

# Racial Science, Geopolitics, and Empires

## Paradoxes of Power

*By Helen Tilley\**

### ABSTRACT

Scholars interested in the history of racial science continue to puzzle over the ways in which such ideas endure. This essay takes up a variant on this theme by considering how critiques of ideas about racial purity and hierarchies, expressed at the Universal Races Congress of 1911, were part of a larger intellectual project that simultaneously undermined ideas of fixed racial types and bolstered identity categories defined in racial terms. Efforts to destabilize racial science in the early decades of the twentieth century often went hand in glove with burgeoning critiques of “white” and European domination in different parts of the world. This essay shines the spotlight on the paradoxical nature of these processes. While anthropologists helped to spearhead attempts to deconstruct mainstream pillars of racial science, they also left the door open for its reconstitution by refusing to reject classificatory schemes by group. And though global conversations about race and science tended to generate more cosmopolitan and egalitarian views, the very act of bringing together people from different places had the unintended effect of reinforcing racial identities and idioms, especially in the context of challenges to colonial rule. Finally, even as state building within empires ensured that racial taxonomies proliferated on the ground, imperial bureaucrats often avoided promoting racial science and research because such endeavors were a divisive force in transnational management.

The “hierarchical classification” [of races] of former days may be given up or greatly modified, but the physical differences between human varieties are zoological traits and must be discussed and classified by zoological methods—no recognition of a “modern conscience” [about race] will ever do away with this aspect of the study of man.  
—A. C. Haddon (1911)

The word “race” will doubtless long survive even though it may have lost all [original] meaning.  
—Jean Finot (1911)

\* Department of History, Northwestern University, 1881 Sheridan Road, Evanston, Illinois 60208.

My thanks to Suman Seth, Ken Alder, and Bernie Lightman for their helpful editorial suggestions and intellectual camaraderie. This essay is dedicated to Nancy Stepan.

IN LATE 1910, the Executive Committee of the Universal Races Congress, scheduled to take place in London the following year, circulated an eight-part questionnaire, which it hoped would shape the content of the congress's papers. The questions ran the gamut from analyses of physical and mental differences in different parts of the world to concerns about whether civilizational status could legitimately be correlated to a race's "innate or inherited capacities." Of particular concern to the committee—which was composed of a multinational group of more than fifty London-based anthropologists, politicians, businessmen, historians, colonial administrators, linguists, and magistrates—was how to combat the logically untenable supposition "prevalent among all the more important races of mankind that *their* customs, *their* civilization, and *their* race, are superior to those of other races." This kind of ethnocentric and absolutist thinking, the committee suggested, had its roots in "the fundamental fallacy of taking a static instead of a dynamic, a momentary instead of a historic . . . point of view of race characteristics."<sup>1</sup>

Held over the course of four days in July 1911, the Universal Races Congress ultimately attracted more than 2,100 individuals from fifty different countries, invited expressly to discuss racial questions "in light of modern knowledge and the modern conscience." It was indeed, as an observer noted, "the first world gathering dealing with the contact of races in the whole world area," during which delegates debated simultaneously the scientific foundations of race and their geopolitical dimensions.<sup>2</sup> The congress's lead organizer, a Hungarian émigré and psychologist, Gustav Spiller, had the fifty-plus papers published for precirculation under the title *Inter-Racial Problems*, so that they could serve as a point of departure for the seven plenary discussions during the congress itself. According to Saint Nihal Singh, one of several journalists present, it was an impressive assembly: among the official delegates were representatives from 160 professional societies, 12 British proconsuls and 8 former prime ministers, over 40 colonial bishops, 130 professors of international law, and the past or current presidents of more than 30 parliaments.<sup>3</sup> A smaller but no less significant cluster of participants at the congress included the dozen or so anthropologists and the handful of geographers, psychologists, and sociologists who were asked to define the "meaning of race" during the inaugural session.

In fact, at the outset of their planning efforts, several members of the Executive Committee wanted to "ensure that the Congress shall be conducted in a scientific manner" and saw the event as an opportunity to publicize key changes in racial theories.<sup>4</sup> Thanks in part to the congress recruitment strategies (including circulating the questionnaire) and also to a special session the anthropologists convened the day prior to the official opening (organized and chaired by the Cambridge anthropologist Alfred Haddon), the experts

<sup>1</sup> Quotations in this paragraph are from "First Universal Races Congress—Questionnaire," n.d., enclosed in Gustav Spiller to John Scott Keltie, 2 Dec. 1910, "Universal Races Congress," Correspondence Block 1881–1910, Royal Geographical Society (RGS) Archives, London. For the epigraphs see A. C. Haddon, "The Universal Races Congress," *Times* (London), 8 Aug. 1911, p. 6, col. E; and Jean Finot, *The Death-Agony of the "Science" of Race* (London: Stead's, 1911), p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> For the original announcement see Gustav Spiller, "Proposed Universal Races Congress," Oct. 1909, "Universal Races Congress," RGS Archives. For the observer's comment see Ulysses Weatherly, "The Universal Races Congress," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1911, 17:315–328, on p. 315.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Nihal Singh, "Trying to Solve the World's Problems of Race," *Review of Reviews*, 1911, 44:339–343, on p. 339. For the papers see Gustav Spiller, ed., *Inter-Racial Problems: Papers from the First Universal Races Congress Held in London in 1911* (London: P. S. King, 1911).

<sup>4</sup> On the need for the specialists to frame the discussion see A. C. Haddon to Keltie, 27 Jan. 1910, RGS Archives.

present were able to achieve a modest consensus that ideas of “pure racial types” and fixed “racial hierarchies” were outmoded concepts, no longer useful in discussions of race.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the competing perspectives among participants, including the anthropologists (and there was indeed much debate and dissent on the plenary floor), the congress did seem to reflect important sea changes in thinking about racial science. As the American scholar and social critic W. E. B. Du Bois noted in his summary of the anthropologists’ contributions, their findings had left him convinced that U.S. policy regarding “races of men and their proper relations” was at least “fifty years behind the scientific world in its racial philosophy.” Felix Adler, a professor of political science at Columbia and the inspirational figure behind the congress, agreed and drew attention to the implications of at least some of the scientists’ conclusions: “If the different races are so many branches of the same stock, if there is no reason for supposing that the essential human faculties are lacking even in the most primitive groups of human beings . . . then at least one of the principal arguments, or rather pretexts, for the proud scorn of one race by another is destroyed.”<sup>6</sup> If nothing else, the congress signaled that racial determinism was giving way to other explanations for world affairs, though what might supersede it remained unclear. Certainly, few of the participants and organizers foresaw the ascendancy of genetics and eugenics as new disciplinary arbiters of racial questions.<sup>7</sup> Nor did they think it was necessary to invite physicians or biologists to take part in the discussions, a telling indication of where—in their eyes—the epicenter of scientific debate on race was then located.

This essay shines the spotlight on several paradoxes of the early twentieth century relating to racial science, geopolitics, and empire. Among other things, it draws attention to the different lines of attack taken against crucial elements of racial science and racial thinking. Anthropologists and their social science allies were champions of such critiques—decades earlier than we often think—but, ironically, they were still unwilling to relinquish the project of sorting people by groups. We thus find in their efforts simultaneous moves to deconstruct race, on the one hand, and to plant the seeds for its reconstitution—through future research—on the other. If we want to understand why racial science endures, or why its “retreat” is never complete, we can locate at least one of the reasons here.<sup>8</sup> Another purpose of the article is to consider what happens when conversations about race cross borders and even go global. Exploring these dynamics helps us explain the geopolitics of racial thinking, especially in an era when institutions of global governance were beginning to take root. Condemnations of “white” and European domination, which were part and parcel of transnational conversations in this era, paradoxically helped to reify identities defined in racial terms. Finally, with respect to

<sup>5</sup> *Record of the Proceedings of the First Universal Races Congress Held at the University of London, July 26–29, 1911* (London: P. S. King, 1911), pp. 4, 23–28. At the preliminary meeting Haddon gave talks on “race mixture” and “race and environment” and also did a “lantern presentation,” “Demonstration of Racial Types.” See also A. C. Haddon, *The Races of Man and Their Distribution* (London: Milner, 1909).

<sup>6</sup> [W. E. B. Du Bois], “Editorial: Races,” *Crisis*, Aug. 1911, 2:157–158, rpt. in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, Vol. 1: 1911–1925 (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1983), pp. 13–15, on p. 13; and Felix Adler, “Report of the First Universal Races Congress,” in *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year Ending June 30, 1911*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912), pp. 609–617, on p. 611.

<sup>7</sup> Only Brajendranath Seal referred to genetics in his remarks; see Seal, in *Record of the Proceedings of the First Universal Races Congress* (cit. n. 5), p. 34; and Seal, “Meaning of Race, Tribe, Nation,” in *Inter-Racial Problems*, ed. Spiller (cit. n. 3), pp. 1–13, on p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> I am invoking Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992).

empires, the essay underscores the contradiction that in the very decades when colonial rule was creating new kinds of racial categories in many parts of the world, imperial administrators were often loath to embrace research that was explicitly racial. We tend to think of race and empire as mutually constitutive ideas, and they were; but they were also mutually antagonistic, and it is this pattern that needs more attention.

#### SCIENTIFIC CRITIQUES AND THE ENDURING SALIENCE OF RACE

For the purposes of this Focus section, the Universal Races Congress (URC) is a good historical event to think with, offering a pivotal moment in the interplay between race and science in a global context.<sup>9</sup> This episode should remind us that *collective* and *transnational* efforts to deconstruct and redefine race in scientific terms can be traced back at least four decades before the famous United Nations Statements on Race in the early 1950s. This and other international congresses of the interwar period helped to lay the groundwork for UNESCO's declarations, emphasizing that the roots of such critique are both geographically wider and historically deeper than we yet understand. Ironically, however, the URC was even more inclusive, regionally and culturally, than any of the ensuing gatherings, providing a platform for more speakers from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas than were ever given a voice in the four statements on race issued by UNESCO.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the cosmopolitan turn in racial discussions that the 1911 congress reflected should not overshadow a second and equally important point about its proceedings: even when certain of the congress's "scientific men" tried to strip race of what they saw as objectionable normative claims about hierarchies or fixity of "type," many of these same individuals still insisted that zoological differences and classification systems would remain a central way to make sense of human populations. While their resolve may, in part, be attributed to their desire to maintain their authority on racial questions, they were also acknowledging that biological differences, and their historical evolution, continued to matter to them. The German anthropologist Felix von Luschan, for instance, explained that "the number of human races has quite lost its *raison d'être*, and has become a subject rather of philosophical speculation than of scientific research. . . . [Our] aim now is to find out how ancient and primitive races developed from others, and how races have changed or evolved through migration and inter-breeding." Even Franz Boas, whose arguments about the fluidity of racial groups had begun to influence anthropologists' analyses across North America and Europe, concluded his paper for the congress with an appeal to investigate globally "the plasticity of human types . . . in different climates and different social environments." Though many experts at the congress wished to foreclose research questions focused on racial superiority and purity, they were still open to questions

<sup>9</sup> There are already several studies of the Universal Races Congress. See Michael Biddiss, "The Universal Races Congress of 1911," *Race*, 1971, 13:37–46; Paul Rich, "'The Baptism of a New Era': The 1911 Universal Races Congress and the Liberal Ideology of Race," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1984, 7:534–550; Robert Holton, "Cosmopolitanism or Cosmopolitanisms? The Universal Races Congress of 1911," *Global Networks*, 2002, 2:153–170; the three contributions to *Radical History Review*, 2005, no. 92; and Tracie Matysik, "Internationalist Activism and Global Civil Society at the High Point of Nationalism: The Challenge of the Universal Races Congress, 1911," in *Global History: Interactions between the Universal and the Local*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 131–159.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Hazard, Jr., *Postwar Anti-Racism: The United States, UNESCO, and "Race," 1945–1968* (New York: Macmillan, 2012). The statements were issued in 1950, 1951, 1964, and 1967; see *Four Statements on the Race Question* (Paris: UNESCO, 1969).

relating to physical resilience, human origins and migrations, disease susceptibility, and psychology, so long as the “races” themselves were regarded as dynamic and mixed. Sorting and splitting human varieties remained the order of the day. Delegates also expected these racial concepts to do contradictory kinds of “work” beyond science, which proved a constant source of tension at the gathering. “The anthropologists employed the term ‘race’ in one sense,” Haddon observed afterward; “most members of the Congress understood it in another.”<sup>11</sup>

This brings us to a third point about the congress: in spite of the explicit references by specialists to the unknowns of racial science, many nonspecialists in the audience seemed to think that because the anthropologists had agreed “that there was probably no race which would be described as pure,” they had also concluded “that there is really no such thing as racial difference” or that “races were chimerical.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, both congress planners and participants were caught in a kind of Möbius strip: they looked to experts for the final word on race and, in turn, sought an outcome that would make the experts superfluous. This simultaneous need for and desire to marginalize science, or at least circumscribe its role, was evident in the language of the questionnaire itself, which implied that the most important challenges to older racial theories had already been developed and that the best role for “anthropologists, sociologists, and scientific thinkers” in “the movement for a juster appreciation of races” was to publicize these findings.<sup>13</sup> After all, if human groups had a history of mixing, and if these various groups had similar inherent capacities, then political and social questions ought to rest on presumptions of (potential) parity rather than difference.

#### COSMOPOLITANISM, DOMINATION, AND RACIAL IDIOMS

Certainly many of the government representatives and international lawyers at the congress interpreted anthropologists’ interventions as a call to shift attention from the realm of science to the realm of politics and policy making. This would allow them to focus on the economic and social inequalities that underpinned different forms of “racial” and “Western” domination. Even some of the scientists endorsed their move in this direction. The Italian anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi, a student of Cesare Lombroso (who had popularized ideas about race and criminal types), told the plenary audience that he “hoped that this Congress would pass a resolution stating that it was unnecessary to consider differences of race, and that the same rights should be given to every race.” Interestingly, Sergi considered his political views in line with his anthropological research. He was among an early generation of physical anthropologists to argue that “the primitive [i.e., Neolithic] populations of Europe . . . originated in Africa” and that the bulk of Europeans should thus be characterized as “Eurafricans.” Sergi’s desire to respect cultural differences and limit “xenophobia” went hand in glove with his revised account of human origins.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Felix von Luschan, “Anthropological View of Race,” in *Inter-Racial Problems*, ed. Spiller (cit. n. 3), pp. 13–24, on p. 16; Franz Boas, “Instability of Human Types,” *ibid.*, pp. 99–103, on p. 103 (Boas was unable to attend the congress); and Haddon, “Universal Races Congress” (cit. n. 1).

<sup>12</sup> Haddon, “Universal Races Congress”; and A. C. Haddon, “The First Universal Races Congress,” *Nature*, Sept. 1911, N.S., 34:304–306, on p. 305. Jean Finot and his editor, William Stead, a congress Executive Council member, were two of the participants who espoused the view that there was “no such thing as race.” See Finot, *Death-Agony of the “Science” of Race* (cit. n. 1), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> “First Universal Races Congress—Questionnaire,” RGS Archives. See also Gustav Spiller, “Science and Race Prejudice,” *Sociological Review*, 1912, 5:331–348.

<sup>14</sup> Giuseppe Sergi, in *Record of the Proceedings of the First Universal Races Congress* (cit. n. 5), pp. 26–27;

Like the anthropologists, the lawyers held their own one-day gathering prior to the congress, passing a resolution that called for “rules of public international law guaranteeing equality to nations of diverse races . . . and stipulating the duty of now existing nations of preparing the emancipation and autonomy of the [subject] peoples.” Likewise, the government representatives, in their own special gathering at the congress’s conclusion, passed two resolutions urging, first, that “diplomatists and Colonial administrators” receive training “which emphasises a just appreciation of different peoples and races” and, second, that “Parliaments of the world consider the advisability of eliminating from their legislation and administration all distinctions of race and religion between citizens of the same country.”<sup>15</sup> Both groups wished to avert conflict and achieve peace, with the added benefit that by dispelling the idea of racial hierarchies they could also eliminate “an excuse for denying elementary human rights to certain races, who, being dubbed inferior, were practically thrust out of the human family.”<sup>16</sup> In his paper for the Congress, John Robertson, who was then Britain’s Parliamentary Secretary for the Board of Trade, drove these points home in no uncertain terms: “all dominant races thus far stand convicted of a mainly self-seeking relation to those in their power.”<sup>17</sup> These conclusions should perhaps not be so surprising given that the invitation made it clear that the goal of the event was “the improvement of the relations existing between the peoples of European descent and those of Asiatic and African descent.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet, for at least some of the speakers, challenging the “so-called supremacy of the white race” and the institutions of imperial rule did not require them to excise biological explanations entirely. This helps to explain why two of the panelists from Sub-Saharan Africa, Mojola Agbebi, a reverend from Nigeria and a disciple of Edward Blyden, and John Tengo Jabavu, an editor and educational activist from South Africa, used biological rationales to justify their claim that African institutions ought to be respected and maintained. As Agbebi argued: “Social organisations are the outgrowth of a people’s life, and, founded more or less upon innate racial characteristics, are incapable of being transferred from one people of a certain type to another of a different type and condition.” For this reason, Agbebi, like Blyden himself, had serious misgivings about miscegenation and approved of segregation, although he noted the irony of this last position since it was Europeans who often imposed the concept on Africans. “It is a matter of ridicule to the African therefore that white people should not only trespass into Africa, but come there to propound the doctrine of segregation which Nature has all along placed boundless seas and countless barriers to indicate.”<sup>19</sup> However much many congressional delegates might have wished to evade essentialist forms of racial thinking, they still made repeated appeals

---

Sergi, *The Mediterranean Race: A Study of the Origin of European Peoples* (London: Scott, 1901), preface and Ch. 3; and Sergi, “Differences in Customs and Morals and Their Resistance to Rapid Change,” in *Inter-Racial Problems*, ed. Spiller (cit. n. 3), pp. 67–73, on p. 69. Sergi considered his research a challenge to existing Aryan hypotheses; ironically, his studies were used in the United States to limit immigration of southern Italians; see Peter D’Agostino, “Crania, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race’: Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thought, 1861–1924,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, 2002, 44:319–343.

<sup>15</sup> “Special Resolutions,” in *Record of the Proceedings of the First Universal Races Congress*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>16</sup> William Stead, preface to Finot, *Death-Agony of the “Science” of Race* (cit. n. 1), p. 6. See also Adler, “Report of the First Universal Races Congress” (cit. n. 6), pp. 610–611.

<sup>17</sup> John Robertson, “The Rationale of Autonomy,” in *Inter-Racial Problems*, ed. Spiller (cit. n. 3), pp. 40–49, on p. 48. See also Andrew Thompson, “The Language of Imperialism and the Meanings of Empire: Imperial Discourse in British Politics, 1895–1914,” *Journal of British Studies*, 1997, 36:147–177.

<sup>18</sup> Spiller to Rt. Hon. Augustine Birrell, MP, 24 Feb. 1911, Oscar Browning Papers, King’s College, Cambridge, OB/1/1546.

<sup>19</sup> Mojola Agbebi, “The West African Problem,” in *Inter-Racial Problems*, ed. Spiller (cit. n. 3), pp. 341–348, on pp. 343–344, 344.



to nature and biology. This too should not be so unexpected, since several of the speakers felt that they had come to London to “represent their race,” no matter how ill-defined the concept. For these delegates, letting go of racial idioms was no small matter because they were part of an arsenal to criticize imperial relations. In all likelihood, they were also connected to endogenous idioms of group difference and rank that we have yet to integrate adequately into our global histories of race.<sup>20</sup>

#### EMPIRES OF RACE: STATES, IDEOLOGIES, AND SCIENCE

The debates at the Universal Races Congress remind us that racial thinking has long been multivalent, polycentric, and contradictory. They also underscore the extent to which both racial science and racial ideologies had been destabilized by the early decades of the twentieth century. Such instability, ironically, developed in tandem with expansive projects of racial state building around the world. Whether we consider the empire building of the Europeans, Japanese, and Americans, or the consolidation of racial bureaucracies and “whitening” projects in the Pacific and Latin America, the patterns are the same: in these decades colonial and national categories of difference actually proliferated on the ground, increasingly sorting populations by alleged racial taxonomies and granting rights and privileges accordingly.<sup>21</sup> This sorting was bound to create friction—sometimes deadly—and was also imbued with its own ambiguities, as many studies of racial crossing have revealed. Yet it also produced lasting legal and vernacular distinctions among people, which could alter radically their lived experiences and identities.

Many scholars have gone to great lengths to illustrate the mutually reinforcing dynamics between racial and imperial projects—and for good reason. Yet their antagonisms are equally worthy of our attention and help to explain how and why empires came to an end, a subject that too often remains just outside the purview of imperial studies. When Lord Rosebery asked in a speech in 1900, “What is Empire but the Predominance of Race?” he was expressing a fairly widespread and uncontested belief. By 1950, it had become much more difficult for statesmen to justify continued colonial rule in racial terms. Why? While we might imagine that these changes were a response to World War II, the evidence across empires and within new international institutions suggests other explanations. As I have argued in my book, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, already in the interwar period the fault lines among racial ideologies, states, and science were more visible in colonial contexts than they were in sovereign countries.<sup>22</sup> Colonial states were highly racialized terrain, yet they were also regions in which both statesmen and scientists shied away from pursuing research that would put various racial assumptions to the test. Indeed, when administrators compared ideas and laws across very different regions, they often found themselves admitting policy disparities and correcting misunderstandings based on what they labeled old-fashioned or outdated concepts. They also

<sup>20</sup> For a careful study of endogenous idioms in East Africa see Jonathan Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011); for comparisons between racial science and racial idioms among Maori see Damon Salesa, *Racial Crossings: Race, Inter-marriage, and the Victorian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), esp. Ch. 5.

<sup>21</sup> I am thinking here not just of the work of historians of science, but also that of imperial historians, including recent monographs by George Steinmetz on the German empire, Emmanuelle Saada on the French colonies, Paul Kramer on U.S. imperial endeavors, and the classic edited volume on Latin America by Richard Graham.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2011).

tended to offer conclusions that tempered or even subordinated racial thinking to other kinds of political, economic, and social calculations.

The point here is that the political and legal conversations that took place at the Universal Races Congress were not so much aberrations or exceptions as they were representative of ongoing, behind-the-scenes debates about imperial management and international affairs.<sup>23</sup> At least some officials and administrators were already beginning to acknowledge that racial ideas and logics could hardly support the vast edifice of empire. And, indeed, key protagonists who had been involved in establishing the League of Nations agreed. One such participant, Philip Kerr, noted when he described his ongoing diplomatic efforts that “the embryo of world government is being born, which will not follow any racial or national pattern but be the result of the conflict of ideas and methods embodied in them all. . . . You cannot go to Geneva without seeing that all the nations have got to learn to live side by side with white, black, brown, yellow and purple, in world affairs.”<sup>24</sup>

Recognizing these trends does not require us to ignore the considerable efforts made across European, Japanese, and U.S. imperial domains to classify and categorize populations in both loose and rigid racial terms. Nor should we downplay the ongoing ethnographic, medical, and biological research in different colonial states that adopted or reinforced, albeit often idiosyncratically, essentialist readings of different groups. Yet returning to the question of evidence and the ways in which imperial relations intersected with transnational and international affairs, we still need to explain the absence of racial investigations, in the decades before World War II, in a vast array of scientific and political venues having to do with empire. Why, for instance, did the League of Nations Health Organization focus so little attention on racial questions in its more than two decades of existence, especially given its focus on infectious diseases and rural health in tropical Africa and Southeast Asia?<sup>25</sup> And why, when the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences convened in London in 1934, did its more than one thousand members pass resolutions critical of research into racial intelligence tests? Sifting through scores of British imperial conference reports and memoranda about research priorities, produced between 1920 and 1960, what tends to be missing is any official endorsement of the notion that either money or time ought to be spent investigating essential racial differences. I have written at length about projects relating to eugenics and intelligence testing in British Africa, which were rejected by policy makers, but even a request to survey “blood groups of African natives” was met with skepticism by Colonial Office officials. “I am inclined,” wrote the Assistant Secretary of State for East Africa in 1937, “to suspect [this project’s] real value. Do we know enough of bloods, sera, etc., to draw any real accepted conclusions as to the mixture of races?” In reply, the office’s chief medical advisor remarked that in his view the project had “little practical

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., C. P. Lucas, [Assistant Under-Secretary of State], *Native Races in the British Empire—Confidential Colonial Office Memorandum*, 31 Dec. 1907, CO885/19/7, British National Archives, London; W. Wybergh [former administrator in Southern Rhodesia], “Imperial Organisation and the Colour Question, Parts I and II,” *Contemporary Review*, 1907, 91:695–705, 805–815, prepared for the fifth Colonial Conference; *Nationalities and Subject Races: Report of Conference . . . Westminster, June 28–30, 1910* (London: P. S. King, 1910); and correspondence in CO 323/715/35, “Native Races and Peace Terms, 1916,” British National Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Kerr to Patrick Duncan, House of Assembly, Cape Town, 22 May 1930, GD40/17/247, Lord Lothian Papers, National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh. Kerr served as private secretary and foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Lloyd George during the Paris Peace Conference.

<sup>25</sup> Iris Borowy, *Coming to Terms with World Health: The League of Nations Health Organization, 1921–1946* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2009).



value. . . . The longer I live the more I marvel at the investigations sometimes made by scientists.” Britain’s Colonial Research Council did eventually approve a handful of small grants on “blood group” and “sickle-cell” research in East and West Africa in the 1950s, but these funds amounted to less than .001 percent of total spending.<sup>26</sup> If the sociomaterialist injunction to “follow the money” is anything to go by, such a trail, within British Africa at least, takes us quickly and consistently away from racial science.

#### CENTRIFUGAL FORCES, RACIAL IDEOLOGIES, AND EMPIRE

So how do we explain these competing interpretations of racial ideologies and scientific trajectories in the first half of the twentieth century? On the one hand, as the URC foreshadowed, social and cultural anthropologists, as well as demographers, sociologists, and geographers, were finding it less and less useful to resort to racial categories or to encourage racial research, especially when they served as advisors to Britain’s Colonial Office. In fact, by the interwar period several leaders in these fields began to eschew “the effervescence of racial doctrines” and call into question “the concept of ‘stability of race,’ as well as its genuinely genetic character.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the kinds of medical and biological questions being asked in the colonial field, while sometimes grounded in physiological comparisons between groups—such as studies of nutrition across East, Central, and West Africa—were focused less on differences classified as innate and more on environmental interpretations of differences, such as diets, that could produce biological variation. So while some kinds of racial thinking could be pervasive in colonial states, neither racial science nor racial research served as a significant centripetal force of empire. Indeed, quite the opposite seems to have been the case: the shifting sands of racial theories in this period—including the waning of scientific justifications for segregation, the doubt cast on the category of “racial intelligence,” and the challenges to strong forms of eugenics (even before World War II)—made it very difficult for imperial officials to make racial claims with any confidence.

When we relocate our studies of racial science to examine the interstitial spaces of empires and international congresses, new patterns come into focus that need to be included in our global narratives. We find, for instance, evidence that forces us to situate critiques of racial science in periods earlier than is customary and to acknowledge their geographically diverse roots. A transnational approach also helps us appreciate the uneven spread of racial research and the paradoxical role of colonial rule in limiting its reach. Finally, we see some of the recurring patterns that help us understand why race remains an enduring object of scientific investigation and controversy. Exploring the geopolitics of race and science does indeed require us to take the world seriously.

<sup>26</sup> J. E. W. Flood minute, 17 Feb. 1937, and Arthur J. R. O’Brien minute, 17 Feb. 1937: CO847/8/2, “Survey of the Blood Groups of African Natives by Dr. Ronald Elsdon-Dew [1937],” British National Archives. Elsdon-Dew had an appointment at the South African Institute of Medical Research in Johannesburg and was asking for access to territories overseen by the Colonial Office. Total funding for blood group and sickle-cell research, including funds spent on research posts in the United Kingdom, amounted to £24,845 out of the more than £18 million allocated between 1950 and 1961: figures derived from *Command Papers* of the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers from 1950–1961: Cmd. 8063, 8303, 8665, 8971, 9303, 9626; and Cmnd. 52, 321, 591, 938, 1215, 1584. For a useful exploration of blood group research see Jenny Bangham, “Blood Groups and Human Groups: Collecting and Calibrating Genetic Data after World War II,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 2014, 47:74–86.

<sup>27</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, “Anthropology,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year* (1938), in Malinowski Papers, London School of Economics.