

The Geographical and Cultural Distribution of Mankind

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In this selection from Buffon's multi-volume *A Natural History, General and Particular* (French publication 1748–1804), the author insists that there is one origin for human species, provides a geographical and cultural distribution of the races, and ascribes to climatic and biological causes differences in intelligence, customs, and habits.

From *A Natural History, General and Particular*

The American

In the most northerly regions of America, we find a species of Laplanders, similar to those of Europe, or to the Samoiedes of Asia. Though their numbers are few, they are spread over a large extent of country. Those who live around Davis's Straits are small, of an olive colour, and have short thick limbs. They are excellent fishers, and eat their meat and fish raw. Their drink is

pure water, or the blood of the sea-dog. They are very robust, and long lived. These are exactly the figure, colour, and manners of the Laplanders: and, what is singular, as the Fins, who are adjacent to the European Laplanders, are white, beautiful, and pretty large and handsome; so, in the neighbourhood of the American Laplanders, we find a species of men who are tall, handsome, pretty white, and possessed of very regular features. The savages along Hudson's Bay, and to the north of Labrador, though they are small, ill made, and ugly, appear not to be of the same race with the former. Their visage is almost entirely covered with hair, like the savages of the lands of Jesso, to the north of Japan. In summer they dwell in tents made of the skins of the reindeer; and, in winter, they live under ground, like the Laplanders and Samoiedes, where they lie promiscuously, and without ceremony. Though their food consists only of raw flesh and fish, they live very long. The savages of Newfoundland resemble those of Davis's Straits. They are of small stature, have little or no beard, broad faces, large eyes, and generally flat noses. The traveller who gives this description adds, that they have a great similarity to the savages in the environs of Greenland.

To the south of these savages, who are spread over the northern regions of America, we meet with a different and more numerous race, who occupy Canada, and the adjacent territories, as far as the Assiniboils. They are large, strong, well made, and all of them have black hair, black eyes, very white teeth, a swarthy colour, little beard, and hardly any hair on their bodies. They are indefatigable in travelling, and extremely nimble in the chase. With equal ease they can support hunger, and the greatest excess in eating. They are hardy, bold, grave, and moderate; in a word, they have so strong a resemblance, both in their external appearance, and in their manners and dispositions, to the Oriental Tartars, that, if they were not separated by a vast sea, we should believe them to have sprung from the same nation. They also live under the same latitude; which is a farther proof of the influence of climate upon the figure and colour of the human species. To conclude, in the northern extremities of the New Continent, as well as in those of the old, we first find men similar to the Laplanders, and likewise a race of whites with fair hair, like the inhabitants of the north of Europe; then hairy men resembling the savages of Jesso; and, lastly, the savages of

Canada, who occupy the whole territory as far as the Gulf of Mexico, and so strongly resemble the Tartars, that, if there were no embarrassment concerning the possibility of their migration, we should conclude them to be the very same people.

However, if we attend to the small number of men scattered over the immense territories of North America, and their universal want of civilization, we must admit that all these nations of savages have been peopled by the escape of individuals from some more numerous race. Though we should allow the number of natives to be now reduced to a twentieth part of what they were on the first discovery of America, still this country was, even then, so thinly inhabited, that it must be considered as a desert, or a land so recently peopled, that the men had not time sufficient for an extensive multiplication. M. Fabry, who penetrated farther into the interior parts of this country, to the north-west of the Mississippi, than any other man had done, and where, of course, the savages could not have suffered any diminution by the inroads of the Europeans, assures us, that he often travelled in this region 200 leagues without seeing a human face, or any marks which indicated the adjacent country to be inhabited; and that, when he did meet with any Indian huts, they were always at least 100 leagues distant from each other, and seldom contained above 20 persons. Along the banks of rivers and lakes, it is true, the savages are more numerous, and some of them are even troublesome to our colonists. But these nations seldom exceed three or four thousand persons, and are spread over a country often more extensive than the kingdom of France: so that I am persuaded there are more men in Paris than all the natives of North America, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Northern Ocean, though this territory is much larger than Europe.

Population depends more on society than Nature. Men would not be comparatively so numerous as the savage animals, if they were not united, and derived not mutual aid and succour from society. In North America, the bisons are perhaps more abundant than the men. But, though population be a result of society, it is the increased number of men which necessarily produces their unity. We may therefore presume, that the want of civilization in America is owing to the paucity of its inhabitants; for, though each nation had peculiar customs and manners, though some

were more savage, cruel, and dastardly than others; yet they were all equally stupid, ignorant, and destitute of arts and of industry.

But to return to our subject: if North America affords only savages, Mexico and Peru present us with a polished people, governed by laws, and subject to regal establishments. They had industry, arts, and a species of religion. They dwelt in cities, where order and police were maintained by the authority of the sovereign. These people, who were very numerous, cannot be considered as new nations, or as originating from individuals who had escaped from Europe or Asia, from whom they are so remote. Besides, if the savages of North America, because they are situated under the same latitude, resemble the Tartars, the people of Mexico and Peru, though like the Negroes they live under the Torrid Zone, have no similarity to them.

What then is the origin of these people, and what cause can be assigned for the difference of colour in human species, since the influence of climate is insufficient in this case to solve the phenomenon?

Before answering these questions, we must continue our description of the savages of South America. Those of Florida, of the Mississippi, and of the more southerly regions, though not absolutely brown, are more tawny than the Canadians. The oil and paint with which they rub their bodies, render their colour unnaturally olive. Coreal tells us that the women of Florida are tall, strong, and, like the men, of an olive colour; that they paint their arms, limbs and body, with several colours, which remain for ever, because they are grained in the skin by means of puncturing; that the olive colour of both sexes proceeds not so much from the heat of their climate, as from the oil with which they varnish the skin; he adds, that the women are extremely active; that with an infant in their arms, they swim across large rivers; and that with equal agility they climb the highest trees. All these qualities they possess in common with the Canadians and other savages of America. The author of the *Natural and Moral History of the Antilles* remarks, that the Apalachins, a people bordering on Florida, are tall, well-shaped, and of an olive colour; and that they all have long black hair; he adds, that the Caribbees, who inhabit the Antilles, have sprung from the sav-

ages of Florida; and that the time of their migration has been handed down by tradition.

The natives of Lucia islands are less tawny than those of St Domingo and Cuba. But so few of either now remain, that the relations of the first voyagers to these countries can derive no support from them. These people, it has been alleged, were very numerous; that they were governed by a kind of chiefs called Caciques; and that they had priests and physicians. But all this is problematical, and besides has no connection with our history. The Caribbees in general, says Father du Tertre, are tall, and have a pleasant aspect; they are strong, robust, active, and healthy; some of them have flat visages and depressed noses; these features however are not natural to them, but artificially induced by their parents soon after birth. This capricious practice of altering the natural figure of the head is very general among savage nations. Most of the Caribbees have small black eyes, white teeth, and long, smooth, black hair. Their colour is tawny or olive; and this colour is natural to them, and not the effect of painting, as some authors have maintained; for the colour of such of their children as have been trained up among Europeans, and not allowed the use of paint, was precisely the same with that of their parents. All these savages, though they never think, have a pensive melancholy aspect.

Some voyagers mention a nation in Guiana, of which the natives are blacker than any other Indians. The Arras, says Raleigh, are nearly as black as the Negroes, are extremely strong, and use poisoned arrows. This author speaks likewise of another nation of Indians, whose necks are so short, and shoulders so elevated, that their eyes seem to be upon their shoulders, and their mouths in their breast. This monstrous deformity cannot be natural; it is not improbable that savages, who delight in disfiguring Nature by flattening, rounding, or lengthening the heads of their children, should likewise conceive the fancy of sinking their heads between their shoulders. To give rise to such absurd caprices, nothing farther was necessary than the idea that deformity rendered them more terrible to their enemies. The Scythians, who were formerly as savage as the present American Indians, entertained the same notions, and practised the same ridiculous arts, which unquestionably gave rise to what the

ancients have written concerning men without heads, men with dog's heads, etc.

The savages of Brazil are nearly of the same size with the Europeans; but they are stronger, more robust, and more nimble; neither are they subject to so many diseases; and they live very long. Their hair, which is black, rarely grows hoary with age. Their colour is tawny, being a mixture of brown and red. They have large heads, broad shoulders, and long hair. They pull the hairs out of their beards, their eye-brows, and every part of their bodies, which gives them an uncommon and fierce aspect. They pierce their under lip for the purpose of inserting a small bone polished like ivory, or a green stone. The mothers flatten the noses of their children immediately after birth. They all go absolutely naked, and paint their bodies with various colours. Those of them who lie on the seacoasts are now a little civilized by the trade they carry on with the Portuguese; but most of those who inhabit the interior parts of the country are still absolute savages. It is not by force and by slavery that savages are civilized; the missionaries have polished more men in these savage nations than the arms of those princes who subdued them. It was in this manner that Paraguay was conquered. The natural ferocity and stubbornness of these savages were overcome by the gentleness, humanity, and venerable example of the missionaries. They often spontaneously solicited to be instructed in that law which rendered men so perfect; and they frequently submitted to its precepts, and united with society. Nothing can reflect greater honour on religion than the civilizing of these nations of barbarians, and laying the foundations of an empire, without employing any other arms but those of virtue and humanity . . .

The African

America is not less singular for the uniformity in the figure and colour of its inhabitants, than Africa is remarkable for the variety of men it contains. This part of the world is very ancient, and very populous. The climate is extremely hot; and yet the temperature of the air differs widely in different nations. Their manners also are not less various, as appears from the description I have given of them. All these causes have concurred in produc-

ing a greater variety of men in this quarter of the globe than in any other; for in examining the differences of temperature in the countries of Africa, we find, that in Barbary and all the regions adjacent to the Mediterranean, the men are white, and only a little tawny; this whole tract of country is refreshed, on one hand, by the air of the Mediterranean Sea, and by the snows on Mount Atlas, on the other; it is, besides, situated in the Temperate Zone, on this side of the Tropic. All the natives, likewise, from Egypt to the Canary islands, are only more or less tawny. Beyond the Tropic, and on the other side of Mount Atlas, the heat becomes much greater, and the inhabitants are very brown, but not entirely black. When we come, however, to the 17th or 18th degree of north latitude, under which Senegal and Nubia are situated, the heat is excessive, and the natives are perfectly black. At Senegal the liquor in the thermometer rises to 38 degrees, while it seldom rises to 30 in France, and never exceeds 25 in Peru, though it be situated under the Torrid Zone. In Nubia we have no observations made with the thermometer; but all travellers agree in declaring the heat to be excessive. The sandy deserts between Upper Egypt and Nubia heat the air to such a degree that the north wind must be extremely scorching in that country. Besides, as the east wind, which generally blows between the Tropics, arrives not at Nubia till it has traversed Arabia, it is not surprising to find the natives very black; it is less surprising to see the inhabitants of Senegal perfectly black; for the east wind before it reaches them, must blow over the whole of Africa in its great breadth, which renders the heat of the air almost insupportable. Taking, therefore, the whole of Africa situated between the Tropics, where the east wind blows most constantly, we may easily conceive why the western coasts of this part of the globe should and actually do suffer a greater degree of heat than the eastern coasts; for this wind arrives at the eastern coasts with a freshness which it acquires by traversing a vast sea; but, on the other hand, before it arrives at the western coasts it acquires a scorching heat by blowing across the interior regions of Africa. It is for this reason that the coasts of Senegal, Sierra, Sierra-Leona, Guiana, and all the western parts of Africa situated under the Tropics, are the hottest climates on the globe. It is not near so hot on the eastern coasts as at Mosambique, Mombaza, etc. I cannot, therefore, hesitate in ascribing to this

reason the cause of our finding the true Negroes, or the blackest men, on the western territories of Africa, and Caffres, or men of a less deep blackness, on the eastern coasts. The difference between these two kinds of blacks, which is very apparent, proceeds from the heat of the climate, which is not very hot in the eastern parts, but excessive on the western. Beyond the Tropic on the south, the heat considerably diminishes, both on account of the higher latitude, and because the point of Africa begins to turn narrow; and this point of land, being surrounded by the sea, receives fresher breezes than if it had been in the midst of a continent. The natives also of this country begin to whiten, and are naturally more white than black, as was formerly remarked. Nothing can prove more clearly that the climate is the principal cause of the varieties of mankind, than this colour of the Hottentots, whose blackness could not be diminished but by the temperature of the climate.

We will be the more confirmed in this opinion, if we examine the other people who live under the Tropics to the east of Africa. The inhabitants of the Maldiva islands, of Ceylon, of the point of the Indian Peninsula, of Sumatra, of Malacca, of Borneo, of Celebes, of the Philippine islands, etc. are all very brown, without being absolutely black; because all these territories are either islands or peninsulas. The sea in these climates has a great effect in tempering the air; and besides, the east and west winds, which blow alternately in this part of the globe, pass over a vast extent of sea, before they arrive at this Archipelago. Thus all these islands are peopled with brown men, because the heat is not excessive. But in New Guinea we find blacks, who, from the descriptions of voyagers, appear to be real Negroes; because, in this country, which extends far to the east as to form a kind of continent, the wind which traverses it is much hotter than that which prevails in the Indian ocean. In New Holland, which is not so hot a climate, the natives are less black, and very similar to the Hottentots. Do not these Negroes and Hottentots, who live so remote from the other people distinguished by that appellation, prove that their colour depends on the heat of the climate? No communication can ever be supposed to have taken place between Africa and this southern continent; and yet we find there the same species of men, because the same circumstances concur in producing the same degree of heat. An example taken from

the other animals will still farther confirm what has been advanced. It has been remarked, that, in the province of Dauphiny, all the swine are black, but that in Vivarais, on the other side of the Rhône, where it is colder than in Dauphiny, all these animals are white. It is not probable that the inhabitants of one of these two provinces would agree to raise only black swine, and the other only white swine. It appears to me, that this phenomenon is owing to the different temperature of the climates, combined perhaps with the manner of feeding these animals.

The few blacks who are found in the Philippines, and some other islands of the Indian ocean, are probably derived from the Papous or Negroes of New Guinea, with which the Europeans have been acquainted for these last 50 years only. Dampier, in the year 1700, discovered the most eastern parts of this country, to which he gave the name of New Britain; but its extent is still unknown; we only know that those parts of it which have been discovered seem to be thinly inhabited.

Thus it appears that the existence of Negroes is confined to those parts of the earth where all the necessary circumstances concur in producing a constant and an excessive heat. This heat is so necessary, not only to the production, but even to the preservation of Negroes, that it has been remarked in our islands, where the heat, though great, is not comparable to that of Senegal, that the Negro infants are so liable to be affected by impressions from the air, that the proprietors are obliged to keep them, for the first nine days after birth, in close warm chambers. If these precautions be neglected, and the children exposed to the air immediately after birth, they are liable to be affected with a tetanus or locked jaw, which proves fatal, because it deprives them of the power of taking nourishment. M. Littré, who dissected a Negro in the year 1702, remarked, that the end of the glans, which was not covered with the prepuce, was black, and that the part of it which was covered was perfectly white. This observation demonstrates, that the air is necessary to produce the blackness of Negroes. Their children are born white, or rather red, like those of other men. But two or three days after birth their colour changes to a yellowish tawny, which grows gradually darker till the seventh or eighth day, when they are totally black. It is well known, that all children, two or three days after birth, are affected with a kind of jaundice, which among white

people soon passes off and leaves no impression; but in Negroes, on the contrary, it gives an indelible colour to the skin, which becomes always more and more black. M. Kolbe remarks, that he has seen Hottentot children, who were born as white as the Europeans, become olive in consequence of this jaundice, and the impressions of the air, however, are only the occasional, and not the primary causes of blackness; for it has been observed, that the children of Negroes, as soon as they come into the world, have black genitals, and a black spot at the root of their nails. The action of the air and the jaundice may perhaps help to expand this colour; but it is certain, that the rudiments of blackness are communicated to them by their parents; that, in whatever part of the world a Negro is brought forth, he will be equally black as if he had been born in his own country; and that if there is any difference in the first generation, it is so small as not to be perceptible. This fact, however, implies not that the colour will continue the same after many successive generations. On the contrary, there are many reasons for presuming, that as this colour is originally the effect of a long continued heat, it will be gradually effaced by the temperature of a cold climate; and, consequently, that if a colony of Negroes were transplanted into a northern province, their descendants of the eighth, tenth, or twelfth generation would be much fairer, and perhaps as white as the natives of that climate.

Anatomists have inquired into the seat of this black colour. Some of them allege, that it neither resides in the skin nor scarf-skin, but in the cellular membrane between them; that this membrane, after long maceration in hot water, retains its original blackness; but that the skin and scarf-skin appear to be as white as those of other men. Dr Town, and some others have maintained, that the blood of the Negroes is black, and that their blackness originates entirely from their blood. I am much inclined to believe this fact; for I have observed, that among us the blood of those persons who have tawny, yellowish, or brown complexions, is blacker than that of those who are fairer. M. Barrere, who seems to have examined this subject most minutely, tells us, and Mr Winslow agrees with him, that the scarf-skin of Negroes is black; and though its extreme thinness and transparency may make it appear white, that it is really as black as the blackest horn, when reduced to the same degree of

thinness. They also assure us, that the skin of Negroes is of a reddish brown colour, approaching to black. This colour of the Negroes, according to Barrere, is produced by their bile, which he affirms, from several dissections he made in Cayenne, instead of yellow, to be as black as ink. The bile, when absorbed and dispersed through the body, tinges the skin of white people yellow; and if it were black, it would probably produce a black colour. But as soon as the effusion of the bile ceases, the skin resumes its natural whiteness. We must therefore suppose that the bile of the Negroes is perpetually effused, or as Barrere alleges, that it is so abundant as to be naturally secreted in the scarf-skin, and to tinge it of a black colour. Upon the whole it is probable, that both the bile and blood of Negroes are browner than those of white people, as their skin is likewise blacker. But one of these facts cannot be admitted to prove the cause of the other; for if the blackness of the blood or bile be allowed to give the same colour to the skin, then instead of demanding why the skin of Negroes is black, we ought to ask why their blood or their bile is of that colour? This species of false reasoning, in place of solving the question, renders it still more intricate. To me it has always appeared, that the same cause which makes our complexions brown, after being exposed to the action of the air, and to the rays of the sun, which renders the Spaniards more brown than the French, and the Moors than the Spaniards, also renders the Negroes blacker than the Moors. Besides, I am not here inquiring how this cause acts; I only mean to ascertain that it does act, and that its effects are more perceptible in proportion to its strength and time of acting.

The Chinese, the Laplander, and the European

The heat of the climate is the chief cause of blackness among the human species. When this heat is excessive as in Senegal and Guinea, the men are perfectly black; when it becomes somewhat temperate, as in Barbary, Mogul, Arabia, etc. the men are only brown; and, lastly, when it is altogether temperate, as in Europe and Asia, the men are white. Some varieties indeed are produced by the mode of living. All the Tartars, for example, are tawny, while the Europeans who live under the same latitude are white.

This difference may safely be ascribed to the Tartars being always exposed to the air; to their having no cities or fixed habitations; to their sleeping constantly on the ground; and to their rough and savage manner of living. These circumstances are sufficient to render the Tartars more swarthy than the Europeans who want nothing to make life easy and comfortable. Why are the Chinese fairer than the Tartars, though they resemble them in every feature? Because they are more polished; because they live in towns, and practise every art to guard themselves against the injuries of the weather; while the Tartars are perpetually exposed to the action of the sun and air.

But when the cold becomes extreme, it produces effects similar to those of violent heat. The Samoides, the Laplanders, and the natives of Greenland, are very tawny. We are even assured, that some of the Greenlanders are as black as the Africans. Here the two extremes approach each other: great cold and great heat produce the same effect upon the skin, because each of these causes acts by a quality common to both; and this quality is the dryness of the air, which perhaps is equally great in extreme cold as in extreme heat. Both cold and heat dry the skin, and give it that tawny hue which we find among the Laplanders. Cold contracts all the production of nature. The Laplanders, accordingly, who are perpetually exposed to the rigours of frost, are the smallest of the human species. Nothing can afford a stronger example of the influence of climate than this race of Laplanders, who are situated, along the whole polar circle, in an extensive zone, the breadth of which is limited by nothing but excessive cold; for that race totally disappears whenever the climate becomes a little temperate.

The most temperate climate lies between the 40th and 50th degree of latitude, and it produces the most handsome and beautiful men. It is from this climate that the ideas of the genuine colour of mankind, and of the various degrees of beauty, ought to be derived. The two extremes are equally remote from truth and from beauty. The civilized countries situated under this zone, are Georgia, Circassia, the Ukraine, Turkey in Europe, Hungary, the south of Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, and the northern part of Spain. The natives of these territories are the most handsome and most beautiful people in the world.

The climate may be regarded as the chief cause of the different colours of men. But food, though it has less influence upon colour, greatly affects the form of our bodies. Coarse, unwholesome, and ill-prepared food, makes the human species degenerate. All those people who live miserably are ugly and ill made. Even in France the country people are not so beautiful as those who live in towns; and I have often remarked, that in those villages where the people are richer and better fed than in others, the men are likewise more handsome and have better countenances. The air and the soil have great influences upon the figure of men, beasts, and plants. In the same province, the inhabitants of the elevated and hilly parts are more active, nimble, handsome, ingenious, and beautiful, than those who live in the plains, where the air is thick and less pure. In France, it is impossible to perpetuate the race of Spanish or Barbary horses: they degenerate even in the first generation, and in the third or fourth, unless the breed be crossed by the importation of fresh stallions, they become altogether French horses. The effects of climate and of food upon animals are so well known, that we need hardly mention them; and though their operation is slower and less apparent upon men; yet from analogy, we ought to conclude, that their effects are not less certain, and that they manifest themselves in all the varieties we find among the human species.

Upon the whole, every circumstance concurs in proving, that mankind are not composed of species essentially different from each other; that, on the contrary, there was originally but one species, who, after multiplying and spreading over the whole surface of the earth, have undergone various changes by the influence of climate, food, mode of living, epidemic diseases, and the mixture of dissimilar individuals; that, at first, these changes were not so conspicuous, and produced only individual varieties; that these varieties became afterwards specific, because they were rendered more general, more strongly marked, and more permanent by the continual action of the same causes; that they are transmitted from generation to generation, as deformities or diseases pass from parents to children; and that, lastly, as they were originally produced by a train of external and accidental causes, and have only been perpetuated by time and the constant

operation of these causes, it is probable that they will gradually disappear, or at least that they will differ from what they are at present, if the causes which produced them should cease, or if their operation should be varied by other circumstances and combinations.