Why Racial Discourse Became Global

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Human beings can display seemingly endless ingenuity in devising ways to discriminate and abase each other, from religion and culture to status and kinship. For a long time, the notion of “race” has been one of the most effective barriers erected by opponents of equality, as population groups are claimed to correspond to biological units which are hierarchically distributed on a scale of evolution with winners at the top and losers at the bottom. Eye color, skin tone, hair texture - these are seen as markers of profound biological differences between human beings, justifying such diverse institutions as the transatlantic slave trade, Apartheid and the Holocaust. And even as open belief in a racial hierarchy is less pronounced today than it was a century ago, the idea that people can be classified like cattle on the basis of some real or imagined physical signifier shows no sign of fading out of favor.

In the aftermath of World War II it seemed, for a while, that widespread revulsion against the Nazi experience spelled the end of the dubious notion of “race.” During the Cold War, a broad range of historians, sociologists, anthropologists and biologists - one thinks of Richard Lewontin and Stephen Gould - denounced race as a powerful illusion with no real foundation in science. But as Marek Kohn has underlined in his Race Gallery: The Return of Racial Science (1996), they failed to foresee the remarkable versatility and persistence of scientific arguments in favor of racial ideas, as recent debates sparked by advances in genomics amply show. Many social scientists have underestimated how a very rapidly evolving language of science has continued to reinvigorate racial discourse, from genetics in earlier decades to DNA today. In fact, far from disappearing from view, the notion of “race” seems to have acquired a new and even more diversified existence, reaching far beyond its original homeland in Europe and the United States.

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How should we explain the global dimensions of racial discourse? One popular view is that racial classifications are widespread simply because they are real: I call this the “common-sense model,” and it has long thrived on ideas attributed to biology. Recent advances in genomics, for instance the Human Genome Project, have even led to folk notions of “race” being given renewed credibility today: not only do some biologists claim that the “five races” historically envisaged by Blumenbach and others several centuries ago really do exist, but it is also alleged that “black,” “brown,” “red,” “yellow,” and “white” people have significant differences at the genomic level that lead to their susceptibility to particular diseases (Rose). Neil Risch, while fully aware of the potential misunderstanding that might be caused by discussing race and genetics together, recently contended - with a number of qualifications - that “self-ascribed race and continental ancestry often have relatively high predictive value” in medically significant terms: folk knowledge, it might be inferred, remains for the time being a good guide to genetic differences (Mountain and Risch 52). In a less subtle manner Armand Leroi, writing an editorial for the New York Times in March 2005, affirms the biological reality of race in the human species by proclaiming that “races are real.”

And “race” is not only in favor again in the field of science: even in the realm of philosophy, Neven Sesardic has spent the best part of his career criticising the philosophical arguments against a biological concept of race, believing that racial differences in heredity and IQ are profound and demonstrable. Finally, popular historians such as Niall Ferguson have seized upon these debates to claim that the persistence of racism at global level today is due to the behavior of humans, programmed to protect one’s kin and fight racial outsiders: deep biological laws dictate that like attract like, thus shaping human history to a much larger extent than many of us would like to acknowledge - or so we are told (2006).

A second and equally popular explanation discards science as mere myth and shows instead that the global spread of racial discourse is linked to the global movement of capital. Put briefly, in what I call the “imposition model” thinkers ranging from Oliver Cox to Fidel Castro believe that as Europeans conquered the globe, they created unequal systems of social relations in which cheap labor was essential: racism ensured that colonized people were regarded as inferior and could be bought and sold like cattle. More recently, Percy C. Hintszen shows how the role of “race” has been fundamental in the shaping of Caribbean identity, which serves to hide a racialized division of labor and a racialized allocation of power and privilege: notions of “white purity continue to reinforce and legitimize a system of globalized dependency” (493). In its latest and most general incarnation this approach posits that the fall of
the Berlin Wall has ushered into a new era of globalisation in which a corporate North perpetuates racism in its spoliation of a postcolonial South.

Less politically overt yet even more influential is the “diffusion model,” or cloud to dust theory: “Westernisation,” it is held, has resulted in the spread of racial ideas out of Europe into the rest of the world, as prejudice is copied and assimilated locally, displacing more traditional forms of discrimination. Negative attitudes about “blackness” are reproduced locally as global elites strive to identify with “whiteness.” Probably the best example is a series of studies on cosmetic surgery in Japan - most purporting to demonstrate how racial ideas about whiteness have been internalized to such an extent that local women not only apply skin lighteners to appear more “Western” but also go under the knife in order to restructure their eyelids and heighten their nose bridges (among others see Kaw; Ashikari).

All three explanatory models are powerful in their simplicity but ultimately fail by interpreting racial ideas as a uniform phenomenon, as if there were only one discourse which is universal in its origins, causes, meanings and effects. They also replicate a eurocentric bias, ignoring the persistent power of moral and cognitive traditions in Asia, Africa, America, and the Middle East. They portray human beings as mere passive recipients of ideas and things foreign, when instead we should recognize the importance of human agency, as people around the globe interpreted, adapted, transformed and possibly even rejected racial discourse in their own specific ways. Far from being fixed or static, the adaptability of racial notions in different historical circumstances should be recognized if their enduring appeal is to be understood. I propose instead an “interactive model” that emphasizes the worldviews constructed by local historical agents, analysing the complex cognitive, social and political dimensions behind the appropriation of racial belief systems from Europe. Put briefly, I highlight inculturation where others see only acculturation.

But the interactive model, based on reception studies, immediately encounters a major challenge: if local understandings of racial discourse are important, we need detailed in-depth studies based on local languages, which have been all but ignored by the three eurocentric models introduced above. Only in 1992 was the first systematic historical analysis of a racial belief system outside Europe and America published, providing detailed evidence about the emergence, spread and consolidation of racial discourse in the specific case of China (all references to China are from Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*; on Japan see Dikötter, *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and...*
Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, and a pioneering book by Dower. A body of work has since appeared on other parts of the world as well, consolidating the interactive model of explanation which emphasizes the complex ways in which “race” as a notion is used and understood in different ways by different people across the globe.

**Cognitive Traditions**

The first significant point to emerge from the study of racial discourse in parts of the world other than Europe is the importance of pre-existing cognitive and social traditions. In a pathbreaking article published in 1997 and entitled “How Indians got to be Red,” Nancy Shoemaker questioned the idea that Europeans were the sole inventors of the idea of “redness.” The conventional wisdom assigns the power to label to Europeans alone, who are believed to have defined Indians as “red” after witnessing how they wore red paint. Yet well before the appearance of the term in any European language, American Indians - in particular those in the Southeast - were calling themselves “red.” Native color symbolism - origin stories which referred to red people, red earth and a red creator - rather than European terminology determined its use in council meetings in the 1720s, when most foreign explorers used the term “brown” or “tawny.” In Southeastern Indian languages - whether Natchez, Choctaw or Muskogee - the very word meaning “Indian” originated in the term for the color “red” and literally meant “man-red,” being translated as “red man” or “red people.” Red and white were complementary divisions indicating war and peace. Where Indians in the Southeast did not have an indigenous category, they called themselves “red” in response to the Europeans who presented themselves as “white” or to distinguish themselves from their “black” slaves. Here too important geographical distinctions existed: most Europeans in the Southeast started referring to themselves as “whites” in the early 1700s, no doubt because many Carolina colonists emigrated from Barbados, one of the first colonies to experience a shift in identity from “Christian” to “white.” The Dutch in New Netherland and the English in the Northeast continued to see the world in terms of Christians and Indians until about 1730s, when they started describing themselves as “white” - a term which could be translated into native languages literally, unlike the strange notion of “Christian.”

By the 1760s many Indians believed that differences in physical appearance were markers of clear distinctions between the two people; skin color served as a divine sign that indicated how the land belonged to the reds while the whites were intruders. Ironically both Indians and Europeans initially viewed themselves in similar ways, but gradually developed a “fiction of irresolute difference” which was signified in racial
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terms of “red” and “white”: “Indian and European similarities enabled them to see their differences in sharper relief and, over the course of the eighteenth century, construct new identities that exaggerated the contrasts between them while ignoring what they had in common” (Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness* 3).

In China, to turn to another part of the world, the color “yellow” had positive connotations well before the arrival of racial ideas from abroad. In Europe the notion of a “yellow race” probably only originated at the end of the seventeenth century as a reaction to Jesuit reports from China on the symbolic value of the color yellow. The concept did not exist in the ancient world, and was not used by travellers of the Middle Ages such as Marco Polo, Pian del Carpini, Bento de Goes, or any of the Arab traders. In 1655, the first European mission to the Qing described the Chinese as having a white complexion, “equal to the Europeans,” except for some Southerners whose skin was “slightly brown.” The first scientific work in which the notion of a “yellow race” appeared was François Bernier’s “Étrennes adressées à Madame de la Sablière pour l’année 1688.” In China, moreover, the meanings ascribed to the term “yellow” were very positive. Yellow, one of the five “pure” colors in China, had long connoted emperorship and symbolized the Centre. It was the color of the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom, ancestral home of the “descendants of the Yellow Emperor” who were thought to have originated in the valley of the Yellow River. Wang Fuzhi (1619-92), a seventeenth-century loyalist who remained influential until the beginning of this century, entitled one of his more important works the *Yellow Book* (*Huangshu*) (1656): the last chapter contrasted the imperial color yellow to “mixed” colors and named China the “yellow centre.” On a more popular level, legends circulated about the origins of humans in which noble people (*liangmin*) were made of yellow mud and ignoble people (*jianmin*) of vulgar rope - not unlike some Cherokee tales about the shaping of humans from red earth (Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*).

The examples given so far indicate that new racial vocabularies from Europe may have flourished better in a cultural environment prepared to emphasize real or imagined physical differences between people. A counter-example might illustrate this point better: according to Wyatt MacGaffey, the traditional cosmology of the BaKongo, a population group living in the south of the Congo along the Angolan border, was based upon a complementary opposition between this world and the other. In a religion strongly involved with water spirits, it was believed that the skin of the dead turned white when they crossed the water to join the spirits in the nether world. When Europeans first arrived among the BaKongo, it was thought that they had emerged from the water,
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where they would return at night to sleep. This integrative worldview, in which life had no end, prevented the BaKongo from distinguishing population groups in racial terms and impeded the emergence of a sharp distinction between European culture and BaKongo cosmology. “When the first Portuguese arrived in Kongo in 1485 they exhibited the principal characteristics of the dead: they were white in color, spoke an unintelligible language, and possessed technology superior even to that of the local priestly guild of smiths... The first Portuguese, like their successors to the present day, were regarded as visitors from the land of the dead” (Religion and Society in Central Africa 199).

MacGaffey’s emphasis is not on an exotic cosmology far removed from modernity but on the ability of a local religion to adjust to major upheavals - not least the colonial project under Leopold II in the Congo to classify the BaKongo as members of a primitive tribe to be harnessed for colonial labor. Primary education in mission schools, for instance, was designed to produce a semi-skilled workforce equipped with docile attitudes. While it was successful in transforming the material culture of the BaKongo, it failed to instil an understanding of the European worldview: the entire colonial enterprise was understood in the language of witchcraft as a nocturnal traffic in human beings, schooling being seen as an initiation camp very similar to precolonial cults. As a result, the Congolese symbolic universe was remarkably resistant to decades of concentrated colonial influence, including the racial panoply bandied around by missionaries and imperial officers (“Education, Religion, and Social Structure in Zaire”).

In stark contrast to the example of the BaKongo, where decades of racial indoctrination failed to displace local cosmologies, complex variables behind the relationship between Hutu and Tutsi created a fertile background on which colonialism could build. When French colonialists arrived in Rwanda in the early twentieth century they differentiated not only between Europeans and Africans in racial terms, but they also racialized already existing social differences, describing the minority Tutsi as a tall and elegant race, wearing togas which pointed to a colonial connection with Roman colonies of North Africa. The majority of Hutus, however, were seen as dumb but good-natured, and portrayed as racially inferior to the Tutsi. A registration system further consolidated the opposition between Hutu and Tutsi, seen as distinct and internally coherent racial types.

The Tutsi exploited these prejudices to their full advantage, using the colonial presence to extend their control over the Hutu. In what Alison Des Forges has ironically called a “great and unsung collaborative enterprise” over many decades, Rwandan intellectuals and European
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colonialists rewrote a history of the country which fitted foreign assumptions and conformed with Tutsi interests (45). Administrators, scholars and missionaries thus helped chiefs, poets and historians, as Tutsi elitism became racial dogma thanks to the tools of physical anthropology: “Bantu” and “Ethiopoid” came to describe Hutu and Tutsi while social, cultural, and regional differences among each group were ignored in favor of a rigid racial classification based on such methods as the measurement of noses and skull sizes. Even after the 1959 revolution, when the Hutu overthrew the Tutsi, the basic elements of this racial cosmology were used in an ideology of hatred against a once powerful minority now blamed for all evil. Politics as well as a number of conjunctural factors in the early 1990s shifted this vision of radical difference further into an ideology of genocide, underpinning a civil war in 1994 in which 800,000 Tutsi were slaughtered. As Peter Uvin has argued, racial prejudice primarily emanated from the government, but it was also fed by the needs of ordinary people: the seeds planted from above fell on fertile ground, as people explained their misery by scapegoating the Tutsi (“Prejudice, Crisis, and Genocide in Rwanda”).

The Politics of Race

It seems almost trivial to underline that racial discourse is a matter of politics: racial belief systems, like all belief systems, are always linked to issues of power and prestige. The real question is whether we can better specify the political dynamics of race, despite a wide diversity of global examples. I will argue here that while it is common to stress the extent to which racial ideas are used to legitimize discrimination, a slightly different yet more precise way of approaching the issue is to emphasize how opposition to the notion of equality often prompts the formulation of a racial discourse. After all, world history is replete with political systems based on strict hierarchy, none of which - up until the very end of the eighteenth century - invoked the notion of “race”: religion, kinship, language or culture could all suffice in the formulation of an ideology of radical difference, and Christians had few qualms in dehumanising and exterminating each other - before slaughtering Americans, Asians, and Africans - during the wars of religion between Protestants and Catholics. A theory of political equality is relatively recent in human history - as is the notion of “race,” and both should be seen to be dynamically related.

Let us turn briefly to the history of race in America. As George Fredrickson - a key historian of racial ideologies who has done more than others to relate virulent racism to equalitarian societies - has shown, a social order based on racial distinctions only developed in parts of North America by the late seventeenth century. In the earlier decades free black men were not overtly and significantly discriminated against,
and - at least in the case of Massachusetts - they had the same basic rights as others. The situation was less clear elsewhere, in particular in Virginia, although even there free black men could acquire property and exercise an equal right to vote. In most parts of the country, marriages between white servant women and black male slaves were not uncommon. Status - free or slave - rather than race – “white” or “black” - determined social position, a situation which changed with the development of class divisions among free whites, as some managed to acquire land and slaves, relegating others to an inferior position. Both poor whites and wealthy elites increasingly resisted the formation of a social hierarchy with different ranks and privileges, as such a system contravened a widespread ideal of equality. Instead an ostentatious effort was made to push down the most successful free black to a status below that of the poorest white, as “race” became the foundation of what Fredrickson calls a kind of “pseudo-equality” among whites (The Arrogance of Race 201). The contrast made by Fredrickson with South America is illuminating: Spain and Portugal were still feudal societies attuned to strict social hierarchy of mutually dependent ranks. Slaves were the lowest group in this hierarchy, and freedom simply meant movement up to the next rank, never threatening the elite. Medieval conceptions of hierarchy and social order were adapted to plantation societies, in which the middle ranks were dominated by a range of mixed-blood categories; the bottom was predominantly black and the top was defined as white (The Arrogance of Race; Racism: A Short History).

The ideological justification for the division of the colonies in North America into “whites” and “blacks” only came a few centuries later, although tensions mounted with the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which made egalitarian philosophy part of the national creed. By the 1830s the application of the concept of equal rights to blacks became impossible to ignore. “Before the abolitionists forcefully demanded consistency in the application of egalitarian ideals, it was even possible to subscribe in a general way to an egalitarian philosophy without confronting directly the contradiction between such a creed and the acceptance of slavery and racial discrimination” (Arrogance of Race 203). Once the notion of equality was demanded, apologists of racism could either define blacks as members of a subhuman species or portray egalitarian ideals as white prerogative only. The view that blacks were inherently inferior to the “master race” hence spread like wildfire, appealing directly to a new biology which emphasized the importance of physical characteristics.

In Europe too the notion of “race,” as Michael Banton has argued in his Racial Theories, became widespread not only because of an expansion overseas but more concretely as a consequence of local politics (29). With
the French revolution in 1789 and the liberal or republican revolutions of 1848, power was taken from monarchies and vested in the people in the name of equality: but who were “the people” in countries emerging from a feudal system based on sharp hierarchical distinctions of rank and order? Revolutionaries and nationalists attempted to destroy internal boundaries based on birth (royalty, nobility, aristocracy) and to construct instead external boundaries between people defined as nations; this was often done by portraying them as biological units - or “races.” Moreover, with the advent of a notion of equality, spread by republican regimes, the exclusion of certain groups of people (blacks, Jews) was increasingly difficult to justify, and here too arguments about permanent, biological inferiority came to the rescue. The most notorious example is probably Germany, as only the Aryans were seen to belong to the nation by the 1930s. Let me turn towards China as a more concrete example, since I want to stress the global dimensions of racial discourse.

While certain cognitive traditions may have created a fertile terrain for the reception of racial theories in China, racial categorisation appeared only with the reform movement which gained momentum after the country’s devastating defeat against Japan, a country usually described as a mere vassal, in 1894-5. Leading intellectuals like Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Kang Youwei (1858-1927), for the first time, turned away from the Confucian classics and appealed instead to scientific knowledge from Europe in their efforts to forge a political system more in tune with the realities of the modern world. In search of wealth and power in the wake of the country’s military rout, in need of a unifying political concept capable of binding all the emperor’s subjects together in a powerful nation which could resist the foreign encroachments which had started with the first Opium War (1839-1842), the reformers used new evolutionary theories from England to present the world as a battlefield in which different races struggled for survival. They also used a widespread social institution, namely the lineage, to represent all inhabitants of China as the equal descendants of the Yellow Emperor. Extrapolating from an indigenous vision of lineage feuds, which permeated the social landscape of late imperial China, the reformers constructed a racialized worldview in which “yellows” competed with “whites” over degenerate breeds of “browns,” “blacks” and “reds.” Thriving on its affinity with lineage discourse, the notion of “race” gradually emerged as the most common symbol of national cohesion, as “race” overarched differences of rank, class, lineage, and region to conceptually integrate the country into a powerful community organically linked by blood. Traditional scholars critical of the reformers denounced the use of terms like “yellow race” and “white race,” as it implied a degree of relativism that undermined the bases of their sinocentric universe.
The reformers proposed a form of constitutional monarchy which would include the Manchu emperor: their notion of a “yellow race” (huangzhong) was broad enough to include all the people living in the Middle Kingdom. In the wake of the abortive Hundred Days Reform of 1898, which ended when the empress dowager rescinded all the reform decrees and executed several reformer officials, a number of radical intellectuals started advocating the overthrow of the Qing dynasty: not without resonance to the 1789 and 1848 political revolutions in Europe, the anti-Manchu revolutionaries represented the ruling elites as an inferior “race” which was responsible for the disastrous policies which had led to the decline of the country, while most inhabitants of China were perceived to be part of a homogeneous Han race. The very notion of a “Han race” emerged in a relational context of opposition both to foreign powers and to the ruling Manchus. For the revolutionaries, the notion of a “yellow race” was not entirely adequate as it included the much reviled Manchus. Whereas the reformers perceived race (zhongzu) as a biological extension of the lineage (zu), encompassing all people dwelling on the soil of the Yellow Emperor, the revolutionaries excluded the Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans, and other population groups from their definition, which was narrowed down to the Han, who were referred to as a minzu. During the incipient period of 1902 to 1911, when the Qing empire collapsed, minzu as a term was used to promote symbolic boundaries of blood and descent: “nationalities” as political units were equated with “races” as biological units. In short, not only was “race” deemed to be an objective, universal, and scientifically observable given, but it also fulfilled a unifying role in the politics of the nation: it promoted unity against foreign aggressors and suppressed internal divisions.

As a notion of “equality at birth” spread with new modes of governance which invoked “the people” and “the nation” rather than “estates” or “classes,” racial discourse could be used in two distinct but mutually dependent ways: some people could be demonstrated to be inferior at birth, and hence unworthy of equal treatment - blacks in America, Africans in South Africa, Jews in Nazi Germany - while others could be elevated to equal status despite differences of class, culture, or region. This was not only the case with nationalism, as entirely different groups of people came to be represented as political equals within the realm of the nation - from Hong Kong merchants to Hunanese farmers in the case of China - but also with larger political entities, for instance pan-Africanism. As Anthony Appiah showed in a pathbreaking study published in 1992, the African nationalism proposed by Alexander Crummell and many of his followers, including Edward Blyden and W. E. B. Du Bois, was based on “race.” The most common factor between all Africans was seen to be not merely geography or history but
something much deeper and congenital, capable of transcending the continent's many barriers of language and culture: instead of repudiating the imaginary identities to which Europe had subjected Africa, they relied on the notion of race to represent Africa as the land of the black people where blood, skin, and hair determined negritude.

The Language of Racial Science

Politics is a key component of racial discourse, in particular the modern notion of equality - whether upheld in a vision of racial inclusion or rejected in an effort at racial exclusion - but another core identifying element is the language of science. Whether proposed by Tutsi historians, Afrocentric thinkers, or Chinese reformers, a language grounded in racial science is shared by different audiences around the globe, and like all idioms it is rich, flexible, complex, and ever evolving. The widespread credibility of racial discourse can only be understood when we see how it is harnessed onto science as a system of organized thought about the natural world: if science could produce steamships and predict the movement of celestial objects, surely it was just as powerful in dividing humanity into distinct biological groups? A common mistake made by scholars who expose the scientific fallacy of “race” is to portray “science” as an integrated and uniform body of work rather than as a way of speaking about the natural world. Not only was the prestige of science instrumental in the success of racial discourse, but there was such an abundance of mutually incompatible theories that just about any approach could be justified in the name of science.

It is often stated, for instance, that racial theorists believed in the permanent and fixed character of races seen as separate species. The evidence, however, is far more complex. There have been many competing theories about what exactly constitutes “racial” heredity, and even in Nazi Germany the eugenics movement did not represent a monolithic movement that inevitably culminated in the Holocaust (Weindling). Eugenics had its heyday between the two World Wars, but while its proponents firmly believed that human “races” could be improved in the same way that better varieties of cattle could be engineered through selective breeding, they were deeply divided over the meaning of “race” and heredity. In early twentieth-century France, for instance, the very existence of genes was often denied, as population experts insisted that “races” were flexible and open to change for the better. They insisted that nature and nurture were mutually interdependent factors, while acquired characteristics could be transmitted from parents to their offspring, leading to improvements in the human race as a whole. In their view, “race” was mutable, and not only a matter of visible differences but also of environment, behavior,
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and culture. The emphasis on environment in neo-Lamarckism (after the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck) was also popular in Latin America, where racial theorists resisted genetic determinism and often combined an emphasis on the environment with hereditarian explanations (Stepan). In many parts of the world neo-Lamarckism was either prevalent or appeared as a widespread discourse that often mingled with Mendelian genetics and Darwinian accounts in the early decades of the twentieth century in a range of disciplinary and institutional settings. This is not only true for Russia, Brazil, China, and France between the two World Wars (Adams), but also for parts of the world where supporters of “hard” genetics were widespread, for instance the United States. As George Stocking has clearly shown, neo-Lamarckian lingered in American anthropological and social thought even after Mendel’s theories had been widely accepted (Stocking; Blatt).

As we can see in the case of eugenics, many individuals and institutions operating in the name of science continued to subscribe to the credibility of racial theories even after the collapse of Nazi Germany and the revulsion against race theories it created. Here again the mistake is to see science as an integrated field speaking with a single voice rather than as an ever-evolving constellation of ideas and practices marked by a plurality of views. In Scandinavia eugenics were implemented for decades after World War II, resulting in tens of thousands of sterilisations. On the basis of recent research, it appears that parts of the world which were on the periphery of scientific research, such as Finland, the Deep South in the United States, and China, harbored strident eugenists who encountered relatively little resistance from either medical experts, government officials, or the general public - although even in mainstream circles eugenics retained its supporters well into the 1960s (Dikötter, “Race Culture”).

Furthermore, while many scientists in parts of Europe and the United States may have had doubts about the validity of racial classifications, abundant research has shown how politics and ideology shape the outcome of scientific research, whether in Victorian Britain or in the United States today. China, again, is a good example. After the ascent to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the language of science gradually started to replace communist ideology in a number of politically sensitive domains. Palaeoanthropological research illustrates how race and nation coincides in scientific research since the 1980s (Dikötter, “Reading the Body”). Prominent researchers have represented Beijing Man at Zhoukoudian as the “ancestor” of the “Mongoloid race.” A great number of hominid teeth, skull fragments, and fossil apes have been discovered from different sites scattered over China since 1949, and these finds have been used to support the view that the “yellow race” today is in a direct
line of descent from its hominid ancestor in China. Although palaeoanthropologists in China acknowledge that the evidence from fossil material discovered so far points at Africa as the birthplace of mankind, highly regarded researchers like Jia Lanpo have repeatedly underlined that man's real place of origin should be located in East Asia. Wu Rukang, also one of the most respected scientists in China, came very close to upholding a polygenist thesis (the idea that mankind has different origins) in mapping different geographical spaces for the “yellow race” (China), the “black race” (Africa), and the “white race” (Europe), even though this idea has long been rejected in mainstream palaeoanthropology: “The fossils of homo sapiens discovered in China all prominently display the characteristics of the yellow race...pointing at the continuous nature between them, the yellow race and contemporary Chinese people.”

In a similar vein, skulls, hair, eyes, noses, ears, entire bodies, and even penises of thousands of subjects are routinely measured, weighed and assessed by anthropometrists who attempt to identify the “special characteristics” of minority populations. To take but one example, Zhang Zhenbiao, a notorious anthropometrist writing in the prestigious Acta Anthropologica Sinica, reaches the following conclusion after measurements of 145 Tibetans:

In conclusion, as demonstrated by the results of an investigation into the special characteristics of the heads and faces of contemporary Tibetans, their heads and faces are fundamentally similar to those of various other nationalities of our country, in particular to those of our country's north and north-west (including the Han and national minorities). It is beyond doubt that the Tibetans and the other nationalities of our country descend from a common origin and belong, from the point of view of physical characteristics, to the same East-Asian type of yellow race.

While the evidence from China today may be discounted as the twisted by-product of a one-party state, recent advances in genomics have rekindled both scientific and popular interest in “race” around the world. As we noted in the introduction, a number of scientists now imply that folk notions about “race” may actually be scientifically verifiable divisions grounded in DNA: those scholars who denounced race science as fiction only a decade ago may have been too optimistic, if not naive, in proclaiming its demise, as history rarely moves forward in a single, progressive line and science can hardly be seen to operate in isolation from a broader political and ideological context.
Conclusion

This article has not tried to provide a comprehensive history of why the world was racialized, but has merely suggested that racial ideas share a common language based on science, that they have a common political tension derived from opposition to an egalitarian philosophy, and that they can also diverge considerably according to local cognitive traditions and political agendas. I believe that an interactive approach alone can take into account how racial discourse was understood and used within historically specific contexts. An interactive approach highlights how racial classification has developed an intensely parasitic relationship with science - itself a historically contingent worldview premised on the systematic study of the “natural world.” This is not to say that the many relationships between science and race across the face of the globe have not been complex and changing over the course of the past few centuries, quite the opposite: both have evolved enormously over time, to the point where the biological might even appear to have vanished, but in its weakest form an indirect reference to “nature” - the field of enquiry constructed by science - is rarely absent from racial discourse.

Given the continued relevance of both science as a foundation for knowledge and of equality as a modern political ideology, we should not be surprised at the global dimensions acquired by racial discourse in a relatively short span of time since the late eighteenth century. Historically, concern with “racial” differences expanded precisely as distinctions of rank, class, and status became increasingly less formal, in particular as the movement of people was facilitated by increased openness across the earth - a process still unfolding today. The likelihood of the world moving away from racial discourse is thus extremely unlikely in the near future, as people everywhere are likely to divide humanity along some sort of alleged biological line – “white” and “black” being common poles adopted from Latin America to East Asia.

However, it is also important to recognize that race as an organized system of belief is only one way among others in which human beings have been classified, marginalized and demeaned by others in the last couple of centuries. To say that racial discourse has become global does not mean that it is either uniform or universal.
Works Cited


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