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This is an electronic version of an article published in:

Anderson, K. & Perrin, C. (2008) 'How Race Became Everything: Australia and Polygenism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(5): 962-990.

The article is officially available online at:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a782297276~db=all~jumptype=rss> (institutional or subscribed access may be required)

The journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies* is available online:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713685087> (institutional or subscribed access may be required)

doi: 10.1080/01419870701568908

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How Race Became Everything: Australia and Polygenism

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the shift that took place in the mid-nineteenth century elaboration of a polygenist idea of race. Supplementing existing claims that increasing evidence about the diversity of humankind provided a context for this shift, the focus here is upon British colonial encounters in Australia. It is against the background of what was considered to be a distinctly human separation from, and capacity to rise above, nature that, we argue, the Australian Aborigine precipitated a crisis in existing ideas of the human. As consternation grew not only about their inclination but about their very capacity for improvement, and particularly for cultivation, the Aborigines challenged the basis upon which the unity of humankind had been assumed. They could not be comprehended, according to the prevailing conception of racial difference, as a mere variety of the human. And it is out of this incomprehension, we argue, that the rise of polygenism may be understood: as an attempt to account for the ontologically inexplicable difference of the Australian Aborigine.

Keywords: Race, history, polygenism, Australia, colonialism, Aborigines

The idea of race underwent a radical shift in the mid-nineteenth century. Race ceased to describe a difference that was traced to the influence of environmental or climatic factors and came to refer to a difference that was understood to be fundamentally biological. Whereas the different races of ‘man’ were previously regarded as ‘tribal’ or ‘national’ varieties of an essentially unified humanity, by 1850 racial difference was considered to be both essential and immutable, and the different races came to be regarded as permanent types, if not as the product of entirely separate creations. Race, to paraphrase Robert Knox, became ‘everything’ (1850, p. 6). And what he meant was that race – and not ‘fanciful causes, such as education, religion, climate etc.’ (1850, p. 8) – is what accounts for the differences between peoples. Predominant among these were differences in so-called ‘development’, according to which, for example, the American Indians had been accorded a subordinate place in the hierarchies set up by the social contract and stadial theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries¹. It was, however, against the background of a unified idea of humanity that the apparently savage condition of the American Indians had been understood by these theorists as a stage in their development. With reference either to

¹ To be clear, the ‘American Indian(s)’ and the ‘Australian Aborigine(s)’ are referred to here only insofar as they are represented or imagined from the perspective of colonial and/or humanist ‘discourse’.

the causes that Knox later rejected, or in the claim that the Indians were relatively recent arrivals on the continent, their condition was thus explained, not according to any innate deficiency, but with reference to their distinct circumstances. And so, as we will indicate, it was as all peoples, including savages, were considered to be on the same scale of human development, that, for better or worse, the American Indian was still regarded as the forerunner of a modern European.

‘In the beginning all the world was America’ (1960 [1689], p. 301), and John Locke’s assumption here, that humankind constituted a unity, as well as his implicit faith in human development, was not seriously contested until the mid-nineteenth century when the savagery of certain races was no longer regarded as a developmental stage, but rather as their permanent and irremediable condition. Race – as biology – indeed became everything, now describing not only the permanent character of a people, but also their irrevocable destiny. By 1850, therefore, the ‘human’ no longer constituted the common referent according to which race could be considered to describe one or another kind of human being. Rather, with this shift – from a ‘monogenist’ to a ‘polygenist’ view of racial difference – the idea of a unified humanity was shattered by the assertion that the peoples of the world constituted multiple and distinct racial ‘species’. What, then, was the reason for this most profound of intellectual shifts?

Many accounts of racial determinism have tended to see it as a justification of colonial power, such that the elaboration of an innate idea of race has been subordinated, if not to a very long history of imperialism (see, for example, Montagu 1965; Morton 2002), then at least to European colonization since the Enlightenment (see, for example, Eze 1997; Mosse 1999). There can be no disputing the consistencies between mid-nineteenth century ideas of racial difference and their antecedents dating back at least 400 years or even to ancient depictions of barbaric savages. And, in so far as racial discourse has provided a support for the exercise of imperial power, there is little with which to disagree. But the claim that an innatist idea of race was ‘systematically expounded in the late 1700s’ (Adas 1989, p. 12) or that polygenism had become ‘the prevailing scientific paradigm’ by the end of the eighteenth century (Goldberg 1993, p. 33), conflicts with a broad consensus among race historians and historiographers. Against the claim of any significant Enlightenment elaboration of race, Banton, for example, has argued that:

In the eighteenth century, authors . . . used the word ‘race’ to designate a group of people but they could equally well have used some other word. A conception of race as later generations have come to know it was not essential to any of their explanations; it had no analytical value, so in this sense there was no idea of race in the eighteenth century (Banton 1998, p. 5).

And so, as Drescher, among others, contends, ‘the turning point in British cultural racialisation should probably be set closer to 1850 than 1770’ (Drescher 2001, p. 483; see also Gossett 1965; Stepan 1982; Hannaford 1996).

While there is no doubt that the views of eighteenth-century figures such as Edward Long (cited by Adas) and Voltaire (cited by Goldberg) anticipated developments in the nineteenth century, racial thinking in the eighteenth was for the most part informed by Christian assumptions of the unity of humankind. As Keith Thomas puts it, ‘the belief that all men had a common ancestor made it much harder to maintain that some were permanently nearer the animal condition than others’ (1984, p. 136). So while, on Adas’s account, ‘it is remarkable how little the British and French

colonial policies in the first half of the nineteenth century were influenced by the ideas associated with Edward Long' (1989, p. 291), this might be considered as less remarkable if the prevalence of Christian assumptions and, as Stocking (1968, pp. 38-9) has noted, their resurgence in the early 1800s, is taken into account². Accounts such as Adas's and Goldberg's, therefore, not only fail to give any consideration as to why innatism developed in the nineteenth century (and not before), but they are also unable to reconcile their own assumptions of eighteenth-century innatism with the notion of a colonial 'civilizing mission' that, as we will indicate, was premised upon a developmental, and not an innatist, conception of race.

Nevertheless, accounts of the mid-nineteenth century shift to a biological understanding of race remain distinctly vague. Nancy Stepan, for example, notes the important influence of the discovery that the earth was much older than previously thought, but she eventually falls back on the indistinct claim that 'a new biological and racial determinism was in the air' (1982, p. 41). Similarly, George Stocking, who provides the most comprehensive account of racial discourse in the nineteenth century, fails – and indeed refuses – to explain this shift with any specificity (1968, p. 36). Claiming he can do no more than 'suggest speculatively several broader contexts' for it – including the development of biology in the early nineteenth century, the effect that the discovery of geological time had upon the biblical account of human origins and a defensiveness in the US surrounding slavery's abolition – Stocking's privileged 'context' is the increase in 'data' about other peoples that followed the 'great expansion of cultural contact' during this period (1968, p. 39). But, while there is little doubt that the struggle of so-called ethnological thought during the early to mid-nineteenth century was to account for human difference, the wide range of which had become evident particularly following Cook's voyages to Oceania (Douglas 2001), there is more historical and geographical precision which can be brought to bear upon the understanding of this struggle. If, as will be argued here, this new 'data' is to constitute more than a mere context for the shift to a specifically polygenist idea of race, it is clear that Stocking's rather general invocation of the proliferation of evidence about the diversity of humankind needs to be supplemented. Indeed, noting the sense in which the polygenist turn in nineteenth-century racial thought shattered the idea of a unified humanity, what is required is an account of exactly how the 'data' generated by increased 'cultural contact' put the idea of human unity into question.

The account that will be developed here focuses upon British colonial encounters in Australia from the late 1700s. It argues, against the background of recent post-humanist problematizations of 'the human' (see later), that these encounters help explain the shift to an innatist conception of race by the mid-nineteenth century. More specifically, the argument of this paper is that it was from the perspective of a secularized Christian ontology, according to which the human was characterized by its separation from and capacity to rise above nature, that the apparently unimproved, and hence extremely savage, condition of the Australian Aborigine precipitate a crisis in existing ideas of what it meant to be human. Challenging the very basis upon which

² As we will see, the polygenist idea of race was consistent with the claim that, owing to an innate deficiency, certain peoples were incapable of 'progressing' to a civilized state. And in this respect it is worth noting that, despite his extreme racism, even Long maintained this possibility: 'We cannot pronounce them [the Negroes] insusceptible of civilization, since even apes have been taught to eat, drink, repose, and dress like man' (1970 [1774], p. 376).

the idea of human unity had been assumed, the Aborigine could not be assimilated to the conception of race as a subdivision, or mere variety, of the human (as, for example, the American Indian had been). Polygenism may thus be understood in relation to this crisis, as an attempt to account for the ontologically inexplicable difference of the Australian Aborigine.

This argument draws upon perceptions of the more general ‘peculiarity’ with which Europeans apprehended Australia (see later), but it considers these within the context of what, we will argue, was a specifically humanist perplexity at the condition of the Aborigines. Representations of the utterly unimproved, and hence extremely savage, condition of the Aborigines and, above all, of their apparent failure to have cultivated their land have been well documented. But, although such representations have been interpreted in accordance with the claim that they simply provided a justification for colonialism (see, for example, Attwood 1992; Ryan 1996), they cannot, we will argue here, be adequately understood in these instrumentalist terms and according to the colonists’ anticipation that, as uncultivated, lands occupied by Aboriginal peoples could be appropriated as *terrae nullius*³.

This legal ‘doctrine’ derived from the pivotal role attributed to improvement, and to cultivation, in the transition that the social contract and stadial theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century described from a state of nature to civil society. And, going back through Locke to the biblical injunction to ‘subdue nature’, it was according to this that lands occupied by ‘savages’ could be colonized because they were considered as insufficiently utilized⁴. Without wishing to engage directly in the debate as to whether this ‘doctrine’ of terra nullius was invoked to justify Australian colonization or was, rather, only a retrospective rationalization of early colonial views⁵, at the very least our argument here may be understood as suggesting that this legal context does not exhaust the range of possible interpretations of colonial ideas about Aboriginal peoples and, particularly, interest in their apparent lack of cultivation. As we have intimated, our own perspective here is altogether less instrumentalist, insofar as it contends that the colonial encounter in Australia

³ This argument was, of course, explicitly (though not fully) overturned by the Australian High Court in *Mabo v Queensland* [No. 2], 1992; and it is notable that the claimants in that case were renowned gardeners.

⁴ For a legal account, see McNeil (1989). For a more general historical consideration of how the idea of improvement informed the development of Enlightenment notions of property rights, as well as their denial in respect of lands occupied by indigenous peoples, see Weaver (2003, pp. 81-7, 133-77).

⁵ While Bain Attwood, for example, has followed the High Court’s decision in *Mabo* in contending that ‘the British Government determined in 1785 that New Holland [Australia] was a terra nullius’ (1996, pp. viii-ix), David Ritter has contended that the ‘doctrine’ of terra nullius was rather a convenient way for the High Court to identify and address the ‘rationale’ for Aboriginal dispossession: ‘When Australia was originally colonised by the Crown’, Ritter argues, ‘neither terra nullius or any other legal doctrine was used to deny the recognition of traditional Aboriginal rights under the common law’ (1996, p. 6). ‘Such a doctrinal denial’, he continues, ‘would not have appeared necessary to the colonists’ (1996, p. 6). Although Ritter himself tends to rely upon a generalized idea of race in order to maintain that ‘the absence of Aboriginal land rights was not a matter for judicial decisions’ (1996, p. 13), his argument is worth noting here, not only for its own problematization of the legal basis upon which accounts such as Attwood’s have maintained that race provided a straightforward justification for colonialism, but also in the possibility of its ‘radicalization’ along the lines of our own argument.

problematized, rather than confirmed, a prevailing idea of race⁶. It is in the context of a more general suspicion that the entire Australian continent must have been the product of a separate creation that the colonists' preoccupation with the unimproved condition of the Aborigines may be understood. For, we will argue, it was precisely their apparently utter lack of cultivation that, setting them apart from other so-called savage peoples, threatened to undermine the very basis upon which the notion of 'the human' had been defined in Enlightenment thought, in its (progressive) separation from nature.

As will become clear, however, it was in the context of successively failed attempts to 'civilize' the Aborigines that initial perplexity at their condition turned into outright dismay, as it introduced speculation not only about the Aborigines' inclination, but about their very capacity for improvement. It was this apparent incapacity that came to be elaborated through the 'sciences' of craniology and phrenology. The figure of the Australian Aborigine entered European and American racial discourse as a challenge to the belief in the possibility of improvement that had, for example, informed the developmental hierarchy of races that had characterized Enlightenment stadial theory, and informed colonialism's 'civilizing mission'. The intractable Aborigine came to supply seemingly irrefutable evidence for an essential, permanent and innate racial difference, and so came to provide the strongest support for those who maintained the intrinsic inferiority of the 'dark-skinned' races. The argument of this paper, then, is that humanist incomprehension in the face of the Australian Aborigine facilitated speculation that race was an innate and permanent difference which – in mid-nineteenth-century arguments for slavery, for example – was extended to the 'negro', as well as more generally⁷.

Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century encounters with the Australian Aborigines can be usefully approached against the background of the earlier 'discovery' of indigenous peoples in the Americas. While in this respect it is again possible to trace a continuity between encounters with the American Indians and the Australian Aborigines, and to document the use of the term 'savagery' (or primitivism, heathenism, barbarism, etc.) stretching back way before this, it is the distinctive character of colonial encounters in Australia that will become evident here. For, whether or not the 'discovery' of the people of the Americas informed or was informed by ideas of human development, it was within the framework of this possibility that their apparently savage condition was explained. It was, for example, as the Americans were compared to 'those early barbarians who occupied the continent of Greece and its islands' (Lafitau, cited in Meek 1976, p. 62) that they were understood within a narrative history of 'the human' according to which all civilized peoples had been savages and all savage peoples were destined to become civilized. The social contract and stadial theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries elaborated a theory of human and societal development that, while drawing upon ancient and Christian ideas, placed an unprecedented emphasis upon what Roy Harvey Pearce, in his study of *Savagism and Civilisation: The Indian and the*

⁶ In this respect, therefore, it is less to Edward Said's (1979) description of the power of colonial discourse and more to Homi Bhabha's (1984) attempt to elicit its limits that our argument takes its theoretical inspiration. See also Perrin (1999).

⁷ The argument presented in this paper draws upon, and summarizes, that in Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (2007).

American Mind, has described as the ‘civilized idea of Progress’ (1958, p. 82). Here, then, it is through a consideration of how the American Indian was apprehended in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the characteristics of a prevailing humanism, and so of a relatively benign racism, will be elaborated in contrast to the polygenist ideas that were to predominate by the mid-nineteenth century and, it is argued here, following the encounter with the Australian Aborigine.

The features of this humanism, in its assumption of the progressive separation of ‘man’ from nature, are familiar enough: in the writings of social contract theorists such as Locke and Rousseau, in their postulation of the transition from a so-called state of nature to civil society, and in the further elaborations of and refinements to this thesis, as elaborated in the work of stadial theorists such as Lafitau, de Pauw and Turgot in France as well as Adam Smith and William Robertson in Scotland (see Meek 1976). Recalling the biblical injunction, as well as the ancient anthropology of the human as a unique city-building, city-dwelling ‘animal’, such theorists articulated a developmental schema that described an increasing human separation from, and mastery of, nature⁸. The human was and became more distinctly human in this progression away from a nature that, conceived as either exterior or interior to the human, was essentially capricious. Nature was to be cultivated. And, as the etymology of this word implies, it was in the labour of cultivation that the distinctively cultural rather than natural character of the human came to be expressed: in the cultivation of human reason over natural instinct or desire (see, for example, Rousseau 1968 [1763], p. 65) and, correlatively, in the cultivation of the land in the transition to a civil society characterized by property, law and the institutions of government (see, for example, Locke 1960 [1689], pp. 290-1). For the stadial theorists too, it was the ‘cultivation’ of nature – both agriculture and the domestication of animals – that was crucial to human progression on to the higher stages of social development: as de Pauw put it, ‘property and all the arts are . . . born in the womb of agriculture’ (cited in Meek 1976, p. 146)⁹.

A key assumption shared by these theorists was that inherent within societal development through higher and higher stages was a force of human perfectibility. Humankind constituted a unity, such that the diversely manifest livelihoods of all peoples could be placed on an imagined scale and considered as variations on a universal path of the human’s emergence from nature, beginning with cultivation. Despite a distinct anxiety in accounting for the apparent ‘infancy’ of the New World

⁸ It is in questioning this separation that our argument draws generally upon a range of recent ‘posthumanist’ writings. Among many, see in particular Glendenning (2000) and Armesto (2004). Their elaboration is beyond the scope of this article, and the reader is directed to Anderson (above) for a discussion of the sense in which such writings unsettle and thus call for a historicization of, the model of ‘the human’ as a uniquely nature-transcending being. This article engages that historicity with the project of race historiography.

⁹ A number of world historians have seen agriculture as the developmental threshold that provided the basis for the emergence of the great regional traditions of human civilization (see, for example, Clark 1969; Smith 1995; Atkins, Roberts and Simmons 1998). For Maisels (1990), for example, it was plant and animal domestication that enabled a succession of interrelated changes in the scale and complexity of human societies, and in the development and diversification of humanity across the surface of the earth. For geographers Whitmore and Turner ‘cultivation is a direct expression of the human-environment condition’ (2001, p. xi). And for MacNeish ‘no civilisation has existed without an agricultural base, either in the past or today. Truly, agriculture was the first great step forward by human beings’ (1992, p. 3).

(Pagden 1995), America did not present any significant challenge to this assumption. For, while the 'state of nature' was imagined on the basis of encounters with the American Indian, the point to be emphasized here is that it was always as a stage – even if the first stage – of human development. In America, therefore, the social contract and stadial theorists found not merely an instance of savage society, but an indication of its inevitable surpassing.

Insofar as the American Indians were regarded as already on an Enlightenment scale of development, the 'state of nature' – or indeed some barely conceivable condition of 'pure' savagery – could be imagined on the basis of encounters with the American Indians exactly because they were considered to be just emerging from such a state. Turgot, for example, noted that there were some signs of transition to a pastoral stage in America: the raising of corn, for example, in Maine but also the annual field re-allotment practices of the eastern Algonkian Indians and some Iroquois. Adam Smith also observed that they 'have some notion of agriculture' (cited in Meek 1976, p. 118); for Robertson too, among others, while it was 'very slight', agriculture among the American Indians was nevertheless discernible. Clearly the limited level of development among the American Indians caused some concern, and at the very least required further explanation. Smith remarked upon the rudimentary character of American agriculture, suggesting that the planting of 'a few stalks of corn' was not agriculture 'proper' (Meek 1976, p. 124). And for others, such as Robertson and de Pauw, it was the failure of the American Indians to have domesticated the reindeer, caribou, moose or bison that indicated their limited progress. How, then, could the Americans' relatively low level of development be explained? Aside from the proposition that the American Indians had themselves only recently arrived on the continent via some now submerged or yet-to-be discovered land bridge, the overwhelmingly prevalent view was that it was the inhibiting effect of the American environment or its climate that provided the explanation. For Turgot, it was simply the lack of availability of domesticable animals that accounted for the Indians' apparently limited development. More generally, for Robertson, it was the effects of climate; for Smith, it was the environment (Meek 1976, p. 124); and for De Pauw too – although he was quick to depict the Americans as stupid, brutish, depraved and debauched – it was the harshness of the environment in which the Americans lived that limited their scope for attending to anything beyond their mere survival.

Significantly then, the American Indians' relatively impoverished condition was explained in these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century perspectives with reference more to their distinct circumstances than to any innate difference or deficiency. As Robertson indicates, such an explanation assumed that 'the human mind, whenever it is placed in the same situation, will, in ages the most distant, and in countries the most remote, assume the same form, and be distinguished by the same manners' (cited in Meek 1976, p. 139). The American Indians were regarded just like any other peoples, only at a different stage on a nevertheless universal path of development: 'In every part of the earth, the progress of man hath been nearly the same; and we can trace him in his career from the rude simplicity of savage life, until he attains the industry, the arts, and the elegance of polished society' (Robertson cited in Meek 1976, p. 141). If, therefore, the Americans were just emerging from a state of nature, and if their development was in this respect limited, it was only ever for reasons that would have inhibited equally any other peoples who were placed in the same situation.

In the eighteenth century, humankind was viewed as essentially an ‘open system’ (Diamond 1974, p. 101); that is, the savage existed on *continuous* ground with the human writ large. Such was the unity of the human. ‘All civilized people have been savages’, wrote Diderot, ‘and if left to their natural impulses all savage people are destined to become civilized’ (cited in Pagden 1993, p. 153). Unity resided in the idea of a uniquely human capacity to separate from nature. And, while Enlightenment thought certainly ranked the world’s people on a hierarchy that stretched from savagery to civility (Gould 1997, p. 63), it was in a fundamental acceptance of the perfectibility of all human beings that an essential humanity lying beneath the superficial, manifest differences of physicality and livelihood among humans, was both assumed and maintained (White 1978, p. 156).

Racial difference was subordinated to this underlying unity and – except for an isolated few¹⁰ – race did not provide any explanation for what were understood to be different levels of human development. Rather, the prevailing Enlightenment view, as indicated by the perception of the American Indian, referred to races merely as peoples who grouped together as kin, tribes or nations, and who exhibited similarities that were themselves traced to the contingencies of their situation (Stepan 1982). Blumenbach, for example – although the pioneer of the skull measurement fetish that was to flourish in the next century (and who, by the early 1790s, was already receiving specimens of Aboriginal skulls from Australia (Williams and Frost 1988, p. 202)) – claimed there were no sharp dividing lines between ‘racial’ groups: ‘No variety of mankind exists, whether of colour, countenance, or stature, etc., so singular as not to be connected with others of the same kind by such an imperceptible transition, that it is very clear that all are related, and only differ from each other in degree’ (cited in Jahoda 1999, p. 65).

A relatively insignificant term in the eighteenth century, only in the following century did race come to be associated with ‘the expression of attitudes toward dark-skinned, and especially black-skinned, people’ (Stocking 1968, p. 36). And, as we will see now, it was in the encounter with a people who seemed to defy the thesis of human exceptionality and the unity premised upon it – a people who could not be accommodated within the existing idea of race as a sub-division of the human – that race came to be conceived as an innate and permanent difference. This paper, then, now considers this confounding colonial experience in the earth’s Great South Land in order: first, to indicate the difficulty that the people of Australia presented for existing ideas and categorizations of the human; and, second, to argue that the elaboration of a polygenist, or more generally an innate, idea of race may be understood as a response to that difficulty.

That Australia presented a general challenge to European categories, its flora and fauna raising questions about the possibility, as Darwin was to put it later, that ‘surely two distinct Creators must have been at work’ (cited in De Beer 1965, p. 107), has been well-documented (see Ritvo 1997; Smith 1985; Marshall and Williams 1982; Martin 1993; Moyal 1986). In 1783, the collector Sir James Smith, for example, complained that ‘[w]hen a botanist first enters . . . New Holland, he finds himself as it were in a new world. He can scarcely meet with any certain fixed points from which

¹⁰ As we have indicated, these included Voltaire and Edward Long, as well as Lord Kames. See footnote 2 and accompanying text.

to draw his analogies' (quoted in Smith 1985, p. 168). And, similarly, Francois Peron remarked in 1809 that 'New Holland defies our conclusions from comparisons, mocks our studies, and shakes to their foundations the most firmly established and most universally admitted of our scientific opinions' (quoted in Smith 1985, p. 306). Bernard Smith concludes his summary of such accounts with the observation that, in Australia, 'traditional European ideas concerning the nature of the universe were exposed to novel and difficult questions' (1985, p. 167). And it was in the context of this more general problematization that Australia posed for existing classifications, and ultimately for the idea of a single creation, that the apparently incomparable Aborigine posed a similar challenge to prevailing categorizations and understandings of the human.

James Prichard, the Quaker ethnologist whose insistently monogenist claims were later to become the target of those who argued for an innate conception of racial difference, struggled to classify Australia's Aborigines. He described Terra Australis as that 'great department of the world so much insulated or cut off from communication with the great continents' (1826, pp. 56-7). And, noting that ethnology had as its challenge the explanation of how the offspring of a single pair had diverged through migration into separate nations with diverse customs, physical features and beliefs (see Bravo 1996), Prichard went on to pose the question: 'Has New Holland . . . an indigenous stock of human inhabitants, as it has of other animals and plants?' (1826, p. 88). Acknowledging a special debt to accounts of Cook's voyages (Stocking 1973, p. xxxv), although Prichard maintained that environmental factors were the cause of the peculiarities of the Australian Aborigine, he nevertheless admitted the observation that '[a]ll New Holland . . . appears to be inhabited by a race, essentially different from all those hitherto known' (Prichard 1826, citing Peron, p. 407), or, again, that '[t]he natives of Australia differ . . . from any other race of men in features, complexion, habits, and language' (Prichard 1841, citing Wilkes, p. 263). Arguably, then, it was in what remained a certain perplexity for Prichard about the Australians that, as Stocking puts it, 'real indications of disarray' became evident in his monogenism by the time of the third edition of his *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind* (1836-47) (Stocking 1973, p. lxxxii)¹¹. Here, for example, while classifying the Australians among the 'Alfourous' nations – despite, as he notes, being 'the only race included among them whose language is known to be distinct from the Polynesians' (1841, p. 215) – Prichard goes on to accord them a separate chapter, 'Of the Natives of Australasia' (pp. 258-79), even though the last section of his discussion of the Alforians carries the heading 'History of the Alforian or Australian race' (1841, pp. 256-7). In his *The Natural History of Man*, moreover, published in 1843, Prichard admits what is already discernible in the third edition of his *Researches*: that any correct classification of the Australians 'cannot yet be determined' (1843, p. 354). So, while Prichard continued to maintain that 'all the races of men are of one species' (1973 [1813], p. 3), clearly he had specific difficulties with the Australians. And, as the introduction to the third edition of his *Researches* indicates, these were directly related to what he considered to be their extremely savage condition.

[I]f a person previously aware of the existence of such diversities [of humankind], could suddenly be made a spectator of the various appearances

¹¹ James Hunt, Knox's protégé and founder of the polygenist Anthropological Society of London, also pointed out that '[t]here are many indications in Dr Prichard's writings that even he was becoming alive to the difficulty of his own theory' (1866, p. 326).

which the tribes of men display in different regions of the earth, it cannot be doubted that he would experience emotions of wonder and surprise. If such a person, for example, after surveying some brilliant ceremony in one of the highly civilized countries of Europe . . . be carried into a hamlet in Negroland, in the hour when the sable race recreate themselves with dancing and barbarous music . . . if he be placed near the solitary den of the Bushmen, where the lean and hungry savage crouches in silence like a beast of prey . . . if he be carried into the midst of the Australian forest, where the squalid companions of kangaroos may be seen crawling in procession in imitation of quadrupeds – can it be supposed that such a person would conclude the various groups of beings whom he had surveyed to be of one nature, one tribe, or the offspring of the same original stock? It is much more probable that he would arrive at the opposite conclusion (Prichard 1841, pp. 1-2).

In the late seventeenth century, William Dampier had observed that the Australian Aborigines had ‘no Houses and skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry and Fruits of the Earth’, as had ‘the great variety of savages’ he had encountered; he went on to describe the Aborigines as ‘the miserablest People in the world’ (cited in Marshall and Williams 1982, p. 40). Dampier’s account had, according to Bernard Smith, already served to displace the African (or ‘Hottentot’) as the lowest link in nature’s chain, or at the very least had offered up ‘a rival candidate for the position’ (1985, p. 170). Prichard, who cites Dampier (1826, p. 397, 1841, p. 262), also subscribed to this view: ‘The Australians [are] . . . in their external condition, perhaps, the most miserable of the human family, being destitute of the arts which could enable them to live with any degree of comfort in the region which they inhabit, or even to support, unless scattered in small wandering bands over wide space, their physical existence’ (1843, p. 545). But, in an indication of just how intolerable this degree of ‘miserableness’ was for his own views, and perhaps also providing an explanation as to why, for him, a correct classification of the Aborigines could not yet be determined, Prichard was reluctant to acknowledge the completeness of such a description, adding: ‘there is reason to believe that we have as yet seen only the most destitute of the whole nation; and that there are tribes farther to the northward, perhaps in inland countries of the great Austral land, who are by no means so miserable or so savage as the people near the southern shores’ (1843, p. 545).

In Australia, Dampier’s and Prichard’s assessment of the Australian Aborigines was reiterated in many early colonial accounts. These are of interest here, however, not in their mere documentation of supposed Aboriginal savagery, but rather in their emphasis upon its extremity, and in this respect – recalling Dampier’s list – upon the evidently remarkable failure of the Aborigines to have improved upon, domesticated or, above all, to have cultivated nature. Lord Monboddo had, in the 1770s, already claimed that the Australian Aborigine was ‘Man in his original condition’ – whose ‘huts are not near so well built as those of beavers’ (cited in Smith 1985, p. 170). And it was the failure of the Australian Aborigine to have surpassed a state of nature – a state that apparently no longer needed to be imagined – which preoccupied both Cook and Banks.

Their canoes, Cook claimed, were the ‘worst he had ever seen’ (cited in Hawkesworth 1773, p. 210). And, similarly, Banks described their ‘houses’ as ‘framed with less art or rather less industry than any habitations of human beings probably that the world can shew’ (1962, p. 128), adding that even the ‘wretched hovels at Terra Del Fuego’

were superior (cited in Hawkesworth 1773, pp. 230-1). To these observations may be added many others, including Surgeon-General John White who argued, more generally, that ‘in improvements of every kind, the Indians of this country are many centuries behind’ (1962 [1790], pp. 204-5). Above all, though, it was the absence of cultivation among the Australian Aborigines that the Europeans found most perplexing. And again, its absence in Australia – in contrast to America and to the so-called ‘Hottentot’ of Africa’s Cape, who was acknowledged as ‘at least’ having some of the arts of civil life, including farming (Hudson 2004) – was remarked upon repeatedly: in Louis Freycinet’s words, ‘as for cultivation properly so-called, nature is the sole contributor’ (2001, p. 173); or in Watkin Tench’s account, ‘to cultivation of the ground they are utter strangers’ (cited in Williams and Frost 1988, p. 190); or again, as William Bradley put it, ‘we never met with the smallest appearance of any kind of cultivated ground’ (cited in Williams and Frost 1988, p. 191); and so on. Unlike in America, therefore, the Australian colonists could find no evidence that the Aborigines’ were even beginning to surpass a state of nature.

It is in the evident struggle of the colonists to comprehend and to categorize a people who are here ‘represented’ as so extremely ‘savage’ that they are unique that, we suggest, such emphasis upon the Aborigines’ lack of cultivation may be interpreted as something other than the colonists’ anticipation of the ‘lawfulness’ of their appropriation of land that, precisely as uncultivated, could be considered as *terra nullius*. As the ‘most barbarous inhabitants on the surface of the globe’, they were, as Turnbull states explicitly, ‘beyond comparison’ (cited in Reynolds 1989, p. 101). And, as this contradiction indicates, the apparently extreme ‘savagery’ of Aboriginal peoples appeared as so extreme that it could barely be comprehended or represented without putting the prevailing notion of savagery – as a condition that was destined to be surpassed – into question.

In this respect, moreover, it is noteworthy that Banks’ infamous and erroneous assumption that the interior of Australia was uninhabited was itself premised upon the sheer inconceivability that the land beyond the coastal area could be inhabited by a people who did not cultivate:

We saw indeed only the sea coast: what the immense tract of inland country may produce is to us totally unknown: we may have liberty to conjecture however that they are totally uninhabited. . . . I do not remember to have read of any inland nation who did not cultivate the ground more or less, even the North Americans who were so well versd in hunting sowl their Maize. But should a people live inland who supported themselves by cultivation those inhabitants of the sea coast must certainly have learn’d to imitate them in some degree at least, otherwise their reason must be suppos’d to hold a rank little superior to that of monkeys (Banks 1962, pp. 122-3).

In Banks’ reasoning – which anticipated something of Prichard’s disbelief that the entire continent could be inhabited by peoples as ‘destitute’ as those already encountered – the existence of a noncultivating inland people was simply unthinkable. And it was equally inconceivable for him that those inhabiting the coastal region, at least if they were to be classed as human, might not have learnt to cultivate should they have been exposed to such a practice.

While the extremely ‘miserable’ condition of the Australian Aborigine may have perplexed Europeans insofar as they saw no evidence that the Aborigine, unlike the

American Indian, was even beginning to transcend nature, circumstantial explanations – stressing, for example, that those in coastal regions had no need to cultivate – could still just about appease any humanist anxiety. The English colonist Peter Cunningham's 1827 account of the 'abject animal state in which they [the Australian Aborigines] live', for example, articulated just such an Enlightenment position:

Civilisation depends more upon the circumstances under which man is placed than upon any innate impulse of his own. . . . It is only necessity that urges mankind to congregate in fixed habitations, and raise their food by the sweat of their brow; for if it could still be procured in as easy a way by civilised Europeans as by our uncultivated tribes, the European woods would soon abound with creatures nearly as rude and idle as our natives (cited in McGregor 1997, 6).

But, as Banks' reasoning indicates, this humanist argument was itself dependent upon the assumption that the transition to a stage of cultivation and beyond could be made, and that the Aborigines shared at least a universal capacity to surpass their 'natural' condition. It was, though, precisely this assumption that the Australian Aborigine was to challenge.

While the failure of the Aborigines to emulate white settlers had been noted as early as the mid-1790s – 'The Native Inhabitants are the most irrational and ill formed Human beings on the Face of the Earth destitute in every thought for future Comfort and deriving as yet no benefit from Civilization. They have no Idea of profiting by the Example of our Settlers to sow Corn for a Sure Provision' (Daniel Paine, cited in Williams and Frost 1988, p. 197) – it was, we will indicate now, as continued efforts to 'civilize' the Aborigines and to encourage them to cultivate came to be regarded as futile that their very capacity for improvement was doubted. Initial puzzlement at the peculiarity of Aboriginal non-cultivation thus turned into outright consternation as Enlightenment humanism and the conception of human unity that it supported were put fundamentally into question.

IV

In the context of Enlightenment assumptions about the inevitable progress – and hence the improbability – of all peoples, including savages, the early nineteenth century witnessed repeated attempts to civilize the Aborigines: to convert them to Christianity and to encourage them to cultivate the land. In terms that recall earlier apprehensions of the American Indian, Governor Macquarie, for example, was optimistic about this possibility:

Scarcely Emerged from the remotest State of rude and Uncivilized Nature, these people appear to possess some Qualities, which, if properly Cultivated and Encouraged, Might render them not only less wretched and destitute by Reason of their Wild wandering and Unsettled Habits, but progressively Useful to the Country (cited in Reynolds 1989, p. 104).

Macquarie established a so-called 'Native Institution' in Parramatta, NSW, in 1814, for the 'civilization of the native black children', although it operated for just four years. Some time later, and after the second such institution had been closed, it was soberly observed that this attempt to 'settle them on a portion of land' had failed entirely (Archdeacon Broughton, cited in Colonial Department 1836, p. 14). Nevertheless, efforts to civilize the Aborigines continued throughout the 1820s and

1830s, with a broad-based endeavour that linked their civilization to Christianization, settlement and cultivation.

Typically, the idea of ‘inducing them to give up their wandering’ and grouping them on missions was consistent with the attempt to ‘wean them from their barbarous habits, and progressively to introduce civilized customs amongst them’ (Colonial Department 1834, pp. 161, 158). Oriented towards this goal, the so-called protectorate system was, according to the *Report of the Inquiry into the Forcible Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (1997), ‘based on the notion that Indigenous people would willingly establish self-sufficient agricultural communities on reserved areas modelled on an English village’ (no page number). In a letter in July 1840 from three members of a mission in New South Wales to the Colonial Land and Emigration Office in London, it was, for example, suggested that reserves of land would supply the ‘best means’ for enabling Aborigines ‘to pass from the hunting to the agricultural and pastoral life . . . wherever they have been induced by any means to abandon their wandering habits’ (Colonial Office 1844, p. 61). And, notwithstanding Macquarie’s failed attempts to ‘attach them to the soil’, it was argued that such ‘reserves . . . would enable them to live not as hunters, in which case no good would be done, but as cultivators of the soil’ (Colonial Office 1844, p. 62).

The dominant view at this time was that the Aborigines’ ‘present barbarism’ could not necessarily be ascribed to ‘any unconquerable dullness of intellect, but merely to their love of erratic liberty’ (Colonial Office 1844, p. 150). And so efforts to civilize them proceeded. The superintendent of a mission in Victoria, for example, insisted, against mounting evidence of the failure of missions in the Australian colonies, that he would not be deterred:

notwithstanding they have sunk to the lowest degree of degradation and misery, yet the means which have been so successful among the Indians in America, the Hottentots in Africa, and the Cannibal Islands of the South Seas, will, by the blessing of God, if faithfully used, produce the same effects among this people also (Colonial Office 1844, pp. 243-4).

But, despite a number of accounts about ‘the decided improvement’ of Aborigines in regions and districts where they had been induced to remain for a fixed amount of time (Colonial Office 1844, pp. 176, 182, 199), there were many more reports of ‘little change’ among the Aborigines. Attempts to convert and more generally to civilize them were proving as futile as Macquarie’s ‘Native Institution’. One commissioner for crown lands in New South Wales summarized this view in 1843: ‘From their present mode of living, and the great dislike the blacks have to civilized life, I do not consider that there is any great hope that their future prospects will improve’ (Colonial Office 1844, p. 334).

In 1844, Captain George Grey conceded to the British government that the Aborigines had ‘resisted all efforts which have been made for their civilization’ (Colonial Office 1844, p. 100). And, while Grey, along with others, proposed that yet further efforts should be made to civilize them, this very possibility was already beginning to be doubted. The residual optimism of Grey and others was not, for example, shared by Lord Stanley, Secretary of the Colonial Office in London:

After making fair allowance for the peculiar difficulty of such an undertaking, it seems impossible any longer to deny that the efforts which have hitherto been

made for the civilization of the aborigines have been unavailing; that no real progress has yet been effected, and that there is no reasonable ground to expect from them greater success in the future. . . . I have great doubts as to the wisdom or propriety of continuing the missions any longer. . . . [And] I cannot conceal from myself that the failure of the system of protectors has been at least as complete as that of the missions.

Stanley, however, could still not bring himself to reach the conclusion that others soon would, concluding:

I should not, without the most extreme reluctance, admit that nothing can be done; that with respect to them alone [the Australian Aborigines] the doctrines of Christianity must be inoperative, and the advantages of civilization incommunicable. I cannot acquiesce in the theory that they are incapable of improvement (20 December 1842, cited in Colonial Department 1844, pp. 221-3).

Stanley rather desperately maintained his willingness to co-operate in ‘any arrangement for their civilization which may hold out a fair prospect of success’ (20 December 1842, cited in Colonial Office 1844, pp. 221-3). But just a year later, in a report from a select committee appointed to assess ‘the condition of the Aborigines in New South Wales’ (Colonial Office 1845), the basis for a rather less open policy towards further attempts at Aboriginal improvement was taking shape. Here, it was exactly the colonists’ initial bewilderment at the peculiarly non-cultivating Aborigine that was recalled. And, as the committee chairman invoked a certain ‘wanting in their minds’ in order to explain the evident failure of civilizing policies (Colonial Office 1845, p. 20), so the committee’s enquiries may be read as struggling to pose the question – if not to propose the thesis – that the Aborigines were uniquely incapable of improvement in general, and of cultivation in particular.

An ‘intelligent’ Aboriginal witness called before the committee was asked by the chairman: ‘Would any black fellows living about you now like to have a farm and to grow cabbages and other things?’ When told ‘they would not stop by it’, the witness was asked for clarification: ‘They like to walk about?’ To which the answer was ‘Yes’ (Colonial Department 1845, p. 4). Reverend Polding, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, was then asked: ‘Are you not aware that all the tribes of Indians, in America, have been accustomed in their native state to cultivate the ground?’ And, on the point of a failure to ‘hold’ the Aborigines to the soil, even on reserves, another member of the committee asked: ‘Can you account for the difference of success that has attended the missionaries efforts with regard to New South Wales, as compared with all the neighbouring islands – does it not appear an anomaly of an inscrutable character?’ (1845, pp. 8-9).

Clearly, the assumption that the Aborigines were capable of improvement was wearing thin as they had become, not just a peculiarity for the European settlers and scientists, but an ‘anomaly’ for the colonial authorities. How, then, could their unique insusceptibility to civilization be accounted for?

Confounding all attempts to civilize them, and so putting into question the cherished doctrine of an essential human improvability, the Aborigines’ difference could no longer be explained in Enlightenment terms – particularly, as many observers were to argue, in view of the agricultural improvements that the Europeans had apparently

managed to achieve in Australia¹². Recourse to the thesis, intimated by the select committee's enquiries, of an innate deficiency among the Aborigines thus came to be acknowledged as the only possible explanation for their continued failure to improve either themselves or the land. An anonymous essay published in 1843 in *The New South Wales Magazine* anticipated, in the context of the nineteenth century development of phrenology and craniology, what was to become the prevalent explanation, declaring that 'all attempts to civilize the savage are futile' because of a 'deficiency in [their] reflective faculties' that was passed on from generation to generation (Anonymous 1843, pp. 58-9). Confirmation that a biological difference, unique to the 'Australian race', provided the explanation for their continuing savagery was also to be found in the case of the 'half-caste'. In a statement that anticipated a colonial policy in Australia of later years, the question was raised:

How is it that the half-caste remains with the white, while the pure black under similar circumstances returns to savage life? I am at a loss for any other explanation than this: that the faculties of the halfcaste are of a different order from those of the pure black . . . and consequently, that nature is too powerful in the other case to be subdued by any change of circumstance (Anonymous 1843, p. 59).

By 1866, a review in the British-based *Popular Magazine of Anthropology* of Gideon S. Lang's *The Aborigines of Australia* was able to interpret that book as vindication of what was by then accepted to be 'the world-wide fact that the savage hunter is irreclaimable by the civilized man' (Anonymous 1866, p. 50).

The boundaries of savagery and of race had once been imagined, as we saw earlier, in the body and being of the North American Indian. But, as the reviewer of Lang's book stated, a more differentiated portrait had emerged: 'the Indian of North America would regard an Australian with a degree of pity bordering on contempt. And perhaps justly so' (1866, p. 51). The Australian savage, the reviewer went on to argue, was not an 'uncultured type of civilized man', one 'who may be schooled in civilisation', but instead was a lost cause. And, in the claim of an essential Aboriginal deficiency that was, as we will see now, generalized, it was precisely a certain humanism that could no longer be assumed: 'In the animal sphere we readily admit that there are both birds and beasts that practically defy domestication. . . . But we are backward in applying this principle to man' (1866, p. 59).

V

¹² By 1811, Governor Macquarie was able to report to the Colonial Secretary 'that the country at large is in a progressive state of improvement' (cited in Gascoigne 2002, p. 75). Although, as Warwick Anderson (2002) for example has pointed out, the colonization of south-eastern Australia was no confident act of mastery, but rather a difficult and anxious exercise of reconciling the mismatch British colonists perceived between themselves and a land in which they felt acutely alienated. In the context of the Enlightenment obsession with improvement, it should also be noted that the development of agriculture in Australia was always more than a means of survival, and a practice bound up with the mastery of nature (see, for example, Ryan 1996). Governor Arthur Phillip, soon after the colony's founding, for example, observed:

There are few things more pleasing than the contemplation of order and useful arrangement on the land arising gradually out of tumult and confusion; and perhaps this satisfaction cannot anywhere be more fully enjoyed than where a settlement of civilised people is fixing itself upon a newly discovered and savage coast (Phillip 1789, p. 144).

We have already indicated how the Australian Aborigine strained Prichard's monogenism. Despite his tendency towards environmental and especially climatic explanations of human physical and cultural difference, Prichard denounced Australia's Aborigines in terms that appeared excessive in view of such explanations. Calling them 'miserable hordes' and describing Aboriginal women as having 'squalid and disgusting forms' (1841, pp. xix, 257), Prichard at least contemplated the idea that they might be innately deficient. 'The Australians', he wrote, 'are generally considered to be at least one of the most degraded and savage races of the world' (1841, p. 266). And, noting that 'some writers have represented them as scarcely endowed with reason' (1841, p. 266), he went on to argue – now with a craniological-phrenological reference which would seem to contradict his monogenism directly – that:

Amongst the rudest of tribes of men, hunters and savage inhabitants of forests, dependent for their supply of food on the accidental produce of the soil or on the chase, among whom are the most degraded of the African nations and the Australian savages . . . a form of the head is prevalent which is most aptly distinguished by the term prognathous. (Prichard 1843, p. 107)

As already indicated, and despite such references, Prichard maintained that 'all human races are of one and the same species' (1843, p. 546). He insisted, moreover, that 'the term [race] should be used without any involved meaning that such a progeny or stock has always possessed a particular character' (cited in Douglas 2001, pp. 21-2). But others who did not share Prichard's religious views – which in any case were losing credibility given the doubt that the discovery of geological time had raised about the biblical account of human origins (see, for example, Stocking 1987, p. 74) were less constrained in drawing more radical and more general conclusions from the stubborn peculiarity of the Australian Aborigine.

While in 1848 the Scottish Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Hamilton Smith referred to the Aborigines as 'the Papuan[s] of Australia', it was this 'most sunken of all human beings', he went on to say, who raised 'the problem of the identity of species' (1848, p. 207)¹³. Polygenists such as Knox and Hunt in England and Nott and Gliddon, among others, in North America, however, went further¹⁴. They drew upon the work of craniologists and phrenologists such as Samuel Morton and George Combe in order to shatter the idea of the unity of the human 'species'. This work explicitly sought to provide an explanation for the unimproved and unimprovable condition of certain peoples in the size and the shape of their skull, as it was taken to reflect the capacity of the mind in its power of reasoning or 'ideality'. And so the thesis of an innate racial difference was supported, as Combe put it, against the 'fashionable tone of

¹³ Working with Cuvier's notion of 'species' as populations bound by the faculty of procreating fertile offspring, Smith went on to question whether 'the offspring of Aboriginal women and whites became infertile' (1848, p. 114). This issue of mixed race reproduction in relation to the species question was one of the more extraordinary developments in the monogenist/polygenist debate, and in the North American context was to grow especially heated (see Stanton 1960, pp. 73-80).

¹⁴ Here, we are compelled to leave aside the European discourse of race, which includes figures such as Carl Vogt (whose *Lectures on Man: His Place in Creation, and in the History of the Earth*, was edited by James Hunt), who stated:

We find that there is an almost regular series in the cranial capacity of such nations and races as, since historical times, have taken little or no part in civilisation. Australians, Hottentots, and Polynesians, nations in the lowest state of barbarism, commence the series; and no-one can deny that the place they occupy in relation to cranial capacity and cerebral weights corresponds with the degree of their intellectual capacity and civilization. (Vogt 1864, pp. 91-2)

thinking . . . that national character depends on external circumstances . . . and the different circumstances in which men are placed; and that the *native* stock of animal, moral, and intellectual powers on which these operate, is the same in New Holland, in England, in Hindustan, and in France' (1853, p. 327). For Knox, as for many others, race became everything exactly because it came to be thought as independent of external circumstances. And, pitched explicitly against what he called 'the laborious writings of Dr Prichard' (1850, p. 23), Knox announced: 'call them Species, if you will: call them permanent Varieties; it matters not. The fact, the simple fact, remains just as it was: men are of different races' (1850, p. 2).

Crucial in the elaboration of this idea of race was the figure of the Australian Aborigine. Beyond contentions, such as Louis Agassiz's, that the 'condensed picture' of separate speciation offered by the 'insular continent' of New Holland provided exemplary support for the argument that there had been distinct 'centres of creation' (1855, p. 1xxiii), it was in the observation, taken here from John Nott, that 'the natives of Australia differ from any other race of man in features, complexion, habits and language' (Nott and Gliddon 1855, p. 433), that Hamilton-Smith's problem of the identity of the human species received an unambiguous response in the form of polygenism¹⁵. Knox himself, despite focusing mainly on Africa (since he claimed to know that country best), could not avoid invoking a source who had informed him 'that he had every reason to believe that the native Australian race differed in an extraordinary manner from the European' (1850, p. 2). The crania of the 'the Tasmanians and Australian races', he observed, 'show many peculiarities of structure' (1850, p. 227). And he went on to quote Richard Owen's report on a collection of skulls shipped from Australia to the British Museum, stating that '[i]t is only with regard to the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines that he [Owen] could feel any confidence in detecting the distinctive characters of race' (1863, p. 269).

It was, however, not simply the peculiarity of Australia or of its inhabitants that prompted the polygenist thesis. Rather, such a thesis was formulated precisely in response to the apparent miserableness of the Aborigines' living conditions and, in particular, in response to the otherwise inexplicable fact that they did not – and apparently could or would not – cultivate. Thus, observations such as Combes', that the New Hollanders and the 'wretched beings' of Van Dieman's Island (Tasmania) 'in a fine climate and productive soil. . . derive no other sustenance from the earth than a few fern roots and bulbs (1851, pp. 135-7), or again that 'in Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales a few natives have existed in the most wretched poverty, ignorance, and degradation, in a country which enriches Europeans as fast as they subject it to cultivation' (1853, p. 332), became the very basis upon which the argument for an innate deficiency among Australia's Aborigines was expounded. And it was the 'sciences' of craniology and phrenology that set about explaining this deficiency; locating its source in, as Combe put it, 'the structure of the head' (1853, p. 335).

¹⁵ Knox too remarked upon the extent of human diversity in the following terms:

That the southern hemisphere of this globe should differ in many respects from the northern in its fauna and flora, will cause no surprise to men in quest of truth; but that it differs so widely as it really does, is not generally known, and still less believed. When I describe the Bosjeman and Hottentot, the Australian and Tasmanian, then will be the proper time to unfold this great fact: that the races of everything living . . . differ from the northern (Knox 1850, pp. 125-6).

Observing that '[t]he New Holland skull' was the most deficient in a variety of respects, including 'Number, Constructiveness, Reflection, and Ideality' (1853, p. 240), Combe 'supported' his analysis with the 'evidence' that had, of course, impelled it. He referred to the accounts of Australian explorers and settlers, making particular note of their observations about the Aborigines' 'lack of housing' and their 'lack of acquaintance with any species of grain', as well as referring to Governor Phillips' failure to 'effect the civilization of that miserable people' (1853, p. 240). Nott too linked evidence that '[t]he races of New Holland and the island of Timor . . . represent the lowest grade in the human family' to what he called their 'remarkable . . . anatomical characteristics' (Nott and Gliddon 1854, p. 434). He continued, drawing now on Morton: 'While, in countenance, they present an extreme of the prognathous type hardly above that of the orang-outan, they possess at the same time the smallest brains of the whole of mankind' (1854, p. 434).

It was in their extreme and apparently irremediable savagery that Australia's Aborigines had prompted the thesis of their innate difference or deficiency. And, it was argued, precisely insofar as they presented 'the lowest and most degraded picture of wretched humanity, scarcely rising in their grovelling and debased dispositions above the level of the very brutes', they offered a unique opportunity for craniological and phrenological study: 'The Aboriginal of Australia exhibits an interesting field for investigation to him who regards with greater interest the character of a people purely the children of Nature, unmodified by the forms and customs of civilization and refinement, and how much more so to the Phrenologists' (Aeneas 1844, p. 156). As measurements of the shape of Aboriginal skulls and the size of their brains were correlated with observations about their savage condition, so Australia's Aborigines came to provide apparently definitive evidence both for the thesis of an innate difference between all races and for the claim of an innate, and so permanent, deficiency in some. And, as Knox, for example, invoked 'specific characters in the quality of the brain' in order to formulate his own theory of 'a physical and, consequently, a psychological inferiority in the dark races generally' (1850, pp. 224-5), it was through craniology and phrenology, and according to a rationale and criteria derived from the 'extreme' case of the Australian Aborigine, that polygenism was generalized to all races but most significantly, of course, to what Knox called 'the dark races'.

In the production of a scale of mental (in)capacity that constituted nothing less than a hierarchy of races, the Australian Aborigines assumed a referential place, as the 'Negro' and other 'types of mankind' were considered and assessed in relation to them. For Morton, as Nott went on to note, the 'Australians' (as members of the 'Negro' group) were placed at the bottom of his 'Table, Showing the Size of the Brain in cubic inches, as obtained from the measurement of 623 Crania of various Races and Families of Men' with a mean cranial capacity of 75 cubic inches, compared, for example, to that of the 'Negro Races', with a mean of 83, the 'American Tribes', with a mean of 84, and the 'English' with a mean of 96 cubic inches (reproduced in Nott and Gliddon 1854, p. 450). And for Combe, albeit less formally, the lowly position of the 'New Hollander' supported his further consideration of, for example, the 'New Zealanders', who were placed above the New Hollanders on account of an analysis supported by the fact that they cleared trees, hewed wood and cultivated potatoes and corn (1853, p. 344), and the 'Negroes', who were placed above the 'New Zealanders'

owing to ‘a concentration of mind which is favourable to settled and sedentary employments’ (1853, p. 352). And so on.

It is not merely the fact that the Australian Aborigines were accorded the lowest position in such racial hierarchies that is significant here. Rather, as we have argued, it is in framing and supporting what, in contrast to Enlightenment stadialism, was a hierarchy of innate and so permanent racial (in)capacity, that the Australian Aborigine may be seen as a key figure in the nineteenth-century shift to polygenism: not only in shattering the monogenism that Prichard sought to preserve, but in the subsequent elaboration and generalization of an innatist idea of race through Combe’s, Morton’s and others’ versions of craniology and phrenology. For such a condition as the human achieved in transcending or cultivating nature was ‘measured’ in the calculations that these ‘sciences’ performed on the skulls and brains of Australia’s Aborigines, as well as on others. And it was because these calculations came to provide the basis upon which polygenism was generalized that – as debates about race in the mid-nineteenth century were impelled by accounts of savagery and the question of its surpassing – the Aborigine appeared not only as the paradigmatic support for a determinist idea of race, but as constitutive of it. Most generally, then, it was the innate deficiency of the Aborigine that was extended to the ‘negro’ as, in the pro-slavery reader *Negro-Mania*, for example, it was argued that:

Never at any given time from the most infinitely remote antiquity until now, has there ever appeared a race of Negroes, that is, men with woolly heads, flat noses, thick and protruding lips, who has ever emerged from a state of savageism or barbarism, to even a demi-civilization – look to the West Indies, to Brazil, to Australia (Campbell 1851, pp. 6-7).

Exactly because of what came to be seen as an innate and permanent racial deficiency among the Australians, and now among all ‘savages’, ‘the dark races’ were no longer expected to change or improve. Supporting his calculation that the ‘Australians’ have the ‘smallest brains’, Morton contended: ‘It is not probable that these people [‘The Australian Family’], as a body, are capable of any other than a very slight degree of civilisation. “Forty years have elapsed since the country was colonised . . . and I have not yet heard of a single native having been reclaimed from barbarism”’ (1839, p. 94). Regarding the possibility of their civilization, and in a strident rebuttal of Enlightenment developmentalism, Knox declared, ‘I should say not’ (1850, p. 244); that they may be converted by education into white men is, he added, ‘an entire delusion’ (1863, p. 268).

The polygenist thesis of permanent racial difference – in Hunt’s words, the idea that ‘from the very earliest dawn of history, races have existed as they are now’ (1866, p. 326) – had thus come to constitute an argument against colonialism’s civilizing mission. And, in a letter to Hunt in 1865, James Bonwick in Australia stated categorically in relation to the Aborigines: ‘I see no hope of their so-called civilization and Christianity. We do not improve them. There are those here who are obliged to acknowledge the force of your arguments’ (1866). In explicitly claiming – or even just speculating – that the human was divided into separate species, as was the case in literalist versions of the polygenist thesis, or, in softer versions, that the differences between races were so unalterable as to be fixed for all time, polygenism determined that the very capacity for realizing humanity was innately and differentially distributed across the world’s peoples. And, against those assumptions of the unity and inevitable progression of all humankind, according to which the

American Indian had been accommodated within the frameworks of social contract and stadial theory, and according to which race was formerly regarded as a subdivision or mere variety of the human, race became everything in the sense that it came to constitute an argument for racial destiny.

As the legacy of polygenism for Aboriginal peoples in Australia was to attest (see, for example, HREOC 1997; McGregor 1997), the polygenist 'notion of the permanence of racial elements' persisted, despite the explicit reversion to monogenism of late-nineteenth century evolutionism, through to eugenics and beyond (see, for example, Stepan 1982, pp. 85, 96). But, while this conception of the permanence of race, and of the inescapability of racial difference or deficiency, was invoked in an attempt to support and to 'rationalize' the genocidal policies that were inflicted upon Australia's Aboriginal peoples, it cannot be adequately explained simply as a justification for colonialism. Rather, as we have argued here, it is in its emergence in the encounter with the Australian Aborigine that polygenism may be understood, most immediately, as a response to the failure of colonial efforts both to comprehend and to civilize Australia's seemingly intractable peoples, and, more fundamentally, as a response to the crisis that they thus precipitated in the cherished idea that 'the human' could be defined according to its separation from, and capacity to rise above, nature.

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