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**Sankar Muthu: Enlightenment against Empire**

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# *One*

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## Introduction: Enlightenment Political Thought and the Age of Empire

IN THE late eighteenth century, a number of prominent European political thinkers attacked imperialism, not only defending non-European peoples against the injustices of European imperial rule, as some earlier modern thinkers had done, but also challenging the idea that Europeans had any right to subjugate, colonize, and ‘civilize’ the rest of the world. This book is a study of this historically anomalous and understudied episode of political thinking. It is an era unique in the history of modern political thought: strikingly, virtually every prominent and influential European thinker in the three hundred years before the eighteenth century and nearly the full century after it were either agnostic toward or enthusiastically in favour of imperialism. In the context of the many philosophical and political questions raised by the emerging relationships between the European and non-European worlds, Enlightenment anti-imperialist thinkers crafted nuanced and intriguingly counter-intuitive arguments about human nature, cultural diversity, cross-cultural moral judgements, and political obligations. This study aims both to pluralize our understanding of the philosophical era known as ‘the Enlightenment’ and to explore a set of arguments and intellectual dispositions that reorient contemporary assumptions about the relationship between human unity and human diversity.

Throughout this book, I use the term ‘Enlightenment’ as a temporal adjective; in this sense of the term, Enlightenment political theory simply refers to the political thought of the long eighteenth century (that is, the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries). As I argue in the concluding chapter, more substantive and conventional understandings of ‘the Enlightenment’ usually occlude more than they illuminate the writings about non-European peoples and empire by eighteenth-century political thinkers. This study, then, is neither a defence of ‘the’ Enlightenment nor an attack upon it, for an investigation of the anti-imperialist strand of eighteenth-century writings is meant to broaden our understanding of Enlightenment-era perspectives, rather than to redescribe ‘the’ Enlightenment or an overriding ‘Enlightenment project’ that ostensibly typified this age of philosophical thought. As with other historiographic terms of convenience, ‘the Enlightenment’ groups together an

extraordinarily diverse set of authors, texts, arguments, opinions, dispositions, assumptions, institutions, and practices. Thus, I begin this book with the presumption that we should diversify our understanding of Enlightenment thought.<sup>1</sup> On this understanding, rather than categorizing ‘the’ Enlightenment *as such* or constructing ideas of a single ‘Enlightenment project’ that one must defend or reject, I take Enlightenment anti-imperialist arguments, which are themselves multifaceted, to represent only some of many, often conflicting, discourses in eighteenth-century moral and political thought.

In the following chapters, I interpret the relationship among theories about the constitutive features of humanity, explanations of human diversity and historical change, and political arguments about European imperialism.<sup>2</sup> In exploring the rise of anti-imperialist arguments in Enlightenment political thought, I concentrate upon the philosophically robust and distinctive strand of such arguments made by Denis Diderot (1713–84), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). These thinkers are not usually grouped together; indeed, they could be viewed as fundamentally antithetical, as representing some of the contrasting ideal-types of eighteenth-century political thought: atheistic materialism, enlightened rationalism, and romantic nationalism. To begin with, such labels grossly distort their actual philosophies. Moreover, as I will argue, viewing these thinkers through the lens of debates about international relations that concerned them deeply, in particular those about the relationship between the European and non-European worlds, brings out the remarkable extent to which their political theories, though obviously unique to be sure, are nonetheless cut from the same cloth.<sup>3</sup> Diderot’s immense philosophical influence in this period with regard to questions of imperialism explains in part the shared intellectual disposition about the immorality of empire and the related philosophical ideas upon which this disposition often rested: theories of human nature; conceptualizations of human diversity; and the relationship between universal moral and political norms, on the one hand, and a commitment to moral incommensurability, on the other. As we will see, Diderot’s anti-imperialist contributions to Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* [*Philosophical and political history of European settlements and commerce in the two Indies*], one of the most widely read, ‘underground’ nonfiction works of the eighteenth century, appear to have left their mark on both Kant and Herder. Behind them all, I will argue, lie Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writings, in particular the two *Discourses*, which exerted both a negative and a positive influence upon the development of this aspect of Enlightenment thought, for Diderot’s, Kant’s, and Herder’s anti-imperialism rested crucially upon both an appropriation as well as a rejection of

particular elements of Rousseau's philosophical anthropology and political thought.

In this chapter, I elaborate the historical and philosophical distinctiveness of Enlightenment anti-imperialist political thought. I also note briefly some of the philosophical sources and legacies of Enlightenment anti-imperialism, which I examine in more detail in the concluding chapter. As I will contend, a number of the conventional distinctions that are deployed by many contemporary political theorists—for instance, between universalism and relativism, or essential and constructed identities—fail to do justice to the arguments made by Enlightenment anti-imperialists, who often treat such supposed opposites as interrelated features of the human condition. A study of Enlightenment anti-imperialism offers a richer and more accurate portrait of eighteenth-century political thought and illuminates the underappreciated philosophical interconnections between human unity and human diversity, and between moral universalism and moral incommensurability.

### **Enlightenment Anti-imperialism as a Historical Anomaly**

Enlightenment anti-imperialist political theory has been the object of far less study than the anti-slavery writings of the same period.<sup>4</sup> Some of the best contemporary scholarship on slavery details the rising tide of philosophical opinion against it, and the emergence of a humanitarian ethic that provided the concepts and languages that newly formed anti-slavery societies and activists deployed in their controversial, lengthy, and ultimately successful campaigns. In their studies about slavery, David Brion Davis and Robin Blackburn attempt to discern why an institution that is universally decried today underwent no sustained opposition from a critical mass of thinkers and political actors until the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The same question can plausibly be asked with regard to imperialism, for it is only in the latter half of the eighteenth century that a group of significant European political thinkers began to attack the imperial and colonial enterprise as such. To be sure, in surveying the philosophical and political debates that followed the European discovery of the New World, one encounters discussions about the hypocrisy of European imperialists,<sup>6</sup> humanitarian attacks upon the practice of Amerindian slavery and other cruelties perpetrated by the conquistadors in the New World,<sup>7</sup> and romanticized (though, as I argue in chapter 2, ultimately dehumanizing) accounts of noble savages in travel, literary, and philosophical texts. Before the late eighteenth century, however, those who sympathized with the plight of colonized peoples and those who launched explicit criticisms of Europeans' relations with the non-European world (including

the most morally impassioned accounts, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas' arguments against the Castilian crown in the mid-sixteenth century) generally decried the abuses of imperial power, but not the imperial mission itself. Imperial rule, however it may have been perceived and justified (inter alia, in light of religious conversion, the civilizing mission of imperialism, economic and other commercial benefits, or the more rational use of otherwise supposedly wasted natural resources), was widely endorsed even by the most zealous *critics* of the violence perpetrated by Europeans in the New World.

Truly anti-imperialist political philosophy emerges in the late eighteenth century among a broad array of thinkers from different intellectual and national contexts. A significant group of European political thinkers rejected imperialism outright as unworkable, dangerous, or immoral—for economic reasons of free trade, as a result of principles of self-determination or cultural integrity, due to concerns about the effects of imperial politics upon domestic political institutions and practices, or out of contempt over the ironic spectacle of ostensibly civilized nations engaging in despotism, corruption, and lawlessness abroad. In confronting the steadily expanding commercial and political power of European states and imperial trading companies over the non-European world, the diverse group of thinkers who assailed the injustices and countered the dominant justifications of European imperialism include Jeremy Bentham, Condorcet, Diderot, Herder, Kant, and Adam Smith.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, such denunciations of what Herder liked to call “the grand European sponging enterprise” were complemented by more specific attacks upon European imperial or quasi-imperial activities in particular regions. Along these lines, the most notable efforts are Edmund Burke's legislative attempts to curtail and to regulate the activities of the East India Company and his lengthy, zealous prosecution of the impeachment of Warren Hastings, a senior East India Company official and the Governor-General of Bengal.<sup>9</sup> Burke argued that the British had failed to respect the sovereignty of local Indian powers, and had accordingly enriched themselves through illegal and unjust means, contributing not one iota, in his view, to the well-being of Indians themselves. In making such arguments, Burke was not a lone voice in the wilderness; rather, he raised concerns that were shared by a number of his contemporaries, a fact that has been neglected even by incisive scholars who have studied the connections between modern political theory and empire.<sup>10</sup> Of course, such anti-imperialist political thinkers fought an uphill battle, for defences of European imperial rule were still prevalent; the Enlightenment era is unique not because of the absence of imperialist arguments, but rather due to the presence of spirited attacks upon the foundations of empire.

Enlightenment anti-imperialism is understudied most likely because of

its failure to take root both in the broader political cultures in which it was presented and in the intellectual writings of later thinkers, including those who in some sense saw themselves as heirs to the tradition of progressive thinking of the eighteenth century. Here the contrast with anti-slavery writings is especially stark. Anti-slavery writings of the eighteenth century, from Montesquieu onward, provided much of the political language and principles that were used by anti-slavery activists and by newly formed anti-slavery societies; accordingly, the immorality of slavery became a common (though, of course, by no means a universal) presumption of nineteenth-century European social and political thought. Eighteenth-century anti-imperialist arguments, on the other hand, almost always went unheeded, not only by political, religious, and commercial authorities (as one would expect), but also by later political thinkers, including some of the most progressive social and political reformers of the nineteenth century. Those who crusaded against the fraud and oppression of imperial rule and the activities of commercial trading companies were generally ridiculed and ultimately defeated in their efforts. Burke's efforts in the Hastings trial are particularly suggestive of the failed political results of anti-imperialist crusades; Hastings was found innocent, and Burke's refusal to compromise on the India issue damaged his standing not only with his parliamentary colleagues, but also with the press and the general populace.<sup>11</sup> And although the French Revolution gave an impetus to eradicating slavery, revolutionary and post-revolutionary France, as Benjamin Constant noted, was firmly committed to a form of imperialism, one of conquest within Europe, in order to spread the ideals and institutions of the revolution.<sup>12</sup> Strikingly, with regard to intellectual opinion, anti-imperialist sentiments largely fell by the wayside as the eighteenth century came to a close. The anti-imperialist writings of the latter half of the eighteenth century failed to rally later thinkers to the cause of exposing imperialist injustices, defending non-European peoples against imperial rule, and attacking the standard rationales for empire. None of the most significant anti-imperialist thinkers of the eighteenth century can be matched with any nineteenth-century anti-imperialist thinker of a comparable stature. By the mid-nineteenth century, anti-imperialist political thinking was virtually absent from Western European intellectual debates, surfacing only rarely by way of philosophically obscure and politically marginal figures.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the major European political theorists of the immediate post-Enlightenment period either were ambivalent about European imperialism or were quite often explicitly in favour of it.

Thus, while imperialist arguments surface frequently in eighteenth-century European political debates, this period is anomalous in the history of modern political philosophy in that it includes a significant anti-

imperialist strand, one moreover that includes not simply marginal figures, but some of the most prominent and innovative thinkers of the age. In this respect, the nineteenth-century European political and philosophical discourse on empire marked a return to the frequently held imperialist sentiments of pre-Enlightenment political thought. While the dominance of languages of race and nation in the nineteenth century was new, the virtual consensus about the necessity and justice of imperialism among European political thinkers recalls the pre-Enlightenment discourse on empire. It is perhaps by reading popular nineteenth-century political views of progress, nationality, and empire back into the eighteenth century that ‘the Enlightenment’ as a whole has been characterized as a project that ultimately attempted to efface or marginalize difference, a characterization that has hidden from view the anti-imperialist strand of Enlightenment-era political thought.

### Synopsis

The following chapters proceed chronologically, and they are also linked biographically. Rousseau and Diderot were, for a time, friends who influenced one another’s political writings, in particular the texts under study in this book. As Kant himself famously attested, his philosophical commitments and intellectual disposition were deeply shaped by Rousseau’s writings. In addition, I will argue that Diderot’s most radical political and historical writings appear to have informed Kant’s and Herder’s anti-imperialism. As is well known, Herder studied under Kant at Königsberg, and held him in great admiration even after Kant had written critical book reviews of the first two installments of Herder’s masterpiece, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* [*Ideas Toward a Philosophy of History of Humankind*]. Approaching some of the philosophically most incisive and innovative currents of eighteenth-century political thought on human diversity and European imperialism reveals the overlapping and intersecting character of such writings and debates. The rapidly proliferating literature about human unity and diversity in the Enlightenment era reflects a cross-fertilization of concepts, arguments, and perspectives from diverse intellectual contexts.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the conclusions and assessments that one draws from their diverse writings, it is clear that many social and political reformers of the eighteenth century saw their efforts as part of a broad, though also a diffuse and contentious, multinational effort. Such a ‘Republic of Letters’, to use a phrase that was employed often in the eighteenth century, aimed to identify and to check oppression not only within Europe, but often also in light of what a number of eighteenth-century thinkers viewed as Europe’s tyranny over

other continents. Hence, the specific grouping of thinkers in this book illuminates both a cohesive set of arguments about international justice and cultural pluralism as well as a set of influences, both negative and positive, across national and ideological lines.

The rise of anti-imperialist political theory in the late eighteenth century depended upon far more than a universal ethic that ascribed value or dignity to every human being. In addition to the fact that the indigenous inhabitants of the New World had been considered by many Europeans, from the fifteenth century onward, to be subhuman, it is crucial to note that even when their humanity was accepted, they failed to win recognition as free and self-governing peoples. Within the modern natural right and social contractarian traditions, Amerindians in particular were almost always deployed as empirical examples of pure humans, that is, as beings who inhabit a state of nature and who thus exhibit purely natural qualities, such as natural sentiments or an unmediated knowledge of natural laws and rights. Ironically, however, for reasons that are philosophically revealing and that I will later discuss, the profoundly influential natural right theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Grotius and Vattel, as well as the social critics who celebrated Amerindians as noble savages, categorized Amerindians as the most purely human of humans, while also according them the weakest possible (and sometimes even a nonexistent) moral status in the face of European imperial power. The idea of what it meant fundamentally to be human went through a transformation before an anti-imperialist political theory could emerge. Human nature had sometimes been viewed as a stable category, one that is unchanging and that serves as a foundational essence upon which more ephemeral, particular features of human life (mores, institutions, social practices) are layered. This account came to be replaced—at times, no doubt, unwittingly, but largely in conscious opposition to naturalistic and unitary understandings of human nature—by the view that humanity is marked fundamentally by cultural difference. This is what I will call the view of *humanity as cultural agency*, which in varying ways animates the thinking of Diderot, Kant, and Herder.

By using the term ‘cultural agency’, I am not suggesting that Enlightenment anti-imperialists believed that there are different cultures, that non-Europeans are members of distinct cultures, and that such cultures are of worth equal to that of all other cultures. Enlightenment anti-imperialism is not ‘multiculturalist’ in this conventional (and contemporary) sense because eighteenth-century thinkers did not write of culture in the plural. This was a development that would occur in European writings of the nineteenth century, when ‘cultures’ would begin to signify (sometimes only certain) peoples. The Enlightenment anti-imperialists under study in this book, by contrast, believed that human beings are funda-



mentally cultural creatures, that is, they possess and exercise, simply by virtue of being human, a range of rational, emotive, aesthetic, and imaginative capacities that create, sustain, and transform diverse practices and institutions over time. The fact that humans are cultural agents, according to these writers, underlies the diverse mores, practices, beliefs, and institutions of different peoples. My use of the term ‘cultural’ is only somewhat anachronistic, since the philosophical use of the term ‘culture’ itself, in particular to denote some aspect of the differences among humans, emerges in a number of late eighteenth-century German writings. *Kultur*, like the English ‘culture’, derives from the Latin *cultura*, which referred to cultivation generally and often to agricultural practices, a fact that (as we will see) is by no means unimportant for appreciating some imperial understandings of cultural development. Even in its earliest uses, ‘culture’ was a highly ambiguous term, for it could refer to a particular social or collective lifestyle (usually sedentary and agricultural) or to an aesthetic sensibility that was posited either as an ideal or as a reality that had been achieved by only some peoples or individuals.<sup>15</sup> It could also, however, connote the constitutive features of humankind; in this book, I use the term ‘cultural agency’ in this most expansive sense, in order to indicate those qualities that humans have in common and that also account for many of their differences. The concept of ‘cultural agency’, then, signifies how Enlightenment anti-imperialists anthropologically employed the term ‘culture’ or its near equivalents and analogues. These include the French *mœurs*, which both Rousseau and Diderot employ in the context of theorizing human diversity, and the language of ‘sociability’, under which many eighteenth-century thinkers discussed the varied capacities, activities, and values that today would often be categorized by the word ‘culture’ and its variants.

Diderot, Kant, and Herder were all profoundly influenced by Rousseau’s account of human history and social life, of his conception of humans as free, self-making creatures, whose very freedom creates and perpetuates diverse psychological needs, social inequalities, and political constraints, while also serving potentially as a source for a less unjust society. But they argued, contra Rousseau, that humans are constitutively social and diverse creatures, that they are cultural agents. Thus, they appropriated Rousseau’s social criticism and much of his accompanying account of freedom, but jettisoned his attack on the idea of natural sociability. Diderot, Kant, and Herder all elaborated the view that, to use Edmund Burke’s concise formulation, “art is Man’s nature”.<sup>16</sup> Having appreciated Rousseau’s searing indictment of European mores, social institutions, political power, and economic inequality, they were loathe to recommend European societies as models for other peoples. But they were also unwilling to classify any people or set of peoples as virtually

natural, as free from artifice. For them, the art (or culture) that constitutes human practices, beliefs, and institutions is necessarily diverse and also, importantly, in many respects, incommensurable. Consequently, non-Europeans, including nomadic peoples who were often viewed as exotically uncultivated and purely natural, were members of societies that were artful, or cultural; they were simply artful in a different manner, one that could not be judged as intrinsically superior or inferior. At certain moments of Enlightenment thought, as cultural differences came to be viewed as the results produced by interactions of human freedom and reason with diverse environments—rather than as pathological aberrations from a single true way of life as represented by some set of European mores, practices, and institutions—Europeans' brutal treatment of foreign peoples evoked an outpouring of moral indignation and protest. Intriguingly, as the particularity and partial incommensurability of human lives came to the fore in a number of late eighteenth-century political writings, the moral universalism that occupied a formal, but ultimately hollow, position in earlier political theories became more genuinely inclusive.

In the following chapters, I examine the core philosophical assumptions and arguments that underlie the anti-imperialist political theories of Diderot, Kant, and Herder. In chapter 2, I examine a series of French writings that constitute what in retrospect can be identified as a tradition of noble savage thinking, which exerted an enormous influence upon many eighteenth-century thinkers, including Diderot. Focusing principally upon understandings of 'natural men' in Montaigne, Lahontan, and Rousseau, I then turn toward Diderot's appropriation and subversion of noble savagery in his account of Tahitian society in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. Diderot's philosophic dialogue upsets the standard assumptions of noble savagery—most notably, the presumption of the existence and philosophical usefulness of 'natural' humans, who were thought to be free, or nearly free, of artifice or culture. Diderot's subversion of noble savagery and his attendant account of humanity as fundamentally cultural would help to ground many aspects of his anti-imperialist political thought. In chapter 3, I analyze Diderot's myriad arguments against empire and conquest in his influential contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*, many of which reemerge in later Enlightenment attacks upon empire. In chapter 4, I examine Kant's understanding of 'humanity' in order to elucidate a key and often misunderstood concept of his political philosophy that has profound consequences for his writings on international and cosmopolitan justice. In Kant's view, humans were not at bottom metaphysical essences from whom one could abstract all social and cultural attachments, but rather they were fundamentally cultural agents. I offer an account of the understandings of reason and

freedom that he associated with ‘humanity’ and I show how this influenced his views of history and society. In chapter 5, I interpret Kant’s account of plural values in order to examine how he defends an anti-paternalistic conception of human development. I then turn to his understanding of human diversity and his attacks upon European imperialism in light of his account of humanity and ideal of cosmopolitan justice. In chapter 6, I provide an interpretation of Herder’s political thought that emphasizes both its distinctiveness and its deep similarities to Diderot’s and Kant’s anti-imperialist political philosophies. Underlying Herder’s account of pluralism and independent nationalities, I contend, is a nuanced and complex understanding of ‘humanity’ (*Humanität*) that is at once anthropological, moral, and political. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I present the key philosophical sources and legacies of the strand of Enlightenment anti-imperialism under study in this book. I argue that Diderot’s, Kant’s, and Herder’s incisive and hitherto underappreciated arguments against empire provide us with an opportunity to rethink prevalent assumptions about our understandings of ‘the’ Enlightenment and about the relationship between human unity and diversity, and between universal moral concepts and pluralistic ethical commitments. Common understandings of ‘Enlightenment universalism’ fail to come to terms with the complicated and intriguing manner in which Diderot, Kant, and Herder interweave commitments to moral universalism and moral incommensurability, to humanity and cultural difference. Such universal and particular categories in their political philosophies not only coexist, but deeply inform one another. Thus, as I will show, their arguments against empire treat the affirmation of a wide plurality of individual and collective ways of life and the dignity of a universal, shared humanity as fundamentally intertwined ethical and political commitments.