Etats Unis was as erroneous and as false as might be expected from a man who had made the Abbé Raynal his model, and his own lively imagination his guide. Fortunately he has candor, and after putting this article under Mr. Jefferson's inspection, he readily struck out and altered the most flagrant errors. It remains at present as different from what he had written it, as to matters of fact, as virtue from vice, and as to reflexions it is changed from censure to eulogy. (W. Short to William Nelson, Oct. 25 1786, in *PTJ*: 10: 3).

The Notes cover ethics, politics, law, and religion as well as natural history; these are discussed elsewhere in this book. But we need to start with Jefferson's zoology and anthropology. To a

modern reader these parts of *Notes* are truly cringe worthy, especially when Jefferson speaks of the lives and culture of Native Americans and Blacks. Therefore, context is all-important.

Jefferson was driven by multiple motives. Innate curiosity and a scientific temperament were two. But so also was a passion to defend the people of Virginia – not only the whites – from the ignorant condescension of European writers.

Buffon was far from the worst offender, and his claims were exaggerated and repeated by egregious writers. These included Cornelius De Pauw (de Pauw 1772), William Robertson (Robertson 1788: a scion of the Scottish Enlightenment who nevertheless never visited the lands of which he wrote) and the abbé Raynal (Raynal 1773: for all of these, whom Jefferson frequently denounced, see Chinard 1947). Although Buffon did not extend his hypothesis of degeneration in the New World to *Homo sapiens*, Raynal did. Jefferson went to great lengths, both by correcting Demeunier's encyclopedia entry and in the published version of the *Notes*, to combat Raynal in particular. This gives context to Jefferson's sometimes cringe worthy remarks about Native Americans and African Americans.

Buffon built his central claims upon those made by Montesquieu in his hugely influential *De l'esprit des lois* (The Spirit of the Laws: Montesquieu 1773). Montesquieu was a climate determinist. He believed that climate determined the level of civilization; and that the climates of the Americas were unsuitable for it. Left uncultivated, the lands of North America were capable of supporting only the small number of Native Americans living there (Montesquieu 1773: 407). Montesquieu, like Locke before him, believed that American land could be improved by white settlers, but writers disputed how far and how much.

Buffon picked up where Montesquieu left off. Here is Jefferson's (not unfair) summary of Buffon on the natural history of North America:

The opinion advanced by the Count de Buffon, is i. That the animals common both to the old and new world, are smaller in the latter. 2. That those peculiar to the new, are on a smaller scale. 3. That those which have been domesticated in both, have degenerated in America: and 4. That on the whole it exhibits fewer species. And the reason he thinks is, that the heats of America are less; that more waters are spread over its surface by nature, and fewer of these drained off by the hand of man. In other words, that heat is friendly, and moisture adverse to the production and developement of large quadrupeds. (Jefferson 1781/1982: 47)

As to Native Americans, Buffon says (in Jefferson's translation):

Although the savage of the new world is about the same height as man in our world, this does not suffice for him to constitute an exception to the general fact that all living nature has become smaller on that continent. The savage is feeble, and has small organs of generation; he has neither hair nor beard, and no ardor whatever for his female; although swifter than the European because he is better accustomed to running, he is, on the other hand, less strong in body; he is also less sensitive, and yet more timid and cowardly; he has no vivacity, no activity of mind; the activity of his body is less an exercise, a voluntary motion, than a necessary action caused by want; relieve him of hunger and

thirst, and you deprive him of the active principle of all his movements; he will rest stupidly upon his legs or lying down entire days (Jefferson 1781/1982, 58, translating Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, XVIII:146).

Jefferson started his rebuttal of Buffon before embarking for France. For instance, he wrote to Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale College, in June 1784:

After I had the pleasure of seeing you in New Haven I received information that you were in possession of several facts relative to the huge bones of the Animal incognitum found in America, or of the Mammoth as the Russians call the same animal whose bones they also find in the Northern parts of their empire. Monsr. de Buffon the celebrated Physiologist of the present age, who has advanced a theory in general very degrading to America, has in this particular also adopted an opinion which I think not founded in fact. It is that this animal was the same with the elephant of Asia and Africa. I think it certain that it was a different animal.... I take the liberty therefore of asking from you a communication of whatever facts you may have become acquainted with as to this animal. (TJ to Ezra Stiles, 10 June 1784. *PTJ*: 7: 304.)

Jefferson pursued not only mammoths but also moose in his search to confirm that North American mammals were bigger than their European relatives. The saga of the giant moose has been well reported elsewhere (Dugatkin 2009). In summary, as early as 1783 Jefferson started his rebuttal of Buffon by making inquiries from hunters in New Hampshire and Maine, through the medium of General John Sullivan, Attorney-General of New Hampshire (Sullivan to TJ Mar.

12 1784 and Jun. 22 1784; William Whipple to TJ, Mar.15 1784. *PTJ* 7: 21-23, 28-30. 317-320).

Sullivan tried to procure a moose, or parts of one, for Jefferson but had not succeeded before Jefferson left for Paris.

Once arrived in Paris, Jefferson introduced himself to the now elderly Buffon, reporting to his Virginia neighbour Archibald Cary that

In my conversations with the Count de Buffon on the subjects of Natural history, I find him absolutely unacquainted with our Elk and our deer. He has hitherto beleived that our deer never had horns more than a foot long; and has therefore classed them with the roe-buck, which I am sure you know them to be different from. I have examined some of the red deer of this country at the distance of about 60. yards, and I find no other difference between them and ours, but a shade or two in the colour. Will you take the trouble to procure for me the largest pair of bucks horns you can, and a large skin of each colour, that is to say a red and a blue? (TJ to A. Cary 07 Jan 1786. *PTJ* 9: 186).

On the same day he renewed his request to Sullivan to get him a moose:

The readiness with which you undertook to endeavour to get for me the skin, the skeleton, and the horns of the Moose, the Caribou, and the Orignal or Elk, emboldens me to renew my application to you for those objects, which would be an acquisition here, more precious than you can imagine. Could I chuse the manner of preparing them, it should be to leave the hoof on, to leave the bones of the legs and of the thighs if possible

in the skin, and to leave also the bones of the head in the skin with the horns on, so that by sewing up the neck and belly of the skin we should have the true form and size of the animal. However I know they are too rare to be obtained so perfect; therefore I will pray you to send me the skin, skeleton and horns just as you can get them, but most especially those of the moose (TJ to J. Sullivan Jan. 07 1786, *PTJ* 9: 160).

With great effort, Sullivan, who was by now governor of New Hampshire, complied (Sullivan to TJ Apr. 16, Apr. 26, and May 9, 1787: *PTJ* 11: 295-7, 320-1 and 359).

Jefferson duly presented the remains to Buffon's *Cabinet* (museum). He ruefully noted that "The experiment was expensive to me, having cost me hunting, curing, and transporting, 60 guineas" (TJ to John Rutledge Jr Sep. 9 1788. *PTJ* 13: 593-4). Many years later, Buffon's successor told Jefferson that the Count had never received some of Jefferson's North American gifts

Buffon est mort sans avoir pu faire usage du présent très précieux que vous lui aviez fait au sujet des animaux d'amérique qu'il avoit rapportés à l'espèce du renne, à celle du chevreuil, et à celle du cougar (Lacépède to TJ, .13 May 1803, in *PTJ* 40: 367)

Turning from moose to humans, Jefferson's detailed rebuttal of Buffon and Raynal on Native Americans is found in Queries VI and XI of the *Notes on Virginia*. He discusses the tribes whom European settlers first encountered in Virginia in 1607, and records how their numbers were decimated by disease later in the 17th century. He had made a detailed study of Native American languages and archeology, to the extent of excavating a burial mound on the Rivanna river near

Monticello (Jefferson 1982 Query XI). That he did not do it to modern standards of science nor of ethics is just to say that he did not live in the 21st century. He reflects on the origins of Native Americans, saying that ‘the late discoveries of Captain Cook’ make it possible to say that they arrived via the Aleutian Islands to Alaska and thence south into the continent. He was an avid collector of Native American words and word lists, in the vain hope that he could trace a common ancestor language.

Rebutting Buffon directly, Jefferson wrote pointedly:

The Indian of North America being more within our reach, I can speak of him somewhat from my own knowledge, but more from the information of others better acquainted with him, and on whose truth and judgment I can rely. From these sources I am able to say, in contradiction to this representation, that he is neither more defective in ardor, nor more impotent with his female, than the white reduced to the same diet and exercise: that he is brave, when an enterprize depends on bravery; education with him making the point of honor consist in the destruction of an enemy by stratagem, and in the preservation of his own person free from injury[.] (Jefferson 1982: 60).

In a passage that would cause Jefferson considerable trouble he wrote:

I may challenge the whole orations of Demosthenes and Cicero, and of any more eminent orator, if Europe has furnished more eminent, to produce a single passage, superior to the

speech of Logan, a Mingo chief, to Lord Dunmore, when governor of this state.

(Jefferson 1982: 62-3)

In Jefferson's telling, Logan's entire family were wiped out in 1774 in retributive murders by Colonel Cresap, and Logan sent a speech to Governor Dunmore of Virginia, which said

"I appeal to any white man to say, if ever he entered Logan's cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked, and he clothed him not. During the course of the last long and bloody war, Logan remained idle in his cabin, an advocate for peace. Such was my love for the whites, that my countrymen pointed as they passed, and said, 'Logan is the friend of white men.' I had even thought to have lived with you, but for the injuries of one man. (Jefferson 1982: 62)

Jefferson's political enemies later alleged that Cresap was innocent, and Jefferson added an appendix to later editions of the Notes conceding that some other whites may have killed Logan's relatives. But some white or whites undoubtedly did. Jefferson's enemies really hated his 'noble savage' portrayal of Logan. The idea of the 'noble savage', often misattributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was common in the anthropological and traveller literature that Jefferson collected avidly. He wrote that Logan's speech was so admired in the Williamsburg of his youth that children were taught to learn it by rote (Jefferson 1982: 227).

Jefferson had a more complex attitude to African Americans – including his own slaves. In the chapter on population, he estimates the population of his Virginia (which includes present-day

West Virginia and Kentucky) to be about 570,000, with the ratio of free to slave being 11 to 10. (Notes, Query VIII). He deplores the importing of slaves (as he had done in his Declaration of Independence draft), hoping that a ban on slave importation will

stop the increase of this great political and moral evil, while the minds of our citizens may be ripening for a complete emancipation of human nature. (Jefferson 1982: 87).

He also reports that the committee for the revision of Virginia's statutes (of which he was a member) offered a proposal 'to emancipate all slaves born after the passing of the act'. (p. 138) However, this was never taken up by the assembly.

The man who had written in 1776 that it was self-evident that all men were created equal had considerably more difficulty in relation to African Americans than in relation to Native Americans. The passage in Notes that most shocks modern readers is not his idealization of Logan, but the following:

It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.—To these objections, which are political, may be added others, which are

physical and moral. The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oran-ootan for the black women over those of his own species (Jefferson 1982: 138).

The passage goes on; but many modern readers will stop there. At one level, the most scandalous thing about it is that Jefferson treats travelers' tales of male orang-utans mating with black women as fact, in contrast to his extreme, and justified, skepticism of the travelers' tales about the people and fauna of the Americans, that he argues Buffon picked up uncritically from DePauw, Robertson, or other unreliable narrators. By letting this fantastic tale stand in all editions of the Notes published in his lifetime, Jefferson shows (at minimum) that he has failed to escape from Buffon's credulity.

Jefferson's contradictory attitudes to slavery and to his own slaves (who were by his side while he was writing and publishing the *Notes*) are reviewed elsewhere in this book. He was not consistent on the need for ex-slaves to leave Virginia, at least if they were related to him. For instance, two of his children by Sally Hemings disappeared into the white world and stayed in Virginia, as indeed did Sally herself after Jefferson's death (Gordon-Reed 2008: 285, 657). But to round off the comparison of Jefferson and Buffon as naturalists, it is important to understand (despite the Oran-ootan) that they are both men of the Enlightenment. They both seek scientific, as opposed to theological or moralistic, understanding of the world around them. Both got into trouble with the religiously orthodox (Jefferson especially in the 1800 election campaign and subsequently; Buffon especially for his pioneering work on geology which made it impossible for him to believe the Hebrew/Christian Bible's creation stories). To look at them through a Darwinian retrospectoscope would be a mistake.

Condorcet

The Marquis de Condorcet was by far Jefferson's most important interlocutor in Paris. Like Buffon, he had been elected to the Academy of Science at a young age, although less than Buffon by patronage and more by mathematical genius (Baker 1975; E and R Badinter 1988). His mathematical work, and its relation to social science, is considered in the next chapter. He was also a passionate anti-slavery campaigner and the only thinker of his era to argue that women should have the same civil rights as men. Because his interaction with Jefferson was both intense and profound, he needs a chapter to himself.