Statue of Voltaire, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris. Image ID: 2F782D3, Photographer: Philippe Blanchot / hemis.fr, Paris, 25 June 2020. Licensed.

Racial Capitalism in Voltaire's Enlightenment

by Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh

In June 2020, in the midst of the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd, activists in Paris doused a statue of Voltaire (1694–1778) in red paint, highlighting the *philosophe*'s complicity in the transatlantic slave trade and colonial commerce.[1] Their action, and the broader movement for

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racial justice around the globe, catapulted conversations about the racist legacies of the Enlightenment to the forefront of public discourse in several former colonial powers. The reaction from the French presidency was unsurprisingly hostile.[2]

The activists' deed brought decades of radical scholarship into sharp public focus. Since the early 1970s, increasing numbers of historians have investigated the Enlightenment's entanglements with slavery and colonialism, teasing out the ways in which prominent figures' racist attitudes were imbricated with colonial interests.[3] Following Michèle Duchet's pathbreaking work, which suggested that 'colonial ideology' strongly flavoured the *philosophes*' ethnographic writings, scholars have meticulously reconstructed the complex and often contradictory politics of knowledge surrounding Enlightenment discourses on race. Louis Sala-Molins and Laurent Estève demonstrated that even the Enlightenment's more progressive thinkers – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, and Condorcet – conceived of human difference as hierarchical, emphasizing European superiority.[4] Similarly, Christopher Miller and Emmanuel Eze showed how eighteenth-century ethnographic discourses othered Africans, justifying racial slavery during a period supposedly preoccupied with universal emancipation.[5] These and other critical histories echo Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's account of the Enlightenment as a dialectical, self-cannibalizing movement, laden with contradictions.[6] Richard Popkin, for instance, wrote of the 'paradox' that a movement devoted to the improvement of the human condition produced such degrading descriptions of non-Europeans, while Silvia Sebastiani has argued that the Enlightenment's progressivism was limited by the contradictions between its universalism and hierarchical human classifications.[7]

Although such critical revaluations have convincingly shown that the Enlightenment's racial politics were often pernicious and mired in contradictions, Voltaire's positions were extreme even by eighteenth-century standards. He was one of the Enlightenment's few prominent polygenists, viewing people of different races as having been created separately by God. On Andrew Curran's account, Voltaire played an important role in effecting the discursive shift from viewing Black people as 'barbaric heathen[s]' (a *moral* category) to 'subhuman' (a *racial* category), 'for whom human bondage seemed the logical but regrettable extension of the race's many shortcomings'.[8] Madeleine Dobie has suggested that the *philosophe* wrote much 'more concretely about the colonies and the slave trade than the other leading philosophers' because 'his moral aversion [to slavery] was attenuated by a particularly racist view of Africans'.[9] Nonetheless, several scholars have sought to downplay the importance of Voltaire's racist ideas, typically by portraying his polygenism as an unsavoury corollary to his deism. David Allen Harvey maintained that in the Enlightenment, 'racial difference was first and foremost a religious question', while for Colin Kidd, Voltaire's support for polygenism had 'a whiff of anti-scriptural notoriety'.[10] In a broader rejoinder to recent historiography, while acknowledging its ambivalences, Antoine Lilti has urged historians not to 'sing the critique of the colonial Enlightenment', given the movement's contributions to the 'critical spirit' that challenged absolutist

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Christian monarchies.[11] Accordingly, in several liberal intellectual histories, Voltaire's secularism continues to trump his racism.[12]

This essay demonstrates that Voltaire's racism was consistent across disparate parts of his *oeuvre* throughout his life, and suggests that it should be viewed not as an unfortunate byproduct of his counter-hegemonic assault on Christian absolutism but rather in the context of his personal and philosophical investments in colonial commerce. Voltaire wrote about race as early as 1734, when he insisted on its fixity over generations in his *Treaty on Metaphysics*, and as late as 1775, when his *Histoire de Jenni* maintained that different populations originated discretely. In the mid-1730s, shortly after arguing that racial differences were immutable, Voltaire contributed to the nascent 'luxury debates' by celebrating the merchant capitalism that brought 'superfluous' commodities from the colonies to Europe's shores.[13] As this article reveals, in addition to these more familiar sources, a largely unexamined commentary on race appears in Voltaire's orientalist fascination with the *Ezourvedam*. This purportedly ancient Brahminic treatise, discussing the origins of the world from an Indocentric perspective, was actually a Jesuit forgery composed as a proselytizing tool.[14] Voltaire manipulated the *Ezourvedam* to argue in his *Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations* (1756, 1761) and *Letters of Amabed* (1769) that India's antiquity implied the existence of a distinct, pre-Adamite society, 'naturally' organized hierarchically since the earliest times. Voltaire's deployment of the *Ezourvedam* was particularly remarkable as he transformed a text that had nothing to do with polygenism – indeed, it followed biblical monogenism – into evidence for immutable, hereditary inequalities. Later in his life, Voltaire remained unquestionably committed to polygenism and a naturalistic hierarchy of 'human species', with Europeans at the top and Black Africans at the bottom. However, his comments about colonialism and slavery shifted significantly over time, coinciding with his loss of capital from colonial investments during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763).

Unlike most other *philosophes*, Voltaire – a self-described 'merchant philosopher' – held shares in the Compagnie des Indes throughout his adult life.[15] The Compagnie administered trading colonies in South Asia and possessed a monopoly over the French transatlantic slave trade until it was absorbed by the Crown in 1769, following the organization's financial collapse amidst the Seven Years' War.[16] Despite Voltaire's idiosyncratic views about race and material stakes in France's slave-trading company, however, scholars have struggled to directly connect his polygenism to his colonial investments.[17] Indeed, polygenism's rival account, monogenism, was also espoused by some figures who held shares in colonial enterprises, such as Montesquieu, another shareholder in the Compagnie des Indes.[18] Thus it is unhelpful to pin Voltaire's polygenism and broader racist ethnology *exclusively* on his investments. Carlo Ginzburg argued that the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755 encouraged Voltaire's 'critical turn' regarding slavery and colonialism, having made him more sensitive to human suffering.[19] While the earthquake certainly played a role, I suggest that his views about race's relationship to labour were also transformed by the global political and economic reconfigurations catalysed during the Seven Years' War.[20] Voltaire was both aware of and distressed by the English threat to French commerce

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in the East and West Indies. In his *Short History of the Age of Louis XV*, he wrote that 'while the English fleets and armies . . . ruined the French in Asia, they also drove them out of Africa'; '[w]hile the English were attacking the French on the American mainland, they turned to the islands. The small but flourishing Guadeloupe, where the best sugar was made, fell into their hands without a blow.'[21] The consequences of the war were reflected in Voltaire's critical re-evaluations of slavery and colonialism.

This essay suggests that the concept of 'racial capitalism' may help us better understand the connections between superficially disparate parts of Voltaire's work. Analyses of racial capitalism underline the interdependence of race and class, contending that racialization plays a functional role in upholding capitalism. For much of his life, Voltaire wrote enthusiastically about what is today called merchant capitalism – which, unlike later industrial capitalism, was a mode of exchange rather than a mode of production.[22] Under merchant capitalism, producers sold commodities rather than their labour, and were alienated from the means of exchange by a merchant class.[23] This class amassed capital by buying commodities in the colonies and selling them at inflated prices in Europe. The Compagnie des Indes was a large-scale agent of such accumulation and, acting with a state-granted monopoly, made itself an indispensable intermediary between colonial producers of commodities and their French consumers, thereby cutting out the producers from the means of exchange. In *Capital*, Karl Marx acknowledged slavery and colonialism as necessary preconditions for the 'primitive accumulation' of capital that enabled the development of merchant and eventually industrial capitalism, but did not consider them essential for upholding any form of capitalism.[24] Challenging orthodox Marxist arguments, scholars from the Black Radical tradition such as Cedric Robinson contend that, in a merchant capitalist context, racial categories described a population's relationship to different forms of labour and production somewhat analogously to class, or indeed that racialization has *always* played a role in the division of labour and accumulation of capital.[25]

Throughout his works, Voltaire connected naturalistic, hereditary, and immutable qualities of different 'races' to the types of labour he thought they should engage in, which strongly resembles racial capitalist logic. Nevertheless, this essay does not attempt to reduce all of Voltaire's actions and writings on race to racial capitalism. Rather, it suggests that there are evidently connections between the 'racial' and 'capitalist' parts of his writings and activities, and thus it is worthwhile examining them together. Moreover, it contends that the Seven Years' War, whose end coincided with the gradual rise of industrial capitalism, reconfigured the *philosophe*'s views about the relationship between race, commodities, and labour. Thus Voltaire's shifting views can help further inform our understanding of the changing role of race in the division of labour at a turning point between merchant and industrial capitalist society in Europe.

The first part of this essay reconstructs Voltaire's financial investments in colonial commerce and juxtaposes them with his early defences of polygenism. It then turns to his comments on slavery, scrutinizing two passages that have been widely regarded as his most explicit condemnations of the trade, from *Candide*

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and his *Essay on Universal History*, respectively. Finally, it examines how he bolstered his earlier polygenist arguments using the *Ezourvedam* in his *Essay on Universal History* and *Letters of Amabed*. The essay argues that Voltaire maintained distinctly racist views throughout his work, even by Enlightenment standards, and suggests that his late re-evaluation of slavery and colonialism largely coincided with his losses from colonial investments in the wake of the Seven Years' War rather than any fundamental shift in his racial thinking.

COLONIAL INVESTMENTS AND POLYGENISM

As Jean-François Lopez has revealed through meticulous archival research, income from colonial business constituted one of the weightiest elements of Voltaire's annual revenue.[26] From the age of twenty-seven, he held shares in the slave-trading Compagnie des Indes, and later in his life he invested heavily in two smaller societies engaged in colonial commerce. Voltaire inherited three shares in the Compagnie des Indes from his father on 1st January 1722, when the trading company's principal commercial activity was the transatlantic slave trade; he boasted of them to the marquise de Bernières the year he acquired them, noting that 'a good part of my fortune' was invested in the organization.[27] Each of these shares corresponded to a modest 150 livres in 1723, but by 1760 Voltaire was receiving 'twenty thousand livres tournois per year' from the Compagnie.[28] Lopez has also shown that Voltaire underwrote loans issued by the Compagnie in 1746 and 1749, indicating that he placed considerable faith in the institution as an agent of wealth accumulation over many decades.

Additionally, between 1749 and 1754, Voltaire was one of the largest financial contributors to the Gilly Brothers' society, which was involved in shipping commodities between the slave-ship hub of Cádiz, the west African coast, and Spanish America. The company, established in 1701 by the Gilly family from Montpellier, was one of the largest French organizations operating out of Cádiz in the eighteenth century.[29] Voltaire invested in forty of the society's ventures across the Atlantic and contributed almost 400,000 livres to the organisation over five years, which constituted almost half of his total recorded expenditure during that period. Although not many records exist documenting the ventures to which Voltaire contributed, a letter written in 1751 to his banker in Geneva, François Tronchin, shows that he invested 10,000 livres in the ship *San Jorge*, captained by Ramon de Palacios, which left Cádiz on 1st December 1752.[30] Stopping in an undisclosed port in Guinea, it abducted 284 Africans and transported them to Buenos Aires, where the surviving 251 were sold into slavery.[31] Voltaire never mentioned the *San Jorge* and its enslaved human cargo in his correspondence, but in 1756 boasted that he had 'provid[ed] my share of one of these ships', describing another transatlantic voyage between Cádiz and Buenos Aires operated by the Gilly Brothers' Society.[32]

The Gilly Society failed in 1765, following France's defeat in the Seven Years' War. As Robert Chamboredon has shown through his analysis of the company's finances, its commercial operations – like those of most French naval enterprises in Cádiz – were severely damaged by the war and the frequent capture of French

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ships by the British navy.[33] After the society failed, Voltaire asked his banker, 'would you allow me to send you this little exchange bill? . . . Business in Cadix has never been so bad.'[34] By the mid 1760s, he had begun to experience more severe misfortunes in his colonial investments, which probably tempered his earlier optimism towards expansionist global commerce.[35]

In 1770, a year after the Compagnie's absorption by the Crown, Voltaire conceded that 'the true riches are with us [in France . . .,] they are our industry'.[36] Voltaire's change in attitude, however, was probably influenced more by Britain's supersession of France as a dominant imperial power in the Seven Years' War than by a newfound empathy for those oppressed by the Compagnie's activities. Moreover, his comment coincided with the gradual rise of industrial over merchant capitalism – at least as a political doctrine if not in practice – in northern Europe. Voltaire's pivot towards the promotion of national industry was probably grounded at least in part in a desire to find more profitable avenues for investment.

In January 1772, however, Voltaire made a new investment of 40,000 livres to arm the Candolle, Lavit & Co. Society's privateer merchant ships, the *Hercules* and the *Carnate*. Unlike the Compagnie des Indes, this organization was an entirely private enterprise, which did not benefit from a state monopoly. Both ships sailed from Lorient to Pondicherry, which had been returned to France by Britain in 1763 in the Treaty of Paris. The *Carnate*, equipped with sixteen cannon and a crew of ninety-five sailors, and the *Hercules*, carrying fourteen guns and fifty-five sailors, were to bring Asian commodities – most likely cotton, textiles, and saltpetre – to French markets, where they would be sold by private merchants.[37] In March 1775, Voltaire revealed that 'Thunder fell on [the *Hercules*] and shattered everything'.[38] In December 1775, however, he asked the Lyonnais merchant Gaspard-Henry Schérer when he could 'expect to receive something from the ship *Carnatik*'.[39] Unlike Voltaire's earlier investments, the Candolle, Lavit & Co. Society was not involved in the slave trade, nor was it associated with the former Compagnie's monopoly on trade. Rather, it operated during the ascent of the Physiocratic economically liberal *laissez-faire* movement, following the Seven Years' War.[40] When the Society collapsed in 1777, Voltaire cursed its founder as a 'damned Norman shipowner', in an outburst that revealed his loss of faith in colonial commerce by the end of his life.[41]

Despite his shifting attitudes over the course of his life, Voltaire profited – with annuities of 20,000 livres – from the infrastructures of colonialism, and directly contributed 10,000 livres to the *San Jorge* slave ship.[42] Unlike many eighteenth-century Europeans, who benefited more passively from colonial economic structures, Voltaire was actively involved in funding colonial commerce and received tangible returns on his shares. Surely, then, his writings on race and global trade, which affirmed the superiority of white people over non-Europeans and celebrated the accumulation of exotic commodities, should be read in the context of his material interest in upholding colonial structures. To contextualize Voltaire's views about race, however, it is helpful to first survey the state of racial discourse in eighteenth-century Europe.

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A good two and a half centuries after Columbus' genocidal contact with the Indigenous peoples of the New World, Europeans were still debating whether Native Americans had saveable souls and were fellow descendants of Adam and Eve. By far the most common account of human origins in eighteenth-century Europe was monogenism: the theory that all people, irrespective of how different they may look or behave, descended from the same biblical patriarchs. Monogenism cohered with the predominant interpretations of the Old Testament and, from a Christian perspective, justified the theological aspects of religious missions. Why embark on expensive voyages to convert Native Americans if their souls were essentially different and unsalvageable? The perceived physical and moral divergences between human populations were assigned disparate causes by different monogenists. Most Christians, however, tended to interpret blackness as the curse of Ham: God's punishment of the descendants of Noah's son Ham, after he saw his father naked.

Enlightenment philosophers espoused somewhat different accounts of human diversity and attitudes towards colonialism, but, with the conspicuous exceptions of Voltaire and (probably) Hume, the vast majority were monogenists.[43] In 1748 Montesquieu, who like Voltaire held shares in the Compagnie, presented a physical theory of human diversity in his *Spirit of the Laws* concerned not with different peoples' origins, but rather with their relationship to their surroundings.[44] As such, Montesquieu's vision of race suggested that, over a few generations, people would begin to look and behave like others living in the same physical environment. Hume, by contrast, wrote in the 1753 edition of his essay 'Of National Characters' that he 'suspect[s] the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be *naturally* inferior to the whites'.[45] Even though, like Voltaire, Hume invoked nature to explain an essential inferiority of non-Europeans, he publicly opposed slavery for both moral and economic reasons, believing wage-labour to be more productive. However, the Scottish philosopher was materially invested in slavery.[46] Having urged his patron, Lord Hertford, to purchase a plantation in Grenada in 1766, Hume lent £400 to one of the plantation's principal investors, and thus – like Voltaire – had reasons to wish for the eradication of the inefficiencies of slave labour, because he believed that reform would generate greater returns on his own investments.[47] Rousseau, by contrast, despite dedicating countless pages to establish that the words 'slave' and 'rights' were contradictory, remained damningly silent on questions about race or the then-flourishing transatlantic slave trade, then 'regulated' by Louis XIV's notorious *Code Noir*.[48] Nevertheless, Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) explicitly characterized early human societies as lacking structural forms of inequality, which he argued only emerged with the institutionalization of private property. Thus, in contrast to Voltaire and Hume, Rousseau viewed humans in a state of nature as equal, with only social and economic forces causing populations' degeneration into states of inequality. Diderot, whom Sankar Muthu has characterized as a leading voice of Enlightenment anti-imperialism, wrote in the *Encyclopédie* (1765) that 'there was . . . only one original race of men, which being

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multiplied and spread over the surface of the earth, has produced over time all the varieties' that existed in his lifetime.[49]

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the dominant account of monogenism was that propounded by the natural historian Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon. In a chapter on 'varieties within the human species' in *Natural History* (1749–67), Buffon contended that while the earliest humans had closely resembled white Europeans, external factors such as diet and climate made them 'degenerate' into other races.[50] Buffon viewed Amerindians as the most inferior population, believing them to have 'degenerated' through exposure to the American environment; this position drew the French naturalist into a heated controversy with Thomas Jefferson.[51] According to Buffon's scheme, the less someone resembled a white European, the further they had 'degenerated' from the 'the most beautiful and well-shaped [people] in the world'.[52] Thus, monogenism was not *inherently* antiracist or abolitionist. Indeed, Laurent Dubois characterized Buffon as 'the best French representative of a "racist Enlightenment"'.[53] Similarly, Duchet explained that, in associating the 'natural' condition of Black people not with just Africa but with tropical regions – including the West Indies – Buffon's arguments were 'more useful to slavers and settlers than to historians of the human species.'[54] Nevertheless, unlike polygenism, Buffon's monogenism was ultimately reversible, and unlike Voltaire, Buffon did not regard slavery as a condition uniquely connected to Blackness.[55] Indeed, Buffon wrote of Tartar, Indian, Nubian, and Armenian slaves in *Natural History*. Thus slavery in Buffon's monogenism was not a direct consequence of race, and racial groups were hierarchically ordered by 'beauty' rather than by any essential property.

In contrast, arguing against the dominant monogenism of his era, Voltaire contended that people of different races were essentially and naturally dissimilar, having originated in discrete creation events. In earlier centuries, polygenism had been associated primarily with radical freethinkers influenced by naturalist philosophies, such as Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, and Isaac La Peyrère. By the mid to late eighteenth century, however, it had become deeply connected to European anxieties over the maintenance of colonial infrastructure. As John Immerwahr pointed out, Hume's polygenist arguments were 'widely quoted by racists and defenders of slavery' in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[56] Similarly, Miller explained that polygenism made it much 'easier to justify slavery'.[57] Justin Smith convincingly argued that while we see in Voltaire 'the lingering hope of conjuring up some of the libertine *frisson* that his polygenist predecessors had enjoyed', his defence of the theory was profoundly influenced by an 'a priori commitment to the inferiority of Africans'.[58] Voltaire's view of Africans as essentially different from and inferior to Europeans cohered well with the colonial activities in which he invested, and simultaneously allowed him to lambast the Church's orthodox narrative of creation.

Voltaire's writings on race are also inseparable from his vocal participation in the eighteenth-century debate on luxury. Up until the Enlightenment, the pursuit of luxury was frequently condemned in Europe by Christian and Stoic doctrines as sinful and morally corrupting.[59] Throughout the eighteenth century, however, a

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number of *philosophes*, including Voltaire, extolled the virtues of accumulating luxury through global trade. They argued that luxury created the conditions for the flourishing of the arts, sciences, toleration, 'self-love', and liberty – in other words, for a secular, Enlightened polity – in the metropole.[60] By examining the *philosophe*'s lengthy correspondence with Frederick II of Prussia, István Hont showed that Voltaire hoped that commerce could replace territorial conquest as a means of accumulating material goods in Europe.[61] Felicia Gottmann too, in her examination of Voltaire's involvement in the luxury debates, suggested that his enthusiasm for merchant capitalism and commercial society emerged from a desire to 'foster peace, liberty, and the arts and sciences'.[62]

Voltaire first wrote about naturalistic racial differences in his unpublished *Treaty on Metaphysics*, composed in 1734 as a philosophical primer for his lover and intellectual partner, Émilie du Châtelet. Notably, the text also contained his views on commerce at the time, which he characterized as 'a blessing from God … that unites all the parts of the earth that immense seas divide', having previously described it as 'the eternal bond of men'.[63] In the *Treaty*, Voltaire imagines an alien from 'Mars or Jupiter' travelling to Goa, which, significantly, was the source and origin of European colonial trade in the Eastern hemisphere, and an essential stopping point for all merchant ships travelling between Europe and South, Southeast, and East Asia. In Goa, the alien encounters a (monogenist) priest and asks him increasingly embarrassing questions about whether Africans would change skin colour if they settled in Germany. The priest's inability to provide satisfying answers leads the alien to conclude that racial differences are fixed rather than variable. The alien eventually surmises that

> There are different kinds of men, just as there are different kinds of trees … pear trees, fir trees, oak trees, and apricot trees do not all come from the same [kind of] tree, and the bearded whites, the wool-bearing Negroes, the horse-haired yellows, and the beardless men, do not all come from the same [species of] man.[64]

This passage dehumanized non-Europeans by likening their physiological features to those of animals, hinting that Voltaire not only viewed different populations as discrete and naturally different, but also that he viewed non-Europeans as inferior. Moreover, it is notable that the *philosophe* uses fruit and timber trees to compare human races, suggesting that people, like plants, are commodifiable. The fact that the alien's introduction to human racial difference occurs in a geographical region that was synonymous with East Indies colonial trade highlights how closely race and commerce were interlinked for Voltaire. Later in the text, he leaves no doubts about his white supremacist views, declaring that white people are 'superior to Negroes, just like Negroes are superior to monkeys, and monkeys are superior to oysters and to other animals of the same species.'[65]

Two years later, Voltaire expresses unqualified excitement for colonial trade networks in his poem *Le Mondain* (1736), betraying his enthusiasm for the fact that metropolitan French wealth was created through exploitation:

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> The superfluous, which is a very necessary thing,
> has reunited one hemisphere with the other.
> Do you not see perhaps those slender ships
> that from Texel, from London, from Bordeaux,
> go forth to seek, by a happy exchange,
> new products from the banks of the Ganges,
> while far from us, conquerors of the Muslims,
> our wines of France inebriate the sultans? (lines 22–29)[66]

Like the *Treaty*, the poem mentions a key site of French colonial interests – the banks of the Ganges – and the ships that brought Asian commodities to Europe. Throughout the 1730s, the Compagnie des Indes' textile factory along the Ganges in Patna, Bihar, competed with similar factories run by the British, Dutch, and Danish East India Companies.[67] While the poem does not mention race or enslavement, *Le Mondain* celebrates activities which relied on subjugated Indian labour, whose capital helped finance the slave trade, and whose profits Voltaire collected. In 1737, the *philosophe* wrote how 'charmed' he was by the France's colonial trading, commenting that 'the Dutch are more jealous of our Compagnie des Indes than Roussau [sic] is of me'.[68] Voltaire's insistence on the necessity of 'the superfluous' a good fourteen years after he first obtained shares in the Compagnie illustrates that he was comfortable with amassing luxurious commodities at the expense of colonialism's many victims. As the next section shows, however, France's loss of slave-grown sugar plantations during the Seven Years' War encouraged Voltaire to rethink the role of slavery in a global economy.

SLAVES, SUGAR, AND SHIPS

Voltaire's positions on slavery, race, and colonial commerce may be re-evaluated with reference to Immanuel Wallerstein's analysis of the different ideological roles of racism and xenophobia within the structures of a capitalist world-system.[69] Wallerstein argued that xenophobia – a fear of the Other that leads to their exclusion or extermination – harms capitalist economies, by expelling potential labourers from the larger pool of workers. Conversely, he wrote, racism – an ideology that racializes and in turn devalues the Other, whilst keeping them within, albeit at the margins of, society – allows capitalists to extract *more* labour at a reduced cost from the racialized, dehumanized group.[70] Wallerstein's framework coheres strongly with formulations of racial capitalism, which treats racialization as a process that serves capitalist interests by creating a subjugated hereditary working class, resulting in unequally differentiated human value. Voltaire's early enthusiasm for colonial trade networks, coupled with his polygenist rhetoric that reified both essential racial differences and a hierarchical ordering of the races, helped legitimize economic infrastructures in which he held substantial stakes. Whilst his writings on race dehumanized Africans, he maintained that tolerance of most populations, including Africans but excluding Jews, was necessary for a well-functioning, commercial, Enlightened metropolitan polity.

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With Wallerstein's framework in mind, even Voltaire's most famous ostensibly anti-slavery passage in *Candide* is compatible with the *philosophe*'s material interests as a colonial investor. In the story, the eponymous protagonist expresses horror at the physical mutilation of a slave in Surinam, who tells him that 'this is the price at which you eat sugar in Europe'.[71] At first glance, the passage appears to discourage European sugar consumption, which is rather odd given that, through the Compagnie des Indes, Voltaire was materially invested in the commodity. Pomeau revealed that Voltaire added the encounter with the slave to *Candide* after reading the materialist philosopher Claude Adrien Helvétius's *De l'Esprit* in October 1758. Helvétius, whose attitudes towards colonialism and human difference radically diverged from Voltaire's, denounced slavery and the misery it caused, including the deaths of French 'citizens who perish by fire, shipwreck or scurvy, . . . [and] sailors . . . during their stay in Santo Domingo'. Helvétius called on Europeans to boycott colonial goods, writing that

> no barrel of sugar arrives in Europe that is not filled with human blood. Now what man, in view of the misfortunes caused by the cultivation and export of this commodity, would refuse to deprive himself of it, and would not renounce a pleasure bought by the tears and death of so many unfortunate people?[72]

Pomeau explains that Helvétius made Voltaire realize that he had, so far, 'forgotten one of the worst abominations of the "brave new world", colonial slavery', in *Candide*.[73]

On closer reading, however, Voltaire's story, coming two years before he would repeat his hierarchical polygenism in the second edition of his *Essay on Universal History*, may not have opposed hereditary racialized labour at all. For Voltaire the investor, the amputation of a slave's legs, abhorrent as it was, meant that a previously labouring body would no longer be able to create surplus value to be expropriated. To quote Marx, 'If [the slave-owner] loses his slave, he loses capital that can only be restored by new outlay in the slave-mart.'[74] Moreover, as Dobie pointed out, Voltaire's 'passage evokes not a French colony, but Surinam, the Dutch neighbour of French Guiana'.[75] Voltaire's move, which emphasized the barbarity of a European rival's colonial policies even though Helvétius referred to French-run Saint-Domingue, was an all-too-common strategy.[76] Indeed, as Jared Hickman recently argued, the 'problem of the mutilated Surinam slave . . . is not that he is a slave, per se, but that he is a slave of a bad master, the cold-blooded Dutch merchant Vanderdendur.'[77] Benjamin Schmidt has convincingly shown that Dutch efforts to portray their Spanish rivals' colonial politics as 'tyrannical' played an important part in shoring up metropolitan support for a more 'innocent' form of colonialism. *Candide* may have similarly bolstered support for a less barbarous, more efficient form of French racialized labour in the colonies through his depiction of Dutch barbarism.

In the same year as he published *Candide*, Voltaire joked with his banker about disruption to sugar production during the Seven Years' War, quipping that 'we no longer have any Negroes to work at our sugar factories. I did well to provide for

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myself.'[78] Even more astonishingly, in another letter from March 1759, in which he speaks about the publication of *Candide*, Voltaire asked 'And [where is] my sugar? Did the English take it from Guadeloupe?'[79] In June, he complained that 'Guadeloupe will never be returned to us. Sugar will be expensive.'[80] Such statements suggest that even when he was aware of the brutalities of the slave trade, Voltaire prioritized the enjoyment of colonial commodities. Thus, while we simply do not know what he wished to see, it is problematic to read *Candide* as calling for the abolition of slavery. Unlike Helvétius, Voltaire never called for a sugar boycott, underlining the complexity of his position: denouncing the inefficiencies and ever more evident unsustainability of slavery, yet continuing to profit from its perpetuation.

It is worth examining a passage from the 1761 edition of the *Essay on Universal History*, which Ginzburg argued heralded 'a much more compassionate attitude towards the slaves and their suffering':[81]

> Thirty years ago, one could purchase a handsome negro for fifty livres, more or less a fifth of what one pays for a fat cow .... We tell them that they are men like us, redeemed by the blood of a God who died for them, and then we make them work like beasts of burden, but feed them less; if they try to flee, we cut off a limb; we force them to turn by the strength of their arms the shafts of the sugar mills, after we have fitted them out with a wooden leg. After all this we dare to talk of human rights! ... This commerce does not enrich a state; on the contrary, it destroys human lives, causes shipwrecks, and without doubt is not a true good; but since men have created new necessities for themselves, France purchases the superfluous at great cost from abroad converted to a necessity.[82]

At first reading, this passage does indeed suggest a remarkable volte-face in Voltaire's attitude towards enslaved Africans. Moreover, as Ginzburg notes, his mention of 'the superfluous' again, in a vastly different light, represents an ironic recognition of his earlier, naïve conception of global commerce in *Le Mondain*. The reference to shipwrecks, which plagued eighteenth-century transoceanic trade, reflects Voltaire's well-documented anxieties about France losing its ships to British aggression during the Seven Years' War.[83] It also hints at his desire to see the emergence of a more sustainable way to accumulate 'true good[s]' than high-risk colonial commerce. However, we cannot ignore that this excerpt appeared in the same *Essay on Universal History* that insisted that 'Nature ... explains why the Negroes have become the slaves of other men, and are purchased on the coast of Africa like animals.'[84]

Voltaire's passage resembles Condorcet's *Reflections on Negro Slavery* (1781), whose subsection 'The means of abolishing Negro slavery by degrees' concluded that the most important aims for the opponents of the slave trade were '(i) to prevent the crimes of the masters by depriving them of an unjust right, or by enforcing the reparations stipulated by law; (ii) to let the masters enjoy their slaves for a period long enough to offset the costs incurred in buying and training them'.[85] Sala-Molins'

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scathing critique of Condorcet, 'whose abolitionism can logically be deduced from a calculation of the economic disadvantages of slave production', can just as well be directed at Voltaire: despite his attempts to invoke the pathos of the predicament of the slave, his criticism of the industry was like that of a shareholder who was displeased with the inefficiency of slaves being forced to turn a sugar mill shaft with their wooden limbs.[86] As the next section shows, Voltaire went to great lengths to find ostensibly naturalistic reasons for linking certain classes of people to different forms of labour; something that cohered well with his broadly racial capitalist outlook.

ORIENTALISM, INDIA, AND NATURAL HIERARCHIES

As early as his *Treaty* of 1734, Voltaire had shown an orientalist interest in India, using Goa as a stage on which to set the encounter between the alien and human difference. In 1756, he turned his attention back to the subcontinent, writing in his *Essay on Universal History* in that 'some have believed that the human race originated from Hindustan'.[87] Voltaire became particularly interested in India during the Seven Years' War, just as France was losing Indian territories to Britain. For example, in a letter sent to Maurice de Pilavoine, a member of the French colonial council at Pondichery, in April 1760, Voltaire wrote: 'I am interested in the Compagnie, not only because of you, but because I am French, and also because I have a part of my wealth in it. These are three good reasons that distress me for the loss of Masulipatan.'[88] Little over four months later, the British launched a siege on Pondicherry, the Compagnie's main Indian settlement, finally capturing it from the French on 15th January 1761.

In the midst of the British siege on Pondicherry, as he was clearly concerned with the fate of French India, Voltaire received a manuscript called the *Ezourvedam* from Louis Laurent de Fayd'herbe, the chevalier de Maudave.[89] The text took the form of a dialogue between two Brahmins: Chumontou, who 'defends the unity of God', and Biache, a superstitious figure 'immersed in the darkness of idolatry,' which 'Chumontou rejects . . . as contrary to good sense.'[90] Voltaire was captivated by the *Ezourvedam* and its potential to legitimize disputes about the origin of humanity and the morality of coercing labour from certain peoples. Unaware of the fact that it was a forgery written by the French Jesuit Jean Calmette, Voltaire dedicated the fourth chapter of the 1761 edition of his *Essay on Universal History* to the supposedly ancient Indian text. He argued that the *Ezourvedam* disproved the Book of Genesis: the manuscript's purported antiquity showed that humans existed before Adam and Eve and that therefore the Old Testament presented an incorrect and possibly derivative account of human genesis. Thus, Voltaire contended, this manuscript confirmed his longstanding belief that humans of different races were created in different events and thus that 'the black race is a species of man different from ours'.[91]

While the Chumontou-Biache dialogue covers several topics relevant to eighteenth-century European theology, one of the most striking passages is the fictional Indians' description of human origins. When Biache asks 'who is the first man that God created, what are the orders that He gave him?' Chumontou replies, '*Adimo* is the name of the first man to emerge from the hands of God, He gifted him

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by creating him with extraordinary knowledge.'[92] The exchange established a direct correspondence between the purported Vedic and biblical narratives of human genesis. This proved problematic for Voltaire, as it lent support to an Indian equivalent of the biblical monogenism to which he was opposed. Despite using the *Ezourvedam* to subvert the Old Testament's claim that Adam and Eve were the earliest humans, the *philosophe* mocked the monogenist passages in the manuscript, writing that while its contents 'seem to strengthen the old idea that mankind was born in a land where nature did everything for men, . . . this only proves that the Indians are indigenous, and it does not prove at all that other kinds of people came from these regions', before adding that 'only a badly instructed and pigheaded Brahman would pretend that *all* humans descend from the Indian [Adimo] and his wife.'[93] Voltaire appropriated the authority embodied by the manuscript (which he claimed came from 'long before Alexander's expedition') to discredit the biblical genesis narrative and thus lend support to polygenist accounts of the origins of humans.[94] This, in turn, implied that there were essential, ancient, and naturalistic differences between separate genealogies of humans.

Later in the *Essay on Universal History*, Voltaire alluded to a passage in the *Ezourvedam* that described the Indian caste-system as a naturalistic division of humanity into four discrete categories. He quoted a dialogue between Adimo and God, where the latter told the former that 'there will be different occupations on the Earth, not all will be proper to all' as evidence for 'four [separate] conditions of human society.'[95] God told Adimo that

> Those who are born with more spirit and taste for virtue than others will be the *brames*. Those who participate more in *rosogoun*, that is to say, ambition, will be the warriors. Those who participate more in *tomogun*, that is to say, avarice, will be merchants. Those who will participate in *comogun*, that is to say, who will be robust and limited, will occupy themselves with servile work.[96]

Voltaire then asked: 'on what basis can the inequality of these conditions be founded, if not on the primitive inequality of talents?'[97] These passages suggest that he used the *Ezourvedam* to provide *naturalistic* arguments for a hierarchical organization of society, which favoured his material interests as a 'merchant philosopher'. Nicole Masson notes that Voltaire changed the term '*chotogun*' in the *Ezourvedam* to '*comogun*' (pronounced similarly to the French word for 'common') in his *Essay on Universal History* – with the aim of providing an ancient, divine, and naturalistic precedent for the separation of the pre-revolution Third Estate into a '*tomogun*'-like merchant bourgeoisie and a 'common' working class.[98] This coheres with Voltaire's derogatory references to the common working classes as '*canaille*'.[99] Masson's argument, however, should be expanded to include the *philosophe*'s conceptions of naturalistic inequalities between humans of different *races*, given his material investments in colonial commerce and proximity to the transatlantic slave trade. Voltaire deployed the *Ezourvedam*'s antiquity to argue that the caste-based social structure it described was the 'natural' condition of humankind. This form of social organization, whereby people were

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'naturally' born into a caste that was destined to perform one particular form of labour, strongly complemented his racial (merchant) capitalist understanding of race in the rest of his *oeuvre*, where one's hereditary race determined what role one would play in a global economy, and what relationship one would have to the means of exchange.

Voltaire repeated his hierarchical polygenist arguments in his *History of Philosophy* (1765), written as a summary of the *Essay on Universal History*, and again in *The Letters of Amabed*, an orientalist epistolary novel set in Goa – which had become Voltaire's favoured site for the discussion of race. After insisting that 'none but the blind can doubt that the whites, the negroes, the Albinos, the Hottentots, the Laplanders, the Chinese, the Americans, are races entirely different', the *History* claimed that Africans' 'round eyes, squat noses, and invariable thick lips, the woolly heads, and the measure of their intellects, make a prodigious difference between them and other species of men'.[100] In the *Letters of Amabed*, Voltaire draws on the *Ezourvedam*, and writes through the eyes of Amabed, another fictional Indian. Amabed wonders 'whether [Africans] have descended from the apes, or whether the apes have come from them', before concluding with the latter, as 'Our sages have said that man is the image of GOD.'[101] As this late output clearly shows, Voltaire did not change his views on the essential inferiority of Black Africans; however, he notably stopped referring to slavery as something *inherently* associated with Blackness, despite mentioning the trade in his *Letters of Amabed*. This coincided with increasing revolts in France's slave plantations and growing public sentiment in metropolitan Europe against slavery.[102]

Voltaire wrote one last time about South Asia in his *Fragments on India* (1773), which studied the rise and fall of the Compagnie des Indes on the subcontinent. Gottmann argues that by the time he wrote the text, the *philosophe* had become utterly disillusioned with the conduct of the French in their Indian colonies.[103] She suggests that *Fragments* served to distance its author from his earlier celebration of the merchant capitalism that brought Indian luxury commodities and, consequently, capital to European metropoles. Although *Fragments* does indeed portray the activities of the Compagnie in a negative light – 'it is to support this trade that powers have gone to war'[104] – Voltaire had, just one year earlier, invested in weapons for the ships *Hercules* and *Carnate*. It is not entirely clear why, having grown so sceptical about colonial commerce during the Seven Years' War, the *philosophe* participated in yet another venture. Perhaps, following the collapse of the Compagnie and its monopoly in India, Voltaire was willing to experiment with France's post-war, Physiocrat-associated liberal trade, as a means of securely and sustainably profiting from international commerce.[105] Indeed, the rise of Physiocracy, agricultural industrialization, and a *laissez-faire* political economy in the *Hexagone* in the 1770s is often seen as a repudiation of the state-associated merchant capitalism practiced by the Compagnie des Indes the previous century.[106] Then again, as the *philosophe* confessed to Candolle, 'commerce is one of the useful sciences of which I have no knowledge, but I will defer to you and your company.'[107]

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CONCLUSION

While critical revaluations of the Enlightenment's racial politics since the 1970s have shown that the movement abounded with contradictions, Voltaire stood out from his contemporaries for several reasons. First, he was more involved and invested in colonial commerce than many other Enlightenment figures. His investments in different colonial enterprises were evenly distributed throughout his adult life, and he continued receiving annuities from the Compagnie des Indes until its collapse. Thus, unlike most Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire had concrete, material interests in the preservation of colonial structures. Second, Voltaire was one of the eighteenth century's few prominent polygenists, and argued, against the Bible, that God had created humans of different races in separate events. Voltaire not only maintained that racial differences were immutable, but also claimed, using the *Ezourvedam* as evidence, that human society had been historically divided by God in such a way that different populations undertook distinct forms of labour. Voltaire combined polygenism with hierarchical thinking to characterize non-Europeans – and especially Black Africans – as naturally and eternally inferior to white Europeans. Although Voltaire maintained his racist view of non-Europeans throughout his life, and indeed brought up African inferiority across seemingly disparate parts of his *oeuvre*, the *philosophe* grew notably sceptical towards slavery and colonial commerce as Britain captured France's colonial possessions in the Seven Years' War.

Given the prominence of racial thought in Voltaire's work, as well as the fact that he had material interests in colonial commerce, I have suggested that his writings embodied what scholars have called 'racial capitalism' – a view of social and economic organization that assigned unequal value to different, racialized populations. Much of the literature on racial capitalism stresses the interdependence of systems of race and class, explaining that the accumulation of capital has largely relied on the unequal differentiation of human value along hereditary lines and, thus, that racial divisions play a functional role in the maintenance of capitalism.[108] Voltaire's racial capitalism invoked nature to justify Europeans' role in the world as the exploiters of purportedly less talented extra-Europeans. However, while the *philosophe* viewed non-white people – and especially Black Africans – as naturally and permanently inferior and servile, France's colonial defeats in the Seven Years' War spurred Voltaire to rethink how to best exploit racialized labour in a new, post-war economic order. The imbrication of racial capitalist interests in Voltaire's philosophy, brought back into the spotlight by BLM activists in 2020, should kindle a return to more materialist histories of Enlightenment knowledge, which recognize the entanglements of racism, colonialism, and capitalism.

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the sciences in early modern Europe. He is fascinated by global histories of knowledge exchange, particularly between East Asia, Europe, and southern Africa.

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