

Meiners's Political Thought

BOURGEOIS MODERNITY VERSUS THE HISTORICAL ARISTOCRACY IN

CHRISTOPH MEINERS'S POLITICAL THOUGHT.*

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Abstract

Christoph Meiners (1747-1810), a major historian and philosopher of the German late-Enlightenment, has received increasing recognition as a significant thinker in the emergence of 19th century racial theories. The scholarly focus on Meiners's hierarchical view of race and its legacy has led to the classification of his broader *oeuvre* as conservative, or even reactionary. By examining his *Geschichte der Ungleichheit der Stände unter den vornehmsten Europäischen Völkern* (1792), written in response to the French Revolution and the contemporary circumstances of the Holy Roman Empire, this article sheds new light on his work, as well as on an under-researched line of thought in the 1790s. Rather than a conservative or reactionary work, this text is a radical critique of the German aristocracy that ultimately recommends the abolition of most significant aristocratic privileges and the overhaul of its membership in favour of the bourgeoisie. This article presents not only a more complex understanding of Christoph Meiners's ideas, but also calls for a reappraisal of the categories applied to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century intellectuals both in Germany and in Europe more broadly.

I

During the 1790s and early 1800s, the work of the Göttingen professor Christoph Meiners (1747-1810) played a crucial role in German debates about the history

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of the aristocracy and its position in contemporary society.¹ In 1802, the Jewish philosopher Saul Ascher published his *Ideen zur natürlichen Geschichte der politischen Revolutionen*. He had attempted to publish it in 1799, but the Prussian censor prevented the work's appearance, calling it 'an open call to revolution'.² The *Ideen* attacked the German status quo, offering instead a radical vision of the future: cosmopolitan, tolerant and abounding in individual rights. Ascher's argument built upon a historical analysis in which the *ancien régime* was in the process of giving way to the values of the bourgeoisie, and one of his key sources was Meiners's 1792 critique of the aristocracy, titled *Geschichte der Ungleichheit der Stände unter den vornehmsten europäischen Völkern* (1792).³ Ascher was not alone in using this text. As early as 1793, the *Geschichte* appeared as a source in Johann Ludwig Ewald's *Was sollte der Adel jetzt thun?*, which argued that the German aristocracy should forsake its unfair privileges in order to avoid unrest.⁴ Likewise, in 1794, the anonymous *Freymüthige Gedanken über die allerwichtigste Angelegenheit Deutschlands* also used Meiners's text to critique aristocratic institutions.⁵ The following year, Friedrich Georg August Schmidt drew on the *Geschichte* to argue in favour of legal equality.⁶ By the time that Ascher's *Ideen* was published, Meiners's work had become a staple source for German critics of the aristocracy and its institutions.

By the 1930s, however, Meiners's role in this anti-aristocratic tradition had been forgotten. Instead, he was known primarily for his hierarchical division of humanity into different racial and cultural groups, and National Socialist intellectuals read Meiners as an anthropologist whose work prefigured their own racial-theoretical ideas. In 1938, the prominent sociologist Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann claimed that Meiners's racial thought appeared 'completely modern'.⁷

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Two years later, Egon Freiherr von Eickstedt (whose racial typology may have influenced the Nuremberg Laws) called Meiners the 'founder of racial doctrine [*Begründer der Rassenlehre*]' and argued that his work had been a key source for Arthur de Gobineau, claiming further that 'it is time to recognize the man's intellectual-historical influence, and his real importance'.⁸ In 1943, the Nazi historian Hermann Blome lauded Meiners as a central figure in the emergence of modern racial ideas.⁹

The fact that Meiners's ideas could be appropriated both by a radical German-Jewish intellectual like Ascher and by leading National Socialist thinkers highlights the interpretative challenges that scholars confront when dealing with his thought. Meiners's legacy in the work of writers such as Mühlmann, Eickstedt and Blome, as well as the breadth of his output, has further complicated the task of situating the various aspects of his works within their late-Enlightenment contexts. It has become commonplace to characterize Meiners's political thought as particularly conservative, or even reactionary. Sabine Vetter and Hans Carl Finsen summarize his political thought simply as a defence of 'Enlightened absolutism', while Susanne Zantop's study of Meiners's racial philosophy describes his output as an 'antirevolutionary colonialist discourse'.¹⁰ Perhaps most significantly, the prominent US historian of race and racism Nell Irvin Painter described Meiners as 'reactionary', 'cranky', and 'politically retrograde'.¹¹

Despite increasing recognition of his significance, however, the majority of Meiners's political writings, including the *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, have received little scholarly attention.¹² This article approaches the *Geschichte* as an intervention in contemporary debates about the aristocracy, the French Revolution and socio-political reform. In this context Meiners's text offered a

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radical critique of the German aristocracy and its institutions. The *Geschichte's* central thesis was that, while aristocratic privileges can be both just and desirable, the contemporary German nobility urgently required extensive reform. Meiners recommended the social ascendance of the bourgeoisie [*Bürgerstand*] and the broader adoption of bourgeois [*bürgerlich*] values which, he claimed, were uniquely suited to modernity. Without discounting or otherwise mitigating the discriminatory implications of his racial philosophy, Meiners is much harder to categorize than the designations of Painter, Zantop and others suggest.

In fact, Meiners's thought more closely resembles the early-nineteenth-century nationalism(s) of Ernst Moritz Arndt, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, and the Napoleonic writings of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, than the ideas of more aristocratic racial thinkers like Gobineau, Eickstedt and Mühlmann. Like Arndt, Jahn, Fichte and their disciples, Meiners's work combined strongly exclusionary attitudes towards supposedly non-Germanic groups (including Jews) with a critique of contemporary aristocratic norms.¹³ Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to suggest that Meiners's thought straightforwardly prefigured these authors. Perhaps most importantly, Arndt, Jahn and Fichte had begun to articulate nationalist ideals that conceptualized the German 'Volk' in terms of popular culture and traditions.

In the work of Arndt and Jahn in particular, this 'völkisch' culture was contrasted with the (supposedly) more commercial, cosmopolitan and elitist values of the bourgeoisie.¹⁴ Conversely, the *Geschichte der Ungleichheit* was a defence of 'Enlightened' bourgeois norms and did not entail any commitment to populist ideals. While both Meiners and later Romantic nationalists considered

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European nations in terms of cultural characteristics, in Meiners's work these characteristics were explicitly bound to the biological superiority of European peoples. Although Meiners's critique of European aristocracies is not contingent upon his racial theories, his biological concept of race is more important to his understanding of European culture than it is in the works of Arndt, Jahn and Fichte. It is in his concept of race that Meiners most resembles the thought of later 'scientific' racial theorists: he was explicit that racial characteristics reflected heritable biological realities with profound moral and socio-political implications. While he may be considered a 'transitional' thinker in the history of political thought, even in this sense Meiners's work resists easy categorization. He was neither a Romantic nor a nationalist (at least in the post-Napoleonic sense), but an exemplary case of an Enlightenment thinker whose thought challenges later expectations.

Similarly, in an article discussing the historiography of the so-called 'Sattelzeit,' George S. Williamson emphasized the need to question 'received assumptions' about the period and engage with ideas and individuals that have received less scholarly attention.¹⁵ In Reinhart Koselleck's original formulation, the *Sattelzeit* represented a period of historiographical transformation between 1750 and 1850.¹⁶ This transformation, centred in the German lands, represented the transition – in Daniel Fulda's words – 'from the plurality of exemplary histories to one autonomous history' in methodology, presentation, and purpose.¹⁷ Through the work of Koselleck and others, the term has come to refer to the broader intellectual and conceptual transformations taking place within the German lands.¹⁸ These years, and especially those between 1789 and 1815, have become associated with the crystallization of distinct categories and

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movements within contemporary political thought. In this view, the intellectual and political developments of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods encouraged the polarization of German intellectuals into distinct political camps.¹⁹ In this context, Meiners's work deserves particular attention. By integrating specific socio-cultural contingencies into a unified historical narrative, his work can be seen as emblematic of the *Sattelzeit's* novel historical thinking. At the same time, his political thought resists many of the categories traditionally applied to this period.

II

The concepts 'conservative', 'radical', and 'reactionary' have proven especially contentious in the study of early modern German political thought. The vast differences in policies, constitutions and governments across the various jurisdictions of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as rapid political changes within these, make it impossible to establish a comprehensive or uncontroversial set of values, ideals or institutions through which these terms could be defined.

Disagreements have arisen not just regarding the definitions of these terms, but also regarding their application to specific individuals. For example, Klaus Epstein's influential work *The genesis of German conservatism* describes the Hanoverian writers and ministers Ernst Brandes and August Wilhelm Rehberg as 'reform conservatives' because they advocated gradual reform within contemporary institutional frameworks.²⁰ Conversely, Brandes's biographer, Carl Haase, disputes not only this description in relation to both thinkers, but the concept of 'reform conservatism' itself.²¹ According to Haase, advocates of gradual reform are not 'conservatives' at all, but simply pragmatic reformers. Perhaps the most prominent – and polarising – debate on eighteenth-century

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German radicalism surrounded the so-called 'German Jacobins'. Not only have discussions considered the popularity of 'Jacobinism' in Germany, but also whether and/or to what extent these 'Jacobins' were political radicals at all.²² The body of work produced by these debates is invaluable and has contributed to a much more nuanced understanding of 1790s Germany, but it has also demonstrated the difficulty of establishing conclusive definitions for these terms.

With this in mind, I use such labels tentatively, acknowledging that they are necessarily tied to the specific circumstances of 1790s Germany. They are consequently considered largely with reference to the political ideals of 'freedom, equality, and fraternity' commonly associated with the French Revolution. While contemporary Germans engaged with debates that often originated long before 1789, the events, ideas and factions in Revolutionary France nonetheless came to dominate the increasingly polarized and antagonistic landscape of German political discourse.²³ Moreover, rather than representing cohesive political-philosophical camps, individual thinkers could – and, as in the case of Meiners, often did – simultaneously hold ideas which, taken separately, may fairly be described as conservative, reactionary, and/or radical.

In this context, 'conservative' refers to expressions of broad satisfaction with social and political institutions within a given territory, while allowing for a degree of limited and/or gradual change in favour of expanding the rights held by disadvantaged classes, promoting social and/or political mobility, and/or limiting hierarchical relationships of power, distinctions, and privileges insofar as such changes would not drastically alter the primary functions or fundamental structure of those social and political institutions. 'Reactionary' refers to expressions of commitment to traditional (or historical) social and political

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institutions within a territory, while advocating changes that would reduce the rights of disadvantaged classes, reduce social and/or political mobility, and/or strengthen hierarchical relationships of power, distinctions, and privileges. Finally, 'radical' refers to expressions of strong dissatisfaction with social and political institutions within a given territory, and the consequent espousal of considerable changes to their functions and/or composition, in particular when doing so would significantly expand the rights of lower classes, promote social and/or political mobility, and/or reduce hierarchical relationships of power, distinctions, and privileges.

III

Christoph Meiners was a prominent German intellectual and, arguably, a major thinker in the European Enlightenment more broadly. Born in Warstade in Bremen-Verden²⁴ in 1747, Meiners studied law from 1767 to 1770, published a well-received critique of 'esoteric philosophy' in 1772, and began teaching at the University of Göttingen the same year, where he remained until his death in 1810.²⁵ He published books on a wide range of subjects, from animal magnetism to travel, joined various learned societies, became privy counsellor to the Hanoverian court and served as university prorector from 1796 to 1800.²⁶ Meiners's work was widely known, appeared in French and English translations, and in the 1800s he was a crucial figure in a transnational network of intellectuals and officials recruiting German professors for Russian universities.²⁷ He made significant contributions to the German reception of contemporary British works and was a central figure in so-called German *Popularphilosophie*.²⁸ His ideas were used by diverse figures, including the Prussian statesman Baron vom Stein and the founder of the Bavarian Illuminati,

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Adam Weishaupt.²⁹ Finally, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger has drawn attention to Meiners's pioneering use of 'sex as historiographical category'.³⁰

Nevertheless, Meiners became best known for his writings on race, the most important of which are *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit*, an article defending the transatlantic slave trade, and the posthumous *Untersuchungen über die Verschiedenheiten der Menschennaturen*.³¹ The racial theses presented in these writings brought him into conflict with contemporaries like Immanuel Kant, Georg Forster, and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.³² The historical significance of his racial ideas had been largely neglected prior to the appearance of pioneering scholarship by Friedrich Lotter, Britta Rupp-Eisenreich, and Sabine Vetter beginning in the 1980s.³³ These studies have uncovered his crucial role in the emergence of anthropology as a distinct discipline.³⁴ As well as being cited by Arthur de Gobineau and the National Socialist authors mentioned above, Meiners's racial anthropology is known to have influenced the French *Société des Observateurs de l'homme* and Julien-Joseph Virey, the latter of whose work was used in prominent nineteenth-century debates about slavery.³⁵

Indeed, when approaching Meiners's work, it is important to recognise that he wrote within a framework of methods, themes and arguments that would now be described as anthropological. Most of his *oeuvre* reflects this framework in that it contemplates and seeks to understand what constitutes humanity and human difference within a broad understanding of the 'history of humanity [*Geschichte der Menschheit*]'.³⁶ Despite only occupying an ancillary position in many of his writings, race remained a major pre-occupation in his thought from the publication of the first edition of the *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit* in 1785 until the end of his life.

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Contrary to Edward Said's suggestion that, due to the lack of a national colonial project, German anthropological discussions were almost exclusively intellectual pursuits, such discussions reflected a range of political debates and interests.³⁷ As Thomas Strack has persuasively argued, discussions of ethnology – and race in particular – were ‘necessarily tied to the controversy surrounding slavery’.³⁸ Perhaps most notably, claims about the culture and/or biology of ‘oriental’ peoples were used in debates about Germany's Jewish population, and especially in relation to Jewish emancipation.³⁹ Additionally, Göttingen was part of the Electorate of Hanover, which was then ruled by the House of Hanover in personal union with the British crown. Although it is unlikely that individual Göttingen professors had significant material interests in British colonialism, many felt they had a unique affinity with Britain.⁴⁰ Such a perceived bond may have impacted their anthropological writings and thinking about British rule generally. Anthropological thinkers responded to political questions of both practical and theoretical import, and Meiners explicitly situated his ideas in relation to these disputes. Most infamously, he took the exceptional position (among intellectuals) of justifying not only the subjugation of non-European peoples, but also the transatlantic slave trade.⁴¹

Meiners's most comprehensive text concerning human difference published during his lifetime was the *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit*, the second (slightly revised) edition of which appeared in 1793. The *Grundriß* is largely a collection of statements and citations regarding the appearance, behaviour, and institutions of different cultures, as well as how these are affected by climate, heredity, and other factors. It is pitched as a primer through which readers interested in the ‘history of humanity’ can learn about key concepts,

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problems, and sources.⁴² Meiners claimed that his work represented a novel intellectual field, which he conceived as being centred on the broad study of human physical and cultural differences with a view to understanding how such differences emerged over time.⁴³

The *Grundriß* divided humanity into two primordial 'lineages [*Hauptstämme*]' – Caucasian and Mongol – which gradually sub-divided into various 'races [*Raßen*]', and thence into smaller national groups.⁴⁴ The Caucasian group comprized 'Celtic' peoples (most Western and Northern Europeans) and 'Slavic' peoples (including, among others, Jews, Arabs, higher-caste Indians, and the peoples considered Slavic today).⁴⁵ The Mongol lineage contained all other groups, including Finns, East Asians, black Africans, and Native Americans.⁴⁶ These groups are not described neutrally. Instead, they reflect moral, intellectual, cultural and physical differences, with Caucasian (and especially 'Celtic') peoples considered fundamentally superior to 'Mongol' peoples. In the second edition Meiners referred to the original lineages simply as 'beautiful' and 'ugly'.⁴⁷ Reflecting a central theme in his concept of aristocracy, these groups and their associated values arose through a range of factors, but especially through selective breeding over many generations. Meiners explicitly defended European imperialism, claiming that the only possibility for the improvement of 'ugly' peoples is the unrestricted domination by superior races.⁴⁸ At a time when 'race' remained an ambiguous term, with debates regarding the extent to which it should be considered biological or related to specific moral, intellectual or cultural traits, Meiners was explicit that racial characteristics reflected heritable biological realities.⁴⁹

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Like most of Meiners's works, then, the *Grundriß* is a political text. That the second, largely unchanged, edition of the *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit* appeared in 1793 further suggests that Meiners's views on race – which may fairly be described as conservative or reactionary – remained consistent throughout the period in which he wrote and published the *Geschichte*. Consequently, it is not my contention that the more radical 1792 text somehow represents Meiners's 'true' political thought while the *Grundriß* does not, but that the *Geschichte* challenges any straightforward political categorization of his ideas. Furthermore, the prominent roles that race and heredity play in the *Grundriß* are central to understanding the *Geschichte*. The importance of heredity in the latter, discussed below, shows a clear conceptual relationship with the *Grundriß*. Although the *Geschichte* is primarily a narrative history of Europe, it reflects Meiners's broader anthropological ideas in its historical treatment of the development of unequal qualities across shifting ethnic units.

Importantly, Meiners wrote neither text with only academic audiences in mind. As Ursula Goldenbaum has argued, the broad realm of public discourse that Jürgen Habermas termed 'bourgeois publicity [*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*]' – usually translated as the 'bourgeois public sphere' – emerged in Germany in the early decades of the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ Accordingly, Meiners was writing within a mature 'public sphere' that featured an array of periodicals, thinkers and ideas responding to political questions and events. Meiners self-consciously engaged with these debates, addressing his work to academics and the educated public generally, meaning that both the *Grundriß* and the *Geschichte* should be considered interventions in mainstream debates. His attempts to reach this

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broader readership appear to have been successful. Meiners's writings on race achieved notoriety within his lifetime and faced significant criticism, most notably from Georg Forster, Immanuel Kant, and Meiners's colleagues Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.⁵¹ These criticisms targeted Meiners's methodology (such as his superficial, or misrepresentative use of travel reports), as well as his disparaging treatment of 'Mongol' peoples. His ideas were even satirized in a novel by the popular author August Lafontaine, which follows a misguided nobleman's attempts to segregate his villagers according to their racial status.⁵² These efforts cause chaos and discord before the nobleman's views are rectified by an African former slave.

To base discussions of Meiners's reception solely on the criticisms of authors now considered the period's 'great thinkers' would be anachronistic. However, that so many thinkers felt it necessary to denounce his thought suggests a broader positive reception, and Lafontaine's satire itself indicates that Meiners's ideas must have been prevalent enough for readers to get the joke. The first edition of the *Grundriß* received a positive review in the influential *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, and the publication of a second edition, as well as Meiners's later writings on race, indicates a significant demand for his ideas.⁵³ As mentioned above, his work was well-received by prominent French anthropologists, and the translation of his writings into French and English suggests a significant international audience.⁵⁴ Indeed, in April 1803 Tsar Alexander I sent Meiners a diamond ring in recognition of his work.⁵⁵ Meiners was clearly a controversial figure, and his *Geschichte* would have been expected to find a broad readership already familiar with his racial theories.

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Anthony J. La Vopa has described the 'flood' of works on natural law in 1790s Germany, invigorated by debates surrounding both the French Revolution and the Critical Philosophy.⁵⁶ Moreover, Otto Dann has shown that German discussions of inequality were typically framed in natural-legal terms.⁵⁷ In this context, it is unsurprising that the *Geschichte* begins with a discussion of natural law. In doing so, Meiners clearly situated his work within the ethical, political and legal frameworks of late-Enlightenment Germany – a fact reinforced by his references to well-known textbooks by Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, Johann Georg Heinrich Feder, and Ludwig Höpfner.⁵⁸ What is unusual about Meiners's discussion of natural law, however, is that it was premised on natural human inequality.⁵⁹ In the century and a half since Hobbes's *Leviathan*, it had become typical among German thinkers to premise discussions of natural law with the claim that, within a hypothetical state of nature, humans are morally and socially equal.⁶⁰ This position was maintained not only by intellectuals ranging from Immanuel Kant to the historian Justus Möser, but also by officials like the Prussian court jurist Carl Gottlieb Svarez and the Bavarian chancellor Wiguläus von Kreittmayr.⁶¹ While it was generally accepted that human beings outside the state of nature retain a degree of moral and/or religious equality, most thinkers concluded that the historical reality of human existence made social (and political) inequality necessary and/or desirable. Meiners's claim that humans are both historically and naturally unequal was exceptional, reflecting the centrality of inequality in his understanding of humanity.

Meiners justified this position in explicit opposition to Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui (1694-1748).⁶² Burlamaqui's work posited that individuals are

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naturally equal, naturally free, and cannot willingly renounce their freedom.⁶³ There is reason to believe that, in responding to Burlamaqui, Meiners had Jean-Jacques Rousseau in mind as well. Although Rousseau's work is absent from the *Geschichte*, Hans Erich Bödeker has compellingly argued that Meiners's 'natural history of inequality' can be read as a critical counter-narrative to Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, and it is noteworthy that Rousseau praised Burlamaqui's work in this *Discours*.⁶⁴ Moreover, in a book published the following year, Meiners was particularly scathing of Rousseau's description of a benign, egalitarian, state of nature.⁶⁵ Meiners's critique may also have been directed against Immanuel Kant, whose concept of a 'kingdom of ends' was founded on universal human equality and ethical freedom.⁶⁶ Meiners had long opposed Kant's philosophy, and in the early years of the nineteenth century published an extensive critique of the *Critical Philosophy*.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, regardless of whose work he had in mind, Meiners's attack on Burlamaqui necessarily positioned itself as rejecting all advocates of natural equality.

This critique was based on a series of inductive comparisons founded on a set of (supposedly) verifiable facts regarding human difference. Animals are naturally inferior to humans due to their relative lack of skills, tastes, and moral sensibilities, he claimed, just as certain races are naturally inferior to others on precisely the same grounds.⁶⁸ Meiners extended this reasoning to within racial groups: 'extraordinarily beautiful, strong, industrious, brave, ingenious, and charitable' individuals have natural rights against and authorities over those lacking such qualities.⁶⁹ In a narrative contrasting sharply with Rousseau's argument that social inequality emerged through a process of corruption, Meiners described meritocratic and benevolent social hierarchies as having

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emerged through natural inequalities.⁷⁰ Relying once again on an argument central to his model of racial difference – that many characteristics are heritable – he argued that because the traits that justify social inequality are heritable, the privileges that they yield should be heritable also.⁷¹ Meiners thus described the institutionalization of a stratified political, social, and cultural realm within which privileges are meritocratically distributed and inherited.⁷²

Importantly, this process is legitimized principally with reference to the encouragement of human happiness. Meiners claimed that 'right', or *Recht*, is defined by the promotion of 'happiness [*Glückseligkeit*]' amongst individuals and communities.⁷³ According to him, *Recht* should be manifested in positive law, meaning that institutional inequalities must be justified according to their contribution to a society's well-being. As a result, despite asserting a set of (supposedly) universal human rights – 'security...of life, health, property, and honour' – Meiners rejected claims that freedom should be considered a universal right.⁷⁴ Instead, legitimate rights to freedom are only held by those able to benefit society by being independent of the will of others. Others, lacking such advantages, should be subjugated by those capable of determining their interests.⁷⁵ This argument reflects another prominent theme in Meiners's earlier anthropological writings: freedom is not a universal characteristic of human nature, but relative to one's situation within a hierarchy of attributes.⁷⁶ One important implication of this argument is the corollary rejection of the desirability (and justice) of any political constitution founded on the claim – as found in Rousseau's *Contrat Social*, among other texts⁷⁷ – that all individuals should participate in establishing the laws which govern them.

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Meiners's emphasis on a set of universal human rights and, crucially, his unequivocal claim that socio-political inequalities must be justified by both personal merit and social value make it difficult to situate his account of natural law as reactionary. The argument that unequal institutions must contribute towards a people's happiness implied that such institutions should be assessed and reformed in order to meet that standard. Equally, the claim that institutional inequalities should derive from individual merit included a similar principle of revision should this criterion not be met. These two claims were central to Meiners's discussion of the historical aristocracy and, crucially, his critique of contemporary German institutions.

V

The core of the *Geschichte* is a narrative describing the emergence of different European social groups, their moral norms, characteristics, and socio-political circumstances. When approaching this narrative, readers must bear in mind the dual meaning of 'aristocracy [*Adel*]' within the text. This stems from Meiners's emphasis on the divergence between 'natural' inequalities and the historical reality of unequal institutions. The text itself does not establish or consistently use distinct terms with reference to these two concepts. For reasons of clarity, the adjectives 'natural' or 'true' refer to those aristocrats who Meiners claims are genuinely superior according to an objective (or 'natural') standard. Conversely, 'contemporary' or 'historical' refer to those recognized as aristocrats by contemporary European institutions, since their aristocratic status emerged through the contingencies of historical change.

The *Geschichte* describes five hereditary ranks among the early Germanic tribes, with privileges distributed according to individual virtues linked to

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martial prowess.⁷⁸ Rather than maintaining these virtues, however, the Germanic tribes adopted the decadent morals of the conquered Romans, including sexual customs (like concubinage) unsuited to the strict regulation of hereditary rank, thereby causing the heritable attributes of the 'natural' German aristocracy to deteriorate.⁷⁹ These problems were compounded by the discovery of new vices and rulers' overly generous distribution of privileges, which further corrupted European social and political institutions.⁸⁰ According to Meiners, these material and moral changes generated *unnatural* inequalities, convoluted socio-political structures, and continuous war.⁸¹ Moreover, the difficulty of maintaining the security of early medieval states encouraged a process of centralization, as monarchs were granted increased powers but were nevertheless unable to institute lasting reforms.⁸² These circumstances diminished the political and legislative rights of lower-ranking aristocrats and citizens, further distorting the social order.⁸³ Such changes, as in other Enlightenment histories of the Middle Ages, resulted in a despotism characterized by serfdom, superstition, and the abuse of power by an immoral feudal aristocracy.⁸⁴

The primary catalyst for change in this narrative was the monarchical investiture of economically productive cities with privileges against territorial nobilities.⁸⁵ *Geschichte der Ungleichheit* traces the development of cities as spaces for the free exercise of commerce and industry, meritocratic distributions of wealth, and the emergence of a new, virtuous – 'bourgeois' – 'aristocracy'.⁸⁶ The open and dynamic nature of these bourgeois 'aristocracies' fostered individuals' sense of personal investment in their cities' political and social success, creating positive feedback loops and the emergence of strong civic

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cultures.⁸⁷ Although Meiners did not clearly define either the bourgeoisie or its values, his usage of these terms suggests a broad conception of the bourgeoisie as the 'middle class' between the peasantry and historical aristocracy, typically inclined towards commerce and/or the pursuit of knowledge.⁸⁸ Horst Möller's suggestion that eighteenth-century Germans generally considered 'bourgeois values' to include 'inner merits [*innere Werte*], virtue, diligence, frugality, honesty [*Ehrlichkeit*], [and] self-sufficiency' is both persuasive and consistent with Meiners's account.⁸⁹ Importantly, Möller argues, eighteenth-century thinkers considered these values to be both suited to the 'bourgeoisie' and to have universal social and moral worth.⁹⁰ This was especially true when contrasted with the negative values often associated with the aristocracy: vanity, disingenuousness, pomp, 'empty etiquette', and immorality.⁹¹

Meiners's emphasis on, and positive evaluation of, the historical role of cities relied on the work of William Robertson.⁹² Meiners's and Robertson's accounts share other important factors in the late-medieval reconfiguration of European society, such as major military, legal, and bureaucratic changes, the end of serfdom, and protracted wars.⁹³ These factors accelerated three key processes: monarchical centralization, the moral decay of the historical aristocracy, and the emergence of modern bourgeois norms. Meiners described the formation of centralized military structures organized around units of infantry rather than increasingly unreliable, unwarlike, and morally corrupt nobles.⁹⁴ Similarly, the education of professional lawyers with 'knowledge, diligence, and incorruptibility', alongside the increased jurisdiction of monarchical courts, gradually divested aristocrats of their legal roles.⁹⁵ The rise of universities and formal qualifications enabled the expansion and development

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of state bureaucracies, displacing members of the aristocracy from ministerial and other official positions.⁹⁶ Finally, the Crusades and other protracted conflicts drained the aristocracy of men and money, further weakening their position.⁹⁷ Each of these processes centralized state administration, diminished the roles of aristocrats, and created space for the rise of more virtuous and talented individuals.

In this narrative, the historical aristocracy's loss of virtue and change of circumstances provoked a protracted power struggle between nobles and monarchs, through which the constitutive elements of modern European society emerged: an industrious urban bourgeoisie, military, legal, and administrative professionalization, and coherent, centralized, states based on taxation rather than feudal obligations. Meiners's account of these transformations is strikingly similar to those described by other authors of what J. G. A. Pocock has called 'Enlightened narratives', and especially that of William Robertson.⁹⁸ The 'Enlightened narrative', according to Pocock, was a common historiographical norm employed by writers including Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith, Pietro Giannone, Voltaire, and Robertson himself, whereby writers explicated and commented upon the transition from Medieval 'barbarism' to Enlightened modernity.⁹⁹ Robertson's account, which Meiners used extensively, had been well received in both Britain and Germany. Although it was not unchallenged, by the 1790s its salient features were neither especially unusual nor controversial.¹⁰⁰ Thus, whereas Meiners's account of human nature stood out for its rejection of natural equality, his narration of the emergence of modern European society and norms largely fell within the mainstream of eighteenth-century historiography. By tracing the emergence of European modernity,

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moreover, Meiners explained the existence of a virtuous, industrial, and bourgeois 'aristocracy', as well as the contemporary unsuitability of the historical aristocracy and its martial values. Thus, contrary to Vetter's claim that Meiners's thought represented a 'de-moralization [*Entmoralisierung*]' of thinking about humanity and human difference, the historical role of morals is central to his critique of contemporary European aristocrats.¹⁰¹

When it came to assessing these aristocrats, Meiners signalled his approval for at least some aspects of the French Revolution by praising the peaceful end of 'baleful' French privileges.¹⁰² Crucially, even if he did not approve of the Revolution wholesale, his criticisms are directed towards the French aristocracy (rather than the Revolutionaries) for having acted despotically, corrupted the king, oppressed the provinces, and ruined the kingdom so much that, as of 1792, it was unclear how the French state could survive.¹⁰³ That Meiners blamed the French nobles for the Revolution and its aftermath, thereby vindicating the early Revolutionaries, was not unusual. German observers were generally critical of the French aristocracy, and positive regarding the early Revolution's anti-aristocratic impulses.¹⁰⁴ The discussion of France is, however, significant: it is written with an eye to the Holy Roman Empire, serving as a cautionary tale for the German nobility.

The situation of the contemporary German aristocracy is, by Meiners's reckoning, appalling – moral degradation and the dramatic changes in European culture described above had made it unfit for purpose.¹⁰⁵ Meiners is often vague regarding the identification of specific offenders among the empire's myriad territories, titles and privileges, perhaps from fear of appearing partial, or even fear of repercussions. Nevertheless, and typical of many contemporary

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assessments, the Imperial Knights are described as enjoying far greater privileges than they should, while the aristocracy's domination of official positions and other unfair legal, social, and political rights is criticized in terms consistent with other German advocates of the bourgeoisie.¹⁰⁶ More broadly, the nobility enjoyed bourgeois advantages without 'bourgeois burdens'.¹⁰⁷ In summary, Meiners argued that the adjustment of aristocratic privileges must accommodate the values and attitudes of the 'third estate', declaring that 'the third estate has long felt that the aristocracy possesses harmful prerogatives'.¹⁰⁸ Should the situation not be rectified, the bourgeoisie may be forced to take actions similar to those in France.¹⁰⁹ Such a statement, if not quite a threat, must certainly have seemed like one to many.

Having discussed the aristocracy's current state, Meiners shifted to a more general analysis, but which is nevertheless – and despite his choosing primarily non-German interlocutors – intended for his German readers. Meiners situated himself as a moderate thinker, representing a meritocratic socio-political vision opposed to both egalitarianism and *ancien régime* aristocratism. To do this, he positioned himself between two opposing camps – egalitarians, or 'ochlocrats', in favour of abolishing inequality entirely, and 'oligarchs' advocating the maintenance of many traditional aristocratic privileges.¹¹⁰ Meiners chose Jacques-Antoine Dulaure to represent the former, and Edmund Burke and Montesquieu the latter.¹¹¹

Meiners responded to these thinkers by reminding readers of his unusually radical argument, derived from natural law, that, while heritable privileges are justifiable, the (re-)establishment of beneficial inequality in modern Europe (or, at least, modern Germany) would require a comprehensive

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overhaul of modern aristocracies. He was emphatic that contemporary aristocrats had both lost their earlier virtues *and* that the virtues they had previously possessed had lost their value. The virtues that had previously justified aristocratic privilege – in his words 'beauty, strength, bravery, experience in arms and at war' – were no longer socially beneficial, and therefore could no longer be justified.¹¹² Previously warriors were needed, but in 1792 it was those with 'a great, active, and educated [*gebildet*] spirit' and a brave, selfless, 'elevated soul'.¹¹³ In other words, the 'true', modern, aristocracy should be composed of virtuous, Enlightened, and public-spirited individuals – the values he considered exemplified by the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁴ The historical aristocracy had lost both its moral compass and its social utility, and it was time for their widespread displacement by members of the bourgeoisie.

In addition to proposing the ascendance of the bourgeoisie, Meiners also recommended a drastic reduction of aristocratic privileges generally. Exclusive access to higher positions in the clergy, court, and state administration should be abolished, and freedom from taxation is described as groundless, unjust and lacking in social value.¹¹⁵ In order to ensure complaints are dealt with fairly, aristocrats should have less legal influence, and feudal duties demanding labour and resources from peasants should be abolished.¹¹⁶ While Meiners clearly advocated some kind of aristocratic system, even his ideal, modern, aristocrats seem left with few, if any, significant privileges.¹¹⁷ In short, despite beginning the *Geschichte* with an unequivocal defense of inequality, Meiners concluded his work with a broadside against contemporary German aristocrats and their privileges, arguing that they did not meet the requirements of natural law. His solution was an aristocracy of merit according to bourgeois values.

VI

Although the French Revolution brought debates about inequality to the fore, the problem of how (and occasionally whether) aristocracy could be philosophically justified and reconciled with modernity had been crucial themes in eighteenth-century European thought.¹¹⁸ Responses varied widely across political, cultural, and intellectual contexts, and in the Holy Roman Empire debates about inequality were integral to discussions of the empire's web of institutions, rights, and relationships of power. Although it is no longer customary to treat the decades prior to the empire's 1806 dissolution as years of inexorable political decline, the period was marked by intense debate about whether, how, and to what extent the empire should be reformed.¹¹⁹ Additionally, German thinking about the aristocracy was oriented not just around the historical reality of aristocratic institutions, but also their relationship to the rising bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie's situation within the empire generally.¹²⁰ Many called for significant reforms, in particular regarding entities seen as outdated, such as the Imperial Knights, Free Imperial Cities, and ecclesiastical principalities. Nevertheless, most writers were largely content with the *Reich's* core aristocratic institutions.

Although the French Revolution catalysed these discussions, egalitarianism remained unpopular in Germany, including during the Revolution's early positive reception (prior to the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793). Terms like 'equality-men [*Gleichheitsmänner*]' and 'equality-fanatics [*Gleichheitsphanatiker*]' appeared as pejoratives and, while there were increasing demands to re-orient inequality around merit, very few authors advocated complete socio-political equality.¹²¹ Even Adolph Knigge (1752-1796)

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– often considered one of the period's most radical thinkers – saw, in Otto Dann's words, 'the implementation of social equality more as a procedure of Enlightenment and moral understanding'.¹²² It was only in 1793, after the *Geschichte* appeared, that Kant and Fichte published explicit calls for the abolition of inherited privileges.¹²³ Kant and Fichte arguably represented the intellectual avant-garde of German egalitarianism: both were controversial, even shocking, and many observers branded them as Jacobins.¹²⁴ Although egalitarian arguments became more widespread in the following years, according to Dieter Langewiesche, bourgeois critiques of the aristocracy were overwhelmingly against the wholesale abolition of aristocratic privilege.¹²⁵ More mainstream were the views of the jurist Wilhelm August Friedrich Danz (1764-1803) and the Franco-German politician Karl Friedrich Reinhard (1761-1837), who maintained that, while German social and political structures may require some reform, such reforms should be minor, or restricted to particularly pernicious aspects.¹²⁶

While his categorical anti-egalitarianism clearly made Meiners a more conservative figure than Knigge, Kant, and Fichte, this was the case for the vast majority of German thinkers at the time. When compared with the views of thinkers like Danz and Reinhard, however, Meiners's critique of the aristocracy and its privileges places him at the radical end of German discourse. This is even clearer when Meiners's views are compared with the work of more reactionary thinkers like Leopold Alois Hoffmann, Felix Franz Hofstätter, and Ludwig Adolf Grolmann, who recommended the hardening of social distinctions, traditional institutions, and strict obeisance to one's superiors.¹²⁷ In other words, to describe Meiners's attitude towards the aristocracy as conservative or reactionary would be to lose sight of his intellectual context.

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The *Geschichte der Ungleichheit* appears to have found a positive reception, for example, in Christoph Friedrich Nicolai's influential *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*.¹²⁸ More importantly, it was quickly adopted as a reference point by other critics of the aristocracy, as discussed at the beginning of this article, and it continued to appear across a range of histories, legal manuals, and other writings decades after its publication.¹²⁹ One scholar citing the *Geschichte* even described Meiners as 'one of the greatest philosophers of his time'.¹³⁰ A comprehensive study of the reception of his thought remains to be written, but this evidence suggests that Meiners's intellectual and cultural impact extended well beyond his writings on race, and included his more radical critique of the German aristocracy.

VII

Christoph Meiners's writings of the Revolutionary decade deserve attention because they challenge conventional views about German political thought during the *Sattelzeit*. His critique of the historical aristocracy suggests that he was neither a conservative nor a reactionary thinker. His arguments in *Geschichte der Ungleichheit* and other publications in this period are complex, advocating both a hierarchical view of human difference and a drastic overhaul of the German aristocracy. The fact that Meiners's argument is congruent with his racial philosophy suggests that his ideas about human difference need to be approached carefully in order to appreciate the different ways in which he used them. This is not to diminish his hierarchical, essentialising, racial theories, but to bear in mind that many Enlightenment authors, like Meiners, resist straightforward categorization. As discussed in the introduction, Meiners's synthesis of racial inequality and anti-aristocratism may in some sense prefigure

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the populist-xenophobic German nationalism of works like Ernst Moritz Arndt's *Ueber Volkshass*.¹³¹ Nevertheless, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit* was written in the context of the early 1790s and not in the wake of the so-called 'Wars of Liberation [*Befreiungskriege*]': Meiners's work was fundamentally anti-populist and did not reflect, let alone advocate, Franco-German antagonism. Instead, the *Geschichte* was a radical, multifaceted, response to the socio-political circumstances of the late Holy Roman Empire.

Finally, Meiners's interventions in contemporary political debates deserve further investigation for their moral-cultural analyses of historical events and developments. His rejection of natural equality, combined with his historicization of moral values, shows a thinker attempting to reconcile universal moral norms with historical change. Meiners's solution in the *Geschichte* was to construct a model of natural law oriented around utilitarian value, offering social well-being as a criterion for determining socio-political privileges. Meiners's analysis of a transition from martial values to modern, bourgeois, norms bears comparison with the 'Enlightened narratives' of thinkers like Edward Gibbon and William Robertson, as described by J. G. A. Pocock.

This suggests a significant German engagement with this historiographical trend. László Kontler has argued that Meiners's use of Robertson in the *Geschichte* was limited by his framework of German ethnic superiority, and this suggestion is reasonable given the pervasiveness of racial categories in Meiners's thought more broadly. Whereas one might expect his 'Enlightened narrative' of European history to 'bracket out' non-European racial groups, racial categories do play key roles in several of Meiners's other discussions of European history.¹³² Nevertheless, his assessment of the

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emergence of modern European norms and institutions relied primarily on historical arguments and data that are, like those of Robertson, independent of such racial ideas.¹³³ Indeed, as shown above, the institutions of medieval Europe were products of the corruption of the Germanic conquerors, rather than their superiority, and modern European norms and institutions emerged through late-medieval socio-political conditions rather than racial differences. The *Geschichte* depicts a fundamentally hierarchical understanding of human nature that is largely coherent with the racial philosophy of the *Grundriß*, but Meiners's account of the emergence of modernity makes extensive use of Robertson without depending in itself upon a specific racial framework. Human inequality, and in particular racial inequality, was a central feature of Meiners's thought. Yet his assessment of the Middle Ages as a period of unnatural hierarchies enabled the construction of a more mainstream 'Enlightened narrative', culminating in a set of radical proposals for the German aristocracy. Meiners's synthesis of cultural history and natural law enabled him to present a sharp critique of contemporary institutions without abandoning his commitment to inequality, whether social, political, or racial.

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¹ Meiners, Christoph, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit der Stände unter den vornehmsten Europäischen Völkern*, (2 vols., Hanover, 1792). The title of Meiners' work can be translated as *History of the inequality of ranks among the most distinguished European peoples*. Note: Meiners uses continuous pagination across both volumes, meaning that the first page of the main text of the second volume is 319. Thus, citations of this work indicating pages between 1 and 318 refer to the first volume, while citations indicating pages 319 and above refer to the second volume.

² Fischer, Bernd, *Ein anderer Blick: Saul Aschers politische Schriften* (Vienna, 2016), p. 71.

³ Ascher, Saul, *Ideen zur natürlichen Geschichte der politischen Revolutionen* (n.p., 1802), pp. 218-19; Hiscott, William, *Saul Ascher, Berliner Aufklärer: eine philosophiehistorische Darstellung* (Hanover, 2017).

⁴ Ewald, Johann Ludwig, *Was sollte der Adel jetzt thun?* (Leipzig, 1793), pp. 26-8, 39, 48, 51, 68, 72, 84.

⁵ (Anonymous), *Frey müthige Gedanken über die allerwichtigste Angelegenheit Deutschlands* (n.p., 1794), pp. 172, 201, 230, 240, 290.

⁶ Schmidt, Friedrich Georg August, *Fortgesetzte Beyträge zur Geschichte des Adels* (Leipzig, 1795), pp. 20, 36-8, 44-9, 59, 97, 242.

⁷ Mühlmann, Wilhelm, *Methodik der Völkerkunde* (Stuttgart, 1938), pp. 28-39.

⁸ von Eickstedt, Egon Freiherr, *Die Forschung am Menschen*, (vol. 1, Stuttgart, 1940), pp. 286-8; Fuchs, Brigitte, "Rasse", "Volk", *Geschlecht: anthropologische Diskurse in Österreich, 1850-1960* (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 297.

⁹ Gobineau appears to have mentioned Meiners only once, and Meiners' impact on Gobineau remains unclear. de Gobineau, Arthur. *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (vol. 1, Paris, 1853), p. 179; Blome, Hermann, *Der Rassengedanke in der deutschen Romantik* (Munich, 1943), pp. 34-49.

¹⁰ Finsen, Hans Carl, *Das Werden der deutschen Staatsbürgers: Studien zur bürgerlichen Ideologie unter dem Absolutismus in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. und zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Copenhagen, 1983), pp. 92-5; Vetter, Sabine, *Wissenschaftlicher Reduktionismus und die Rassentheorie von Christoph Meiners* (Aachen, 1996), pp. 163-5; Zantop, Susanne, 'The beautiful, the ugly, and the German: race, gender and nationality in eighteenth-century anthropological discourse', in Herminhouse, Patricia & Mueller, Magda eds., *Gender and Germanness: cultural productions of nation* (New York, NY, 1997), pp.21-35, at p. 23.

¹¹ Painter, Nell Irvin, *The history of white people* (New York, NY, 2010), pp. 87-9, 100.

¹² E.g. Bödeker, Hans Erich, 'Einleitung', in Meiners, Christoph, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit der Stände unter den vornehmsten europäischen Völkern* (Hildesheim, 2013), pp. v-xlix; Godsey, William D. (Jr.), *Nobles and nation in central Europe: Free Imperial Knights in the age of revolution, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 49-63; Peters, Martin, 'Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Rezeption Rousseaus in den deutschen Historiographien. Das Beispiel der Göttinger Professoren August Ludwig (von) Schlözer und Christoph Meiners', in Jaumann, Herbert ed., *Rousseau in Deutschland: neue Beiträge zur Erforschung seiner Rezeption* (Berlin, 1995), pp. 267-89; Schneiders, Werner, *Die wahre Aufklärung: zum Selbstverständnis der deutschen Aufklärung* (Munich, 1974), pp. 170-7; Dann, Otto, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung: das Gleichheitspostulat in der alteuropäischen Tradition und in Deutschland bis zum ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1980), p. 128. On the political dimensions of Meiners' writings on race and gender see Gierl, Martin, 'Christoph Meiners, Geschichte der Menschheit und Göttinger Universalgeschichte: Rasse und Nation als Politisierung der deutschen Aufklärung', in Bödeker, Hans Erich et al. eds., *Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen in Göttingen um 1800* (Göttingen, 2008), pp. 419-33; Stollberg-Rilinger, Barbara, 'Väter der Frauengeschichte? Das Geschlecht als historiographische Kategorie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert', in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 262 (1996), pp. 39-71; Hess, Jonathan, 'Jewish emancipation and the politics of race', in Eigen, Sara & Larrimore, Mark eds., *The German invention of race* (Albany, NY, 2006), pp. 203-12; Carhart, Michael, 'Anthropology and

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¹³ von See, Klaus, *Freiheit und Gemeinschaft: völkisch-nationales Denken in Deutschland* (Heidelberg, 2001), pp. 18-25.

¹⁴ Arndt, Ernst Moritz, *Ansichten und Aussichten der Teutschen Geschichte*, (vol. 1, Leipzig, 1814), p. 463; Jahn, Friedrich Ludwig, *Deutsches Volksthum* (Leipzig, 1813), pp. 67, 77.

¹⁵ Williamson, George S., 'Retracing the *Sattelzeit*: Thoughts on the historiography of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras', in *Central European History*, 51 (2018), pp. 66-74.

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¹⁷ Fulda, Daniel, 'Sattelzeit. Karriere und Problematik eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Zentralbegriffs', in Fulda, Daniel & Décultot, Elisabeth eds., *Sattelzeit: Historiographiegeschichtliche Revisionen* (Berlin, 2016), pp. 1-16, at p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ E.g. Beiser, Frederick C., *Enlightenment, revolution, and Romanticism*, (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Epstein, Klaus, *The genesis of German conservatism* (Princeton, 1966); von See, *Freiheit und Gemeinschaft*.

²⁰ Epstein, *German conservatism*, pp. 548-9.

²¹ Haase, Carl, *Ernst Brandes, 1758-1810*, (vol. 1, Hildesheim, 1973), pp. 311-12.

²² Fehrenbach, Elisabeth, *Politischer Umbruch und gesellschaftliche Bewegung: Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Geschichte Frankreichs und Deutschlands im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1997), pp. 29-48.

²³ Beiser, *Enlightenment, revolution, and Romanticism*, pp. 1-3.

²⁴ Now part of Hemmoor in Lower Saxony.

²⁵ von Prantl, Carl, 'Meiners, Christoph', in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (vol. 21, Leipzig, 1885), pp. 224-26; Meiners, Christoph, *Revision der Philosophie* (Göttingen, 1772).

²⁶ Bödeker, 'Einleitung', p. x. Examples of the breadth of his work include Meiners, Christoph, *Kleinere Länder- und Reisebeschreibungen* (3 vols., Berlin, 1791-1801); Meiners, Christoph, *Ueber den thierischen Magnetismus* (Lemgo, 1788).

²⁷ Glitsch, Silke, 'Von der Leine an die Newa und zurück. Wege und Beziehungen zwischen Göttingen und St. Petersburg im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert', in *Göttinger Jahrbuch*, 52 (2004), pp. 117-128, at p. 126; Bödeker, 'Einleitung', p. xv; Meiners, Christoph, *Histoire de l'origine, des progrès et de la décadence des sciences dans la Grèce*, trans. Laveaux, Jean-Charles (4 vols., Paris, 1799); Meiners, Christoph, *History of the Female Sex*, trans. Shoberl, Frederic (4 vols., London, 1808).

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1760-1795 (New York, NY, 2014); Waszek, Norbert, 'Die Schottische Aufklärung in der Göttinger Wissenschaft vom Menschen' in Bödeker, *Wissenschaft vom Menschen*, pp. 125-51. On *Popularphilosophie*, see Böhr, Christoph, *Philosophie für die Welt: die Popularphilosophie der deutschen Spätaufklärung im Zeitalter Kants* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 2003); van der Zande, Johan, 'Popular philosophy and the history of mankind in eighteenth-century Germany', in *Storia della storiografia*, 22 (1992), pp. 37-56; van der Zande, Johan, 'In the image of Cicero: German philosophy between Wolff and Kant', in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56 (July, 1995), pp. 419-42; Beiser, Frederick C., *The fate of reason: German philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 165-92.

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³⁴ Garber, Jörn, 'Selbstreferenz und Objektivität: Organisationsmodelle von Menschheits- und Weltgeschichte in der deutschen Spätaufklärung' & Proß, Wolfgang, 'Die Begründung der Geschichte aus der Natur: Herders Konzept von "Gesetzen" in der Geschichte', in Bödeker, Hans Erich et al. eds., in *Wissenschaft als kulturelle Praxis, 1750-1900* (Göttingen, 1999), pp. 137-86 & 187-226; Vermeulen, Han F., 'Göttingen und die Völkerkunde: Ethnologie und Ethnographie in der deutschen Aufklärung, 1710-1815', in Bödeker, *Wissenschaft vom Menschen*, pp. 199-230; Garber, Jörn, 'Die "Bestimmung des Menschen" in der ethnologischen Kulturtheorie der deutschen und französischen Spätaufklärung', in *Aufklärung*, 14, (2002), pp. 161-204; Carhart, Michael C., 'Polynesia and polygenism: the scientific use of travel literature in the early 19th century', in *History of the Human Sciences*, 22 (2009), pp. 58-86; Ihle, Alexander, *Christoph Meiners und die Völkerkunde* (Göttingen, 1931); Park, Peter K. J., *Africa, Asia, and the history of philosophy: racism in the formation of the philosophical canon, 1780-1830* (Albany, NY, 2013).

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⁴⁰ Marino, Luigi, *Praeceptores Germaniae: Göttingen 1770-1820* (Göttingen, 1995), pp. 14-17.

⁴¹ Meiners, 'Ueber die Natur der Afrikanischen Neger'.

⁴² Meiners, 'Vorrede', in *Grundriß*, 1st edn.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 17, 91-110, 141-63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 16-80.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Meiners, *Grundriß*, 2nd edn., pp. 3-6.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1st edn., p. 163.

⁴⁹ Eigen & Larrimore, *German invention of race*, passim; Hudson, Nicholas, 'From "nation" to "race": the origin of racial classification in eighteenth-century thought', in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1996), pp. 247-64.

⁵⁰ Goldenbaum, Ursula, 'Die öffentliche Debatte in der deutschen Aufklärung 1697-1796', in Goldenbaum, Ursula ed., *Appell an das Publikum* (vol. 1, Berlin, 2004), pp. 1-118, at pp. 80-90; Habermas, Jürgen, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (12th edn. Darmstadt, 1981).

⁵¹ See footnote 32.

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⁵⁷ Dann, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung*, pp. 85-122.

⁵⁸ Höpfner, Ludwig, *Naturrecht des einzelnen Menschen, der Gesellschaften, und der Völker*, (2nd edn., Giessen, 1783); Burlamaqui, Jean-Jacques, *Principes du Droit de la Nature et des Gens*, (8 vols., Yverdon, 1766-68).

⁵⁹ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 1-11.

⁶⁰ Dann, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung*, pp. 94-102, 118-22.

⁶¹ Ibid.; Kant, Immanuel, 'Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten', in Kant, Immanuel, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft (1. Aufl. 1781), Prolegomena, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft: Akademieausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werken*, (vol. 4, Berlin, 1911), pp. 385-463; Möser, Justus, *Sämtliche Werke*, (vol. 5, Berlin, 1843), pp. 178, 191; Kreittmayr, W. X. A., *Grundriß des allgemeinen und deutschen Staatsrechtes* (Munich, 1769), p. 70; Svarez, Carl Gottlieb, *Vorträge über Recht und Staat*, ed. H. Conrad (Cologne, 1960), pp. 63-65, 459.

⁶² On Burlamaqui's significance, see: Korkman, Petter, 'Introduction', in Burlamaqui, Jean-Jacques, *The Principles of Natural and Political Law*, ed. Petter Korkman (Indianapolis, 2006), pp. ix-xx; Rosenblatt, Helena, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 101-2, 128-9, 133-5, 154-5.

⁶³ Burlamaqui, *Principes du Droit*, (vol. 3, Yverdon, 1766), pp. 155, 300.

⁶⁴ Bödeker, 'Einleitung', pp. xxxiv-xxxvi; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Amsterdam, 1755), pp. lix-lx. On Burlamaqui and Rousseau, see Douglass, Robin, 'Rousseau's debt to Burlamaqui: the ideal of nature and the nature of things', in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 72 (2011), pp. 209-30.

⁶⁵ Meiners, Christoph, *Historische Vergleichung der Sitten, und Verfassungen, der Gesetze, und Gewerbe, des Handels, und der Religion, der Wissenschaften, und Lehranstalten des Mittelalters mit denen unsers Jahrhunderts in Rücksicht auf die Vortheile, und Nachtheile der Aufklärung* (vol. 1, Hanover, 1793), pp. 6-28.

⁶⁶ Kant, 'Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten', p. 439.

⁶⁷ Meiners, Christoph, *Allgemeine kritische Geschichte der ältern und neuern Ethik oder Lebenswissenschaft*, (2 vols., Göttingen, 1800-01).

⁶⁸ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 8-13.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 13-15. Cf. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité*.

⁷¹ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 21-4.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 13-15.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 2-3

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 17-18. Meiners does not explain how these rights could be reconciled with the transatlantic slave trade.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Meiners, 'Vorrede', *Grundriß*, 1st edn.

⁷⁷ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Du contrat social; ou principes du droit politique* (Amsterdam, 1762), pp. 31-76.

⁷⁸ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 25-41.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 41-6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 50-2.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 55-68, 132.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 41-2, 88-114, 146-7.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 169-185, 282-303.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 319-454.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 320, 324-5, 333-7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 401.

⁸⁸ On shifting definitions of the bourgeoisie, see Riedel, Manfred, 'Bürger', in Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (vol. 1, Stuttgart, 1972), pp. 672-725.

⁸⁹ Möller, Horst, 'Aufklärung und Adel', in Fehrenbach, Elisabeth (ed.), *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland 1770-1848: Schriften des Historischen Kollegs Kolloquien 31* (Munich, 1994), pp. 1-10, at p. 8.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Other Enlightenment histories emphasized the role of cities, and perhaps most notably Adam Smith's *The wealth of nations*. While Meiners mentions Smith (and many other historians) in the *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, he only cites Robertson significantly in this section. Smith's discussion of the role of cities can be found in Smith, Adam, *The wealth of nations: books I-III*, ed. Andrew Skinner (London, 1999), pp. 496-506.

⁹³ Robertson, William, *The history of the reign of the Emperor Charles V, with a view of the progress of society in Europe* (vol. 1, London, 1769), pp. 11-19 22-9, 39-41, 66-9, 95-6, 112-4.

⁹⁴ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 454-85

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 496-9.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 536-44

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 524-33.

⁹⁸ Pocock, J. G. A., *Barbarism and religion* (vol. 2: Narratives of civil government, Cambridge, 1999), pp. 3-4.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Kontler, *Translations, histories, enlightenments*, pp. 1-17.

¹⁰¹ Vetter, *Wissenschaftlicher Reduktionismus*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰² Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 594, 621-2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Saine, Thomas, *Black bread-white bread: German intellectuals and the French Revolution* (Columbia, SC, 1988), pp. 7-57; von Aretin, Karl Otmar, 'Deutschland und die französische Revolution', in von Aretin, Karl Otmar & Härter, Karl eds., *Revolution und Konservatives Beharren: das Alte Reich und Die Französische Revolution* (Mainz, 1990), pp. 10-19.

¹⁰⁵ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 571-2.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; Gagliardo John G., *Reich and nation: The Holy Roman Empire as idea and reality, 1763-1806* (Bloomington, 1980), pp. 227-41; Umbach, Maiken, 'Culture and *Bürgerlichkeit* in eighteenth-century Germany', in Scott, Hamish & Simms, Brendan eds., *Cultures of power in Europe during the long eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 180-99.

¹⁰⁷ Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 571-2.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 575.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 578-9

¹¹¹ Ibid. Despite his present obscurity, Dulaure's books sold well and he became a deputy to the National Convention. Meiners took his work seriously, and he lists Dulaure's *Histoire de la noblesse* (Paris, 1790) as an important source for *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*. On Dulaure see Boudet, Marcelin, *Les conventionnels d'Auvergne: Dulaure* (Paris, 1874).

¹¹² Meiners, *Geschichte der Ungleichheit*, pp. 601-3.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 604-7, 639-41.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 609-14, 618-34.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Meiners does not state which privileges aristocrats should maintain.

¹¹⁸ Bödeker, 'Einleitung', p. v; Dann, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung*, p. 85.

¹¹⁹ Schmidt, Georg, *Geschichte des alten reiches* (Munich, 1999); Whaley, Joachim, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire* (vol. 2: The Peace of Westphalia to the dissolution of the Reich, 1648-1806, Oxford, 2012), pp. 453-650; Blanning, T. C. W., *The French Revolution in Germany* (Oxford, 1983); Gagliardo, *Reich and Nation*, and Godsey, *Nobles and Nation*, passim.

¹²⁰ Dann, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung*, pp. 122, 126-31, 143-9; Möller, 'Aufklärung und Adel', pp. 1-10.

¹²¹ Dann, *Gleichheit und Gleichberechtigung*, pp. 122, 126-31, 143-9.

¹²² Ibid.; Knigge, Adolph Freiherr, *Ueber den Umgang mit Menschen* (3 vols., 3rd edn. Hanover, 1790), passim.

¹²³ Kant, Immanuel, 'Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis', in Kant, Immanuel, *Abhandlungen nach*

1781: *Akademieausgabe von Immanuel Kants Gesammelten Werken* (vol. 8, Berlin, 1923), pp. 273-313; Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* (Danzig, 1793), *passim*.

¹²⁴ Maliks, Reidar, *Kant's politics in context* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 39-79; La Vopa, Fichte, pp. 81-130.

¹²⁵ Langewiesche, Dieter, 'Bürgerliche Adelskritik zwischen Aufklärung und Reichsgründung in Enzyklopädien und Lexika', in Fehrenbach, *Adel und Bürgertum*, pp. 11-28, at p. 13.

¹²⁶ Schmidt, *Geschichte des alten Reiches*, pp. 320-6.

¹²⁷ E.g. Hoffmann, Leopold Alois, 'Prolog', in Hoffmann, Leopold Alois ed., *Wiener Zeitschrift*, 1:1 (Vienna, 1792), pp. 3-6; (anonymous), 'Einladung des Herausgebers', in Hofstätter, Felix Franz ed., *Magazin der Kunst und Literattur*, 4 (Vienna, 1793), pp. 46-50; Grolmann, Ludwig Adolf, 'Prospectus', in Grolmann, Ludwig Adolf, ed., *Eudämonia*, 1:1 (Leipzig, 1795), iii-vi; Weiß, Christoph & Albrecht, Wolfgang eds., *Von 'Obscuranten' und 'Eudämonisten': gegenaufklärerische, konservative und antirevolutionäre Publizisten im späten 18. Jahrhundert* (St. Ingbert, 1997).

¹²⁸ (Anonymous), 'Geschichte der Ungleichheit der Stände unter den vornehmsten europäischen Völkern', in Nicolai, Friedrich (ed.), *Neue allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 2:2 (1793), pp. 471-488.

¹²⁹ E.g. von Proff, Karl Freiherrn, *Ueber Titel und Würden in den regierenden Deutschen Fürstenthümern* (Munich, 1816), p. 7; Beck, Christian Daniel, *Handbuch der mittlern und neuern allgemeinen Welt- und Völker-Geschichte zum Gebrauch für Studirende* (vol. 2, Leipzig, 1807), p. 877; Wachler, Ludwig, *Geschichte der*

historischen Forschung und Kunst (vol. 2:2, Göttingen, 1818), p. 888; Mittermaier, C. J. A., *Lehrbuch des deutschen Privatrechts* (Landshut, 1821), p. 128.

¹³⁰ (Anonymous), *Standes- und Grundherrliche Rechte und Verhältnisse, Geschichte und Statistik, alter und neuer Zeit* (vol. 2:1, Karlsruhe, 1822), p. 145.

¹³¹ Arndt, Ernst Moritz, *Ueber Volkshaß und über den Gebrauch einer fremden Sprache* (Leipzig, 1813).

¹³² I would like to thank one of my anonymous referees for encouraging me to clarify this point. Meiners' racial ideas are important in the following accounts of European history, among others: Meiners, Christoph, 'Ueber die Natur des Slawischen Völker in Europa', in *Göttingisches historisches Magazin*, 7 (1790), pp. 600-51; 'Ueber die Natur der Germanischen und übrigen Celtischen Völker', in *Göttingisches historisches Magazin*, 8 (1791), p. 1-48.

¹³³ Kontler, *Translations, histories, enlightenments*, p. 94.