“That Miserable Continent”: Cultural Pessimism and the Idea of “America” in Cornelis de Pauw

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Introduction

The story has been told several times before. In the late eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin, the United States representative at the French court at Paris, hosted a dinner at which both American and French guests were present. Among the French guests was also the well-known *philosophe* Abbé Raynal, who in the course of the evening got on his favorite theory concerning the general degeneration of animals and even humans on the American continent. Irritated, Franklin felt the need to vindicate his fellow Americans and therefore asked all present to rise from their chairs, “to see,” as Thomas Jefferson later reported, “on which side nature has degenerated.” The result left no room for doubt. The Americans were “of the finest stature and form, while those on the other side were remarkably diminutive, and the Abbé himself, was a mere shrimp.”

The theory of American degeneration, one of the earliest versions of systematic anti-American thought in Europe, was no invention of Raynal. Already in the 1750s the famous French naturalist Count de Buffon had defended the thesis that the animal world in the Americas had seriously degenerated compared to Europe. American animals were small, weak and inconspicuous compared to their European counterparts, which he ascribed to the detrimental influence of a wet climate and swampy conditions. This theory, however, had become popular and widely discussed in the late 1760s and 1770s through the work of a lesser-known *philosophe*, Cornelis de Pauw. His two-volume *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, first published in 1768–9 in Berlin, immediately triggered a widespread debate about the natural world and primitive society in America. Supporters of the idea of the “noble
savage” had to defend their idyllic images of the Americas against the arguments of a level-headed commentator like De Pauw. This debate, which lasted until the beginning of the nineteenth century, turned the unknown De Pauw into a celebrity in intellectual Europe. Frederick II, King of Prussia, tried to install him at his court at Potsdam, and when De Pauw wrote a second book, in which he dispelled the myth of the wise and enlightened Chinese, even Voltaire felt he had to cross swords with this upstart philosopher. Although the outbreak of the French Revolution put an end to the immediate impact of De Pauw’s books, as late as 1811 Napoleon, the French emperor, deemed it appropriate to have an obelisk erected in his honor in the city of Xanten, in the western part of Germany, where the philosopher had lived for most of his life.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, De Pauw and his theory of American degeneration fell into almost complete oblivion. “History,” as one of his first modern commentators remarked in 1936, “offers many examples of individuals who have occupied the center stage during their life-time, only to be forgotten by posterity; but in modern times few writers have risen so high, and then sunk so completely out of sight, as did the abbé Corneille de Pauw.” During the last two or three decades, some intellectual historians showed some interest in De Pauw, and the Italian historian Antonello Gerbi even wrote an impressive, 600-page study on the controversy that erupted after De Pauw had published his Recherches philosophiques. Gerbi, however, did not intend to rehabilitate De Pauw, whom he accused of a “slanderous

Figure 3 Portrait medaillon of Cornelis de Pauw (c. 1790). The ceramic medaillon is partly colored and has a diameter of 17.7 cm. It is now in the Regional Museum of Xanten (Germany). © Kath. Propsteigemeinde St. Viktort, Xanten.