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FREEMAN, MEAD, AND THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONTROVERSY OVER POLYNESIAN SOCIETY

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Inconsistencies cannot both be right, but, imputed to man, they
may both be true.

--Samuel Johnson

Derek Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983) attacked both the conclusions and methodology of Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Freeman set out to refute Mead's interpretation of a peaceful, sexually permissive Samoan society and, equally important, to discredit Mead's cultural determinism, the assumption that the roots of human behavior lie strictly in culture rather than in interactions between culture and biology.¹

In attempting to dismantle Mead's legacy, Freeman has displayed an unusual sense of urgency, as if anthropology in general and South Pacific ethnology in particular would lie sprawling before this obstacle unless it were demolished at once. From a historical perspective, however, the sense of urgency appears decidedly narrow. The controversy over the nature of Polynesian societies has, in fact, been going on since Europeans first reported contact with them. Are Polynesians (and Samoans in particular) a peaceful, harmonious people who avoid the psychological turmoil of adolescence and the guilt of sex, or are they a hostile, violent people who repress the guilt and mask the turmoil? From the earliest extensive reports of European discoverers, the same questions echo across time, and the Meads and Freemans are there to answer, usually armed with philosophical templates on which to analyze the subject.

Disagreements over the nature of Polynesian society have thus often been disagreements over philosophical perspectives. However, the persistence of the double vision of Polynesian culture through generations of philosophical fashions reveals that the controversy transcends the changing philosophical perspectives. The most recent controversy raised by Freeman, that between cultural determinism and interactionism, is merely the latest in a long series in which the double vision has lived on, stronger than ever. Its longevity should reveal that beneath surface disagreements and philosophical disagreements exists a stratum of problems that makes the double vision possible. These problems are elusive of definition, but they involve the nature of cultural understanding itself. They involve our inherently selective perception, definition, and understanding of human behavior; the checkered knowledge that results when one complex reality is viewed vis-à-vis another; and finally the nature of the humans who use the philosophical templates.

In this article I propose to return to the eighteenth century to show that many of these blurring factors have affected the study of Polynesian life for more than two hundred years and may, in fact, never be overcome. I will begin by examining the double perspective that Westerners have fostered of the Polynesians, showing that we have from the first seen them as variously noble and ignoble. I will then outline the growing awareness of the difficulties of comprehending and communicating the ways of Pacific cultures, showing that crucial issues which surfaced then still evade conclusive resolution. Finally, and of special relevance to Freeman's attempt to discredit Mead's cultural determinism, I will examine some philosophical dimensions of Western interest in Pacific islanders. The eighteenth century saw many attempts to test theories of mankind in the cultures of the South Pacific. But then, as now, the relationship between a philosophical position and a view of Polynesian society was by no means simple; certainly it is rarely so simple that one can build or refute a theory on a single ethnography.

The Savage: Noble or Ignoble?

The double vision of the primitive antedates the exploration of the Pacific, of course. In some ways it goes back to classical times in speculation about and yearning for the lost golden age. H. N. Fairchild locates its beginnings in Tacitus's description of the Germans.² In modern times it begins with the discovery of the Americas and the races who lived there. Marshall and Williams have noted that by the late 1700s "two streams of writing on the North American Indian were evident.

. . . To reconcile the two was difficult, and by and large compilers and commentators at home selected the materials which supported their own attitudes and prejudices.”³ George Shelvocke, reporting his voyage of 1719-1722, wrote of the California natives as a race “endued with all the humanity imaginable” and who “seem to pass their lives in the purest simplicity of the earliest ages of the world, before discord and contention were heard of amongst men.”⁴ Others pointed emphatically at a darker side. Miguel Venegas listed the characteristics of the same California Indians as “stupidity and insensibility; want of knowledge and reflection; inconstancy, impetuosity, and blindness of appetite.”⁵ In *The History of America* (1777), William Robertson took careful note of the competing images of native Americans. “These contradictory theories,” he remarked, “have been proposed with equal confidence, and uncommon powers of genius and eloquence have been exerted in order to clothe them with an appearance of truth.” The distance between two versions grew when vested interests were at stake (as in the case of commercial or ecclesiastical agents) or when philosophers used eyewitness accounts to further their programs.⁶

With the exploration of the Pacific, this cycle was set to repeat itself, perhaps with greater extremes. Certainly some early visitors to the South Seas found a paradise and people that far exceeded anything American in beauty, bounty, and benevolence. When Louis Antoine de Bougainville landed at Tahiti in 1768, he was certainly unprepared by experience for what he found there. But if experience had not prepared him, a set of popular ideas seemed to have. These were the notions--almost a cult of ideas--of the noble savage. The ideas had appeared in romances of the late seventeenth century; in the eighteenth Rousseau helped them spread through the drawing rooms of Europe by expounding his faith in the virtue of the simple, uncivilized human, uncorrupted by the state or church, in his *Discours sur les arts et sciences* (1749).

Bougainville’s Tahiti is a lush paradise inhabited by a race of innocent, sensual, benevolent, and beautiful people. “I thought I was transported into the garden of Eden,” he exclaimed; “a numerous people there enjoy the blessings which nature showers liberally down upon them.”⁷ Tahiti was a place of “beautiful landscapes” with a “vast number of rivulets” nourishing the “fertility of the country. . . . One would think himself in the Elysian fields,” he remarked. He praised the beauty of the people, their cleanliness, benevolence, and peacefulness. “There does not seem to be any civil war, or any private hatred on the isle. It is probable, that the people of Tahiti deal amongst each other with unquestioned sincerity.”⁸

Sexual behavior and attitudes took on a special interest for Bougainville, just as for modern researchers. He could not imagine a freer and more open exchange of pleasures. From his first glimpse of a Tahitian girl who climbed on board and dropped her covering to reveal the "celestial form" of Venus herself, he measured the gulf that separated this people from those of his home continent. Illicit pleasures did not exist because nothing was illicit, not even adultery: "Jealousy is so unknown a passion here, that the husband is commonly the first who persuades his wife to yield to another."⁹ Sex was performed openly.

Slight hints of a darker side to Tahitian society emerged in Bougainville's account. He noted that the people were accomplished thieves, "more expert filchers" than his own countrymen. Fear of attack occasionally colored his narrative. But these hints merely added faint shadows to the bright picture. I note them here more as a starting point that would be developed into cloud and storm by later commentators who stayed longer or looked through different lenses.

Just as Mead drew lessons for American society from the harmonies of Samoan life, so did Diderot from Tahitian life as described by Bougainville. Bougainville's report confirmed Diderot's suspicions about the dangers of civilization--and his faith in the virtue of societies that lived close to nature. In *Supplement au voyage de Bougainville*, Diderot "raged against the wilful intrusion into pagan simplicity and happiness" and extolled the generous, unhypocritical ways of Polynesian life.¹⁰ Diderot's response illustrates even more emphatically than does Bougainville's narrative the predisposition among intellectuals to see in the Tahitians their own lost golden age, lost innocence, lost innate goodness.

Cook sailed before the publication of Bougainville's account and so gives us another fairly fresh look at Polynesia. Against the Frenchman's record, Cook strikes us as impressively observant and objective. The dark side emerged in much greater detail to balance the euphoria of other reports. He noticed, for example, the disturbing human jawbones strung as trophies, the practice of infanticide among the *arioi* (a sect in charge of religious festivals), the class system, and, of course, the constant thievery. Yet, among a public eager for news of a yet noble race of men, Cook's observations served to strengthen the image of the noble savage that Bougainville had already created. The official history of Cook's voyage, collated (and embellished) by John Hawkesworth from the journals of Cook and Joseph Banks, strengthened that image even more directly.

In Hawkesworth's hands, the Tahitians emerged as more complex but

nonetheless still simpler than Europeans and more natural in their notions of right and wrong. "These people," he recorded, "have a knowledge of right and wrong from the mere dictates of natural conscience; and involuntarily condemn themselves when they do that to others, which they would condemn others for doing to them."¹¹ Given the status of the Golden Rule among his readers, Hawkesworth could hardly have given higher praise. He gave due attention to the sexual license, registering a degree of shock befitting an official account, but he cautioned against the imposition of Western notions of morality in judging the rampant thievery. On the whole, Hawkesworth painted a picture of a people not only "exempted from the first general curse, that 'man should eat his bread in the sweat of his brow,' " but altogether happier than their European counterparts: "They are upon the whole happier than we . . . and we are losers by the perfection of our nature, the increase of our knowledge, and the enlargement of our views."¹²

If the most extreme glorification of the South Pacific came from the pens of stay-at-home philosophers such as Diderot, then it can also be said that the sharpest denigration came from those skeptical eighteenth-century Englishmen who read Hawkesworth's edition of Banks and Cook and detected sufficient material to assure themselves that the image of the noble native was a dream imposed on a reality. Especially when it was reported that Hawkesworth had liberally amended Cook's journal entries and had drawn with great selectivity from the more sensational diary of Joseph Banks, those disposed to question the existence of paradise on earth were confirmed in their suspicions. To this sort, "soft primitivism" equated merely with "luxury, sloth, and degeneration."¹³ Satirical portraits ridiculed the life of the pagans and the exploits of Banks among the female islanders.¹⁴

As more information arrived by way of other exploration, including from Cook's second and third voyages, both firsthand observers and stay-at-home interpreters amassed more evidence for the noble, and the ignoble, savage. Cook himself reported class systems and concepts of ownership that were more highly defined than they had seemed at first. The issue of sexual license came into sharper focus with the knowledge that not all classes participated eagerly in the prostitution of their women for nails and beads. The brutal effects of war and political reshuffling became apparent. Polynesians displayed a canny instinct for bestowing their hospitality on those who wielded power and could therefore return favor. Thievery, of course, continued. Reports of human sacrifice and child murder proved true. Frequent contact with other peoples and cultures led to more bases for comparison and there-

fore more guarded enthusiasms. Of great interest is the fact that the double vision did not vanish with more information; it merely partook of the information with greater selectivity.

George Forster, son of J. R. Forster who translated Bougainville's *Voyage* and who accompanied his father on Cook's second voyage, exhibited such guarded enthusiasm. He noted signs of decadence such as a fat chief who led a life of "phlegmatic insensibility" and "luxurious inactivity, and without one benefit to society." He noted the cautious spirit among the natives who hid their pigs from the Westerners and who "attend upon us" not without "interested motives."¹⁵ Yet he also echoed the beauty of the land and people and wished contact with the South Pacific broken off before the manners of a whole people were irreversibly corrupted for the sake of the knowledge of a few.

The glorification of the islands carried on even after more detailed reports were disseminated and even after Cook's death. George Keate's *An Account of the Pelew Islands* (1788), though a late entry into the arena of eyewitness reporting on the Pacific, was, as Bernard Smith describes it, "the most thoroughgoing and elaborate presentation of the noble savage in the literature of the South Seas."¹⁶ And in some ways the noble savage never died. As Smith has also observed, "the belief in the natural goodness of savages was, at bottom, a belief in the natural goodness of man."¹⁷

Those who held a contrary view, or who for some other reason were less inclined to experience paradisiacal visions, had their day eventually. It arrived in two forms, first in the death of Cook in the Hawaiian Islands and second in the natural process of reassessment and time. Cook's death gathered into immediate focus all that white men had feared about the Pacific natives: their violence, their volatile emotions (which could be viewed either as childlike and innocent or as inherently dangerous and naturally vicious), their disregard for life, their cunning and duplicity in relationships with outsiders, and so on.

James King, an officer with Cook on his final voyage, had this to say of the Society Islands even before Cook's death:

I rather think that whoever goes to this country will be mistaken in his expectation of finding it that Elysium which warm imaginations have paint'd it to be; writing a great deal about any ever so trifling subject has a tendency to give it a consequence it does not often deserve; thus too much has been said respecting the regular policy of these people, their perfect feudal system, charming & delightful Country & their happy lives. . . . The Country instead of being a delightful garden, is

a rich wilderness; & the bulk of the people must have their griefs & afflictions, if we reflect upon the number of human sacrifices, & by what means they are procur'd; besides the killing of a Teou (servant or slave) never suffers the aggressors of above that rank to any great Punishment.¹⁸

Cook was not the first to lose his life to savages in the South Pacific. J. M. Crozet witnessed the slaughter of his captain, Marion de Fresne, by Maoris in 1772 and delivered his understandably negative impressions in his *Nouveau voyage a la mer du Sud*. Note his particular venom for the intellectuals at home who brought the noble savage to life in their secondhand speculations:

Here then we have a picture of these primitive men, so extolled by them who do not know them, and who attribute gratuitously to them more virtues and less vices than possessed by men whom they are pleased to call artificial. . . . For my part I maintain that there is amongst all the animals of creation none more ferocious and dangerous for human beings than the primitive and savage man. . . . I speak according to my experience. Having been occupied with the art of navigation ever since my childhood, I have never been able to enjoy that happy ease which permits of those studies and contemplations by means of which philosophers improve their minds; but I have traversed the greater part of the globe, and I have seen everywhere that when reason is not assisted and perfected by good laws, or by good education, it becomes the prey of force or of treachery, equally as much so among primitive men as amongst animals, and I conclude that reason without culture is but a brutal instinct. . . .

At times I endeavored to arouse their curiosity . . . but I only found wicked children, and all the more dangerous, for being as they were stronger and even hardier than the generality of men. Within the space of a quarter of an hour, I have seen them pass from the most silly joy to the darkest sorrow, from calmness to fury, and return as suddenly to immoderate laughter. I have seen them turn and turn about, sweetly affectionate, hard and threatening, never long in the same temper, but always dangerous and treacherous.¹⁹

Thus we have come from the paradise of Bougainville to the hell of Crozet. Yet all the commentators, no less than Mead and Freeman, are

responding to similar societies.²⁰ How does one explain it? Partly, of course, their attitudes reflect different objects of perception: Bougainville and Crozet observed different pieces of a reality more complex than either was prepared to describe, perhaps more complex than any individual outsider (or even insider?) is ever prepared for. Partly, too, they saw what they were prepared to see, inclined to see.

We can appreciate the problems from a different perspective by considering the difficulties faced by painters who portrayed the Pacific islanders. One's first prejudice would be to say that artists should have a much easier task of transferring what they saw onto paper or canvas, that they escaped the web of concepts and words in which writers struggled. But not so. Artists, no less than writers, recorded as much their preconceptions of man and art as they did the objects before them. This was true of both landscapes and portraiture. Alan Moorehead has described the problem:

The temptation to paint the idea of Tahiti rather than the reality was very strong, and it was an idea interpreted in a European manner. In the Pacific the artist had no precedent to guide him, everything was new, the light, the strange vegetation, the colour of the sea, the Polynesian face and figure, the whole menagerie of outlandish animals and birds. To see these objects accurately, to divest himself of the European attitude, to refrain from the temptation to paint a pretty composition--this was the artist's problem if he was going to represent the Pacific without prejudice, and it is hardly surprising that the weaker brethren fell along the way so that their breadfruit trees grew up into English oaks and their Tahitian girls were transformed into nymphs surrounded by classical waterfalls in a soft English light.²¹

Bernard Smith even identifies the precise styles and precedents that corrupted faithful representation by the hands of painters such as Hodges and Webber. The problem of representation was further aggravated when engravers got to work to produce copies that would be circulated among the public. To a greater degree they furthered the Europeanization that the original painters had begun in their drawings.²²

Non-European Cultures as Objects of European Understanding

If painters and trained engravers had difficulty transferring images onto canvas and paper, it is no wonder that others had problems recording

events and behavior in words. But did these writers show an awareness of their own difficulties? They did, and to a surprising degree. The more perceptive observers wove into their narratives and descriptions their keen sense of inadequacy in the face of problems that plague us still: the perception problem (you see what you look for), the effect of the observer's presence, the lack of the insider's comprehension, the problem of time and the gradual effects of interaction with outsiders on what one observes, the lack of language understanding, and the reliability of informants.

Cook especially grew in his estimation of the difficulties of gaining genuine understanding of strange peoples. On his third voyage, he spent nearly three months in Tonga and had the advantage of an interpreter as well as an earlier acquaintance with Pacific islanders. Yet the following journal entry captures nearly the full range of difficulties I have just described:

It may indeed be expected that after spending between two and three Months among these islands, I should be enabled to give a good account of the customs, opinions, and arts of the inhabitants, especially as we had a person on board who understood their language and he ours. But unless the object or thing we wanted to enquire after was before us, we found it difficult to gain a tolerable knowledge of it from information only without falling into a hundred mistakes; in this Omai was more liable than us because he never gave himself the trouble to gain knowledge for himself, so that when he was disposed to explain things to us his account was often very confused. It was also rare we found a person both able and willing to giving us the information we wanted, for most of them hate to be troubled with what they probably think idle questions. Our situation at *Tongatabu* where we remained longest, was likewise unfavorable; it was in a part of the country where there were few inhabitants except fishers; it was always holyday with our visitors as well as with those we visited, so that we had but few opportunities of seeing into their domestick way of living.²³

James Boswell dined with Cook and recorded a further example of Cook's candor as to the difficulties of comprehending life in the Pacific:

I placed myself next to Captain Cook, and had a great deal of conversation with him. . . . I must observe that he candidly confessed to me that he and his companions who visited the

south sea islands could not be certain of any information they got, or supposed they got, except as to objects falling under the observation of the senses; their knowledge of the language was so imperfect they required the aid of their senses, and any thing which they learnt about religion, government, or traditions might be quite erroneous.²⁴

Even a supposedly simple idea such as thievery, which runs through so many accounts, withstands simple moral categorization when we view it in context. What effect did the presence of strangers with their marvelous possessions have on a people unused to such, and unused to Western notions of ownership? Did they behave the same among themselves? Hawkesworth cautioned his readers against judging too hastily. "We must not hastily conclude that theft is a testimony of the same depravity in them that it is in us," he warned. Rather we must estimate their virtue by "conformity to what in their opinion is right."²⁵ It is entirely possible that the visitors elicited a behavior that the islanders themselves hardly knew how to categorize, or that thievery served a function not apparent to outsiders.²⁶

The more sophisticated observers knew well enough that the objects of their perception yielded at least two, and possibly many more, versions and interpretations, depending on where the emphasis was laid or on the point from which actions were viewed. George Forster admonished readers familiar with earlier accounts that "the same objects may have been seen in different points of view, and the same fact may often have given rise to different ideas."²⁷ But the fullest awareness of this challenge to knowledge is reflected in the diaries James King kept while among the people of Nootka. I quote from them at length because he circles around what I perceive to be the genesis of the great gap between Mead and Freeman. King begins by reviewing the barriers of education and artifice and language. These incline us, he says,

to form conclusions in the narrow confined sphere of our observations, & what has immediately happened to ourselves; whence one person will represent these People as Sullen, Obstinate, & Mistrustful, & another will say they are docile, good natured & unsuspecting; the former will prove his assertion from their Phlegmatic temper, from their unwillingness to comply with what has the smallest appearance of compulsion, & from their manner of bartering, examining with the greatest suspiciousness your articles of trade . . . he will also instance the perpet-

ual Squabbles amongst themselves, & their taking by force things from one another. He who supports the contrary Character will say that they have a nice sense of affronts, & which their passionate & quick tempers immediately resent, that this makes them sensible of a courteous behavior, & which is returnd on their parts with perfect good Nature; that they are easy to be gaind by a mild & flattering Carriage, & that a diff't procedure will be highly resented, & that all this is very contrary to a sullen obstinate character; that the Quarrels amongst themselves are mostly of different parties & that they are the free'est from all invidiousness & deception in their Actions of any people in the world; shewing their resentments instantaneously, & totally regardless of the probable consequences of so ill tim'd an appearance of their displeasure; & these are strong marks against the charge of a sullen & mistrustful Carriage. The facts on which the above reasonings are founded are true, & I will add some other transactions between us which may enable any one to make what conclusions he likes.²⁸

The application of King's words to the versions of Samoa put forth by Mead and Freeman is there to ponder. King is much more crude, much less scientific than Freeman, yet he seems to have put his finger on an issue that we can never fully escape, an issue that plagues study in the social sciences to such a degree that it could be said that Freeman, even after thinking he has refuted Mead on both internal and outside evidence, has only succeeded in refuting one partial formulation (and many anthropologists dispute even that claim) and putting forth another. As James Clifford has stated, "Ethnographies are complex, realistic fictions derived from research in historical circumstances that can never be fully controlled. A score of counter-examples may not discredit a convincingly illustrated portrait of a culture."²⁹

Moving specifically back to Samoan culture, we are in a position to respect the problems of intercultural understanding more fully when we recognize that the phenomenon of double vision occurs even within the culture. Bradd Shore's excellent book *Sala'ilua: A Samoan Mystery*, a study that escapes many of the problems of cultural interpretation I am concerned with here, offers this key insight--that the Samoan view of things involves a "double vision" of numerous relationships and values. What may appear to the outsider as inconsistency or just disagreement is, in fact, merely an attempt to convey the sense of wholeness through the expression of viewpoints that are part of a more complex but total

picture. Indeed, Shore argues, the survival of the Samoan way may hinge on the Samoans' continuing to perceive relations among elements of their culture "with a double vision in terms of which they make themselves whole."³⁰

From the reviews of Meads and Freeman's works by those who count themselves as Samoan by birth or long association, one senses great irritation with both anthropologists, as if to say: well, you have lived and studied among us and consider yourself a scholar of our ways, but you still don't understand us. Your scientific ways are impressive and no doubt make your work difficult to overthrow by any who lack the same skills you have, but your views are those of an outsider speaking to outsiders. Freeman has waved aside these expressions of dissatisfaction with the greatest ease imaginable, for they are not made in the same arena in which he operates. But for all that, the expressions strike, in their simplicity and even naivete, at a problem that anthropologists must take seriously.

Cases and Theories: The Problem of Proof

Thus Mead and Freeman belong to a line of commentators and interpreters who have perpetuated radically different versions of Pacific islanders. And like their ancestors, Mead and Freeman use Pacific cultures as testing grounds for theories of mankind. Mead does not apply the principles of cultural determinism as rigidly to Samoan behavior as Freeman asserts she does, and Freeman himself seeks only to discredit her theories, not sustain his own. But we can fairly say that both of them have loyalties to theories and view Samoan culture as a test case. I would like to explore this dimension of their work. Even though the ground gets slippery when we discuss the relationship between surface findings and underlying theories, I want to argue that we are justified in viewing with some caution those interpretations of culture put forth to support--or refute--theories.

From the first extensive reports of the islands and on through the eighteenth century, the South Pacific was used as grist for speculation on the nature of man, the nature of development that civilization brings, and the causes of one people's differences from another. What I would like to show now is that these philosophical templates are sometimes separable from the problem of double vision. Often, the philosophical or methodological assumption leads to the findings or creates the evidence for a hostile or benevolent view of a people. But equally often, the assumptions merely create a range of kinds of evidence. The

weighting, the tip of the scale from dark to light and vice versa, comes from the ends that the assumptions serve, ends that in themselves may not be scientific at all.

Even the concept of the noble savage illustrates the unstable relationship between theory and specific finding. Theories obviously predisposed their proponents to see either noble or ignoble peoples, but the link is not always a necessary one. Therefore, to refute the specific finding is not always to refute the theory behind it. Those who saw Tahitians as noble savages, for example, were often so disposed because they had special theories about the deficiencies of advanced civilization and the virtues that came from living close to the dictates of nature. And so, in a limited sense, a skeptic could strike a blow against the very notion of the noble savage by showing that the Polynesians were vicious, backward, and inferior in important ways to Europeans. Frequently, in fact, skeptical observers did ridicule the notion of the noble savage at the same time they reported their negative views of the Pacific islanders. But it is important for us to see that a blow against the picture of the Tahitians as noble savages is not necessarily a blow against the notion of an uncivilized people of natural virtue. Such a blow, if any more true than the benevolent view, does eliminate an instance that would support the idea of the noble savage, but it would still be possible for such a society to exist at some place or time. More plausible still would be the view that the noble and the ignoble dwelt side by side, intertwined and layered not only with each other, but with other strands of personality and culture, so that either could be perceived--or confuted--according to an observer's scheme and purpose.

One nearly universal but now discarded idea that saw testing in the South Pacific was that of the great chain of being. Naturalists were eager to identify in the chain the positions occupied by the hosts of unclassified plants and animals they encountered. And one of the most intriguing sections of the chain was man himself. What gradations of man were on the planet, and on what basis were they to be placed in the appropriate links? Hawkesworth saw in the groups encountered on Cook's voyages not only evidence of such gradation, but evidence that providence had established environments suitable for each variety and stage of man. But where some saw the Fuegians (inhabitants of the Tierra del Fuego) as vying with the Hottentots for the lowest human link on the chain before it rattled off into animals, Hawkesworth saw them as hardy, contented primitives undisturbed by excess possessions.³¹

What is interesting to note here is that once one approached the data from the perspective of the great chain of being, it made little difference

to the validity of the theory whether one saw the Fuegians as occupying a bottom link or a higher one. The theory did not dictate where any particular group would be found--only that there would be various groups occupying distinct positions in the chain. And the validity of the theory did not rest on proving the position of any particular group.

Among the most interesting theoretical viewpoints--in some ways a precursor to the nature, nurture, or interactionist positions taken by Mead, Freeman, and others--is that which seeks to find causes for different groups' behavior in the climates in which they lived, or in some interaction between climate and human nature. Were climates and environments only possibilities against which man defined himself, or were they strict limits within which he was essentially confined? Montesquieu was an early proponent of environmental causation for behavioral and cultural differences. His ideas influenced Adam Ferguson, William Falconer, Lord Kames, and also J. R. Forster, who was probably the best prepared observer and interpreter of nature to sail in the eighteenth century. In his *Observations*, published in 1778, Forster devoted several hundred pages to consideration of Polynesian peoples and, as part of that consideration, to the causes of the distinct ways of life they displayed.

Forster anticipated the interactionist viewpoint of modern anthropology by holding that environment itself could not fully explain the differences in peoples, that one needed also to take into account the effects of education and human intelligence put to use--what we would call culture. Instead of simply causing all differences between human groups, he saw climate and other environmental factors as simply the potentials and limits within which humans created their societies and ways of life. Forster saw that climate, which in some cases could be nearly deterministic, could in others, as Smith summarized, be "modified by the effects of education whereby man can raise himself from his primitive condition by his own resources."³² Yet Forster, after careful observation, concluded that the South Sea islanders--and the Tahitians in particular--preserved more of "that original happiness" of man and were "more improved in every respect" than all the other nations visited during the voyage.³³ Others, including William Falconer, believed the tropical climate led to torpor and timidity.³⁴ Kames, with his own version of climatic interactionism, viewed Polynesia as a "sluggish tropical backwater, where mankind stagnated without hope of improvement and progress."³⁵ There was no necessary link between the theory and a given interpretation of island life.

Gibbon shrewdly argued that environment was the chief determiner

of culture among primitive peoples, but that moral factors were chief among civilized peoples.³⁶ I find this position thought-provoking, suggesting as it does that even interactionism must be open to models that may differ with each group studied. The Meads and Freemans who build or destroy cultural, biological, or interactionist theories through studies of individual societies would do well to entertain the possibility that each case may have its own explanation and therefore contain little from which to generalize.

The eighteenth-century parallels could be multiplied endlessly, but before I conclude I want to draw one more that seems especially appropriate to the case that Freeman thrusts forward. The parallel relates directly to the nature/nurture dichotomy and also to Freeman's attempt to refute a theory by undermining an interpretation of a particular culture built upon the theory. What this parallel shows is that (1) cultural explanation is inextricably woven into the problem of defining uniformity and diversity and that (2) refutation of an explanation of uniformity is very simple, requiring only that one show striking diversities where uniformity was thought to exist, while refutation of diversity is not so simple. Freeman, it should be noted, has placed all his faith in the proposition that to show that Samoans are *not* different from other groups is to discredit a theory by which they can be said to be different. The difficulty with his position, once stated in these terms, should be obvious.

Early in the decade when Cook was making his greatest voyages of discovery, Lord Kames was collecting material for his wide-ranging *Sketches of the History of Man*. In the first sketch, Kames tackled the problem of diversity among peoples and found climatic determinism as formulated by Montesquieu inadequate to account for it. His demonstration of this inadequacy was simple. He merely had to show that within a single type of climate, there existed groups with demonstrable differences for which climate could not account. To provide explanation for these differences, Kames posited a theory of races. The inherited traits of a race, he said, acted in conjunction with the external conditions to create the distinct behavior and appearance of human groups.³⁷

Kames's refutation of climatic determinism was easy because he merely had to show anomalies for which it could not account. But how does one refute a theory created to account for anomaly? In the social sciences, this is a tricky business. It involves both the definition of anomaly and probability theory. (If this single anomaly does not exist, or is not in fact a true anomaly, does that mean there are no other anomalies of a similar order?) How, in fact, would one refute Kames's theory of races? My reading convinces me that we still have not reached a satis-

factory understanding of whether and to what degree races exist and how such inherited (or biological) characteristics interact with the physical environment and culture. This, in fact, is the issue over which so-called cultural determinism arose and over which Freeman has attacked Mead's work.³⁸ We have refined our theories a great deal, but the core issues are the same as those that earlier theory was created to explain.

To return to the immediate question, does even a valid refutation of an anomaly or "negative instance," as Freeman calls Mead's interpretation, disprove the theory behind it? No. As I have showed above, that course works only when one shows greater *diversity* than was thought to exist, but not generally when one is attempting to show greater uniformity.

I set these precedents before us because Freeman, in seeking to refute both Mead's picture of Samoan society and the premises upon which she conducted and interpreted her research, would have us believe that to eliminate one is to eliminate the other. Not so. Freeman believes that because Mead's picture of Samoans stood as an exception to the rule of troubled adolescence, an exception that opens the door for a strictly cultural explanation for behavior patterns, he can discredit the theoretical position of cultural determinism by discrediting the specific exception. Marvin Harris has stated flatly that "it doesn't matter a whit which of the two versions is eventually vindicated."³⁹

To prove that cultural determinism is wrong requires more than the refutation of a cultural interpretation based on it, just as refutation of the great chain of being requires more than refuting the position of one link. What it requires is an alternative ethnography that does everything cultural determinism can do and more, all with a higher degree of validity and evidence. Yet this is exactly what Freeman states he does not intend to do in his book. And why not? Could it be because he is not much closer to a particularized understanding of the interaction of biology, culture, and environment than was Lord Kames? Could it be because it is very easy to talk in terms of theory of interaction, but very difficult to show just where the subtle webs of biology and culture tie together and with what results? Until we can do so decisively, more caution is in order in putting forth alternative views of societies.

Cooks mission to observe the transit of Venus failed because of the crudity of his instruments of measurement, but whereas astronomical instruments and methods of calculation have long since allowed us to measure the distance to the sun, one wonders whether the same progress will ever hold true in fields where human relationships and values are

the objects of understanding, where definitions and assumptions and methods so color every observation and piece of evidence. By returning to the eighteenth century, we can better understand why two such contradictory versions of a Polynesian society could emerge in the twentieth and why they will probably continue. I have suggested that the double vision results from our very humanness and from the scrutiny of one culture through ideas and methods--however scientific--that grow out of another.

NOTES

1. I'm not sure Freeman has represented Mead's intentions fairly but will not investigate this issue in detail here. Mead used cultural factors to explain the differences between Samoan and American adolescents, not to give cultural explanations for all facets of Samoan behavior. Freeman attacks her as if she had intended the latter and therefore creates something of a straw dummy. Of most importance here, however, are the facts that the two anthropologists establish very different versions of Samoan society and also differ in their assumptions about how behavioral differences are caused.

2. H. N. Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 4-5.

3. P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: J. M. Dent, 1982), 191. My debt to Marshall and Williams goes well beyond the few specific references that follow.

4. George Shelvocke, *A Voyage round the World*, ed. W. G. Perrin (London: Cassell, 1928), 224-225.

5. Miguel Venegas, *A Natural and Civil History of California*, trans. from the original Spanish, 2 vols. (London, 1759), 1:64.

6. William Robertson, *History of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1777), 1:286-287.

7. Louis Antoine de Bougainville, *A Voyage round the World*, trans. J. R. Forster (London, 1772), 228.

8. *Ibid.*, 245, 252.

9. *Ibid.*, 218-219, 257.

10. Alan Moorehead, *The Fatal Impact: An Account of the Invasion of the South Pacific, 1767-1840* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1968), 64-65.

11. John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, 3d ed., 4 vols. (London, 1785), 2:351-352.

12. *Ibid.*, 3:20, 2:256.

13. Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 32. My debt to this work, too, goes beyond the specific citations to follow.

14. Smith describes these portraits, *ibid.*, 29-32.
15. George Forster, *A Voyage round the World*, 2 vols. (London, 1777), 1:296, 287, 285.
16. Smith, *European Vision*, 99.
17. *Ibid.*, 67.
18. James Cook, *The Journals of Captain James Cook . . .*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1955-1967), 4:1390-1391.
19. Julien Marie Crozet, *Crozet's Voyage to Tasmania, New Zealand, the Ladrone Islands, and the Philipines in the Years 1771-1772*, trans. H. Ling Roth (London: Truslove and Shirley, 1891), 63-64.
20. Lest it should be argued that Samoa figures nowhere in the accounts I have reviewed, I present below the views of La Perouse, recorded after his visit to Manu'a in 1787 (*A Voyage round the World in the Years 1785, 1786, 1787, and 1788*, ed. M. L. A. Milet-Mureau and trans. from the French, 3 vols. [London, 17981):

This charming country combines the advantages of a soil fruitful without culture, and of a climate which renders clothing unnecessary. The trees that produce the breadfruit, the cocoa-nut, the banana, the guava, and the orange, hold out to these fortunate people an abundance of wholesome food. . . . They were so rich, and have so few wants, that they disdained our instruments of iron and our cloth, and asked only for beads. Abounding in blessings, they were desirous of obtaining superfluities alone.

. . . What cold imagination could separate the idea of happiness from so enchanting a place? These islanders, said we a hundred times over, are, without doubt, the happiest beings on earth. Surrounded by their wives and children, they pass their peaceful days in innocence and repose: no care disturbs them but that of bringing up their birds, and, like the first man, of gathering without labour, the fruit that grows over their heads. We were deceived. This delightful country was not the abode of innocence. We perceived, indeed, no arms; but the bodies of the Indians, covered over with scars, proved that they were often at war, or else quarrelling among themselves; while their features announced a ferocity, that was not perceptible in the countenances of the women. Nature had, no doubt, stamped this character on their faces, by way of shewing, that the half-savage, living in a state of anarchy, is a more mischievous being than the most ferocious of the brute creation. (3:72-73)
21. Moorehead, *The Fatal Impact*, 71.
22. See Smith, *European Vision*, 23-28, for examples.
23. Cook, *Journals*, 3:166.
24. *Ibid.*, 2:234n.
25. Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages*, 2:352.
26. Alan Howard and Rob Borofsky suggest that thievery and sexual promiscuity may have served in the struggle to test power and status, in "Developments in Polynesian Anthropology" (manuscript), which they kindly allowed me to read.
27. G. Forster, *A Voyage round the World*, 1:viii.

28. Cook, *Journals*, 4:1406-1407.
29. James Clifford, "The Other Side of Paradise," *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 May 1983, 475.
30. Bradd Shore, *Sala'ilua: A Samoan Mystery* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 283.
31. Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages*, 2:295.
32. Smith, *European Vision*, 64.
33. J. R. Forster, *Observations Made during a Voyage round the World* (London, 1778), 286-287.
34. William Falconer, *Remarks on the Influence of Climate, Situation . . . on Mankind* (London, 1781).
35. Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, 278-279.
36. Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, 7 vols. (London: Methuen, 1896-1900), 3:71.
37. Lord Kames [Henry Home], *Sketches of the History of Man*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1774). "Sketch No. 1" in particular addresses the issue of diversity and the adequacy of climatic causes to explain it.
38. David Schneider has pointed out that the nature/nurture debate "has always been deeply embedded in wider questions of race . . . around which there was and still is considerable ferment in Europe and America" ("The Coming of a Sage to Samoa," *Natural History*, June 1983, 6). This is another reminder of how deep issues explored in the eighteenth century still evade definitive resolution.
39. Marvin Harris, Review of *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, by Derek Freeman, *Psychology Today*, May 1983, 24.