

Chapter 1

The Racialization of the Globe: Historical Perspectives

Frank Dikötter

“This yellow river, it so happens, bred a nation identified by its yellow skin pigment. Moreover, this nation also refers to its earliest ancestor as the Yellow Emperor. Today, on the face of the earth, of every five human beings there is one that is a descendant of the Yellow Emperor.”¹

Definitions and Approaches

How do we explain the spread of racist belief systems around the globe? Before we attempt to answer this question it might be helpful to provide definitions of the terms “race” and “racism.” In English alone, the Oxford English Dictionary provides a range of literary and scientific meanings, and it is obvious that the word had many legitimate definitions for different people in different times and different circumstances. As Michael Banton has shown, in English the term “race” only started referring to alleged biological differences between groups of people during the nineteenth century.² Nor is it a necessary precondition to use the word “race” in order to construct what many would consider to be racial categories of thought. At the turn of the century, many authors in Britain used the word “nation” to sustain racial frames of analysis; the “nation” was thought by some to correspond to a biologically homogeneous unit that could be improved through selective breeding. In Nazi Germany, German citizens were often described as a Volk, whereas “racial hygiene” was called Volksgesundheit. No historian would deny that the term Volk has a variety of ambiguous meanings, but it would be foolhardy to argue that it did not contribute to the invention of “the Aryans” as a group of people linked by blood.³

Rather than review the different definitions that have been proposed for “race” by the historical participants themselves, it may be more fruitful to

focus on how boundaries have been drawn between human beings. Socially constructed “races,” from this perspective, are population groups which are imagined to have boundaries based on biological characteristics, and can be contrasted to socially constructed “ethnicities,” which are groups thought to be based on culturally acquired features: the ways in which boundaries are created and maintained are distinct, although they clearly overlap in many cases. Racism attempts to root culture in nature, to equate social groups with biological units, to primordialize the imagined or real bodily attributes of human beings: it takes a bodily feature—eye color, skin tone, hair texture—to construct systemic differences between human beings. A softer version of racism—seen to convey notions of hierarchy and oppression—is sometimes proposed by using the term “racialism,” defined as the belief that the human species can be divided into equal yet distinct “races.” But whether or not any hierarchy is implied between human groups, all worldviews which systematically purport to classify people on the basis of some physical signifier, be it skin color, body height, hair texture, or head-shape, are racist in that they define group boundaries along alleged natural lines.

Two main criticisms have been leveled against this approach. On the one hand it is argued that “scientific racism,” as it is sometimes referred to, no longer represents the dominant form of discrimination, as references to the science that underpinned racism in the nineteenth century have largely disappeared. One of the key problems, it is alleged, is that after the exposure of “scientific racism” as a dangerous illusion, explicit racist statements are rarely made in public as they are no longer seen as acceptable, although racism per se has all but vanished. It is hiding behind notions of “culture” and “difference” and thus needs to be caught with a wider net. As Marek Kohn has argued in his *Race Gallery: The Return of Racial Science*,⁴ this argument—popular during the Cold War—failed to foresee the remarkable versatility and persistence of scientific arguments in favor of a notion of race, 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 racist belief systems, from genetics in earlier decades to DNA today.

A second reservation is that we should be concerned with the function rather than the contents of discourse: the intention of discrimination is what matters, not its particular ideological justification. But humanity has devised so many ways to discriminate—in the name of religion, status, or culture—that this approach would be of little help to historians, who would quickly be overwhelmed. For instance, large numbers of people were killed

in the twentieth century in the name of “class” rather than exclusively as a consequence of “race”—some thirty to forty million were starved or beaten to death in communist China between 1959 and 1962. More fruitful is the recognition that racism as an organized belief system is a limited historical, ideological, and political phenomenon—one tool among others in the arsenal of horror devised by human beings to demean, oppress, or exterminate each other.

Now that we have a rough working definition of “racism,” we can turn our critical attention to some common explanations of its global dimensions—three to be precise. One popular view is that racial classifications are widespread because they are real: I call this the “common-sense model,” and it has long thrived on ideas attributed to biology. For many decades a broad range of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and biologists—one thinks of Richard Lewontin and Stephen Gould—have denounced race as a powerful illusion with no real foundation in science,⁵ but the very fact that science itself is a complex and ever-evolving field speaking in many voices means that new claims purporting to demonstrate the existence of “racial differences” continually reappear. 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.” The point here is not to contend that science should be purged of the notion of “race,” but rather that the field of science is so diverse and the interactions between biology and culture so complex that, as Troy Duster puts it, such an enterprise might not be practicable, possible or even desirable.⁸ Finally, directly relevant to those of us working in the humanities, “race” is not only in favor again among some scientists: popular historians such as Niall Ferguson have also seized upon these debates to claim that the

persistence of racism at a global level today is due to the behavior of humans, programmed to protect their kin and fight racial outsiders: deep biological laws dictate that like attracts like, thus shaping human history to a much larger extent than many of us would like to acknowledge—or so we are told.⁹

A second and equally popular explanation discards science as mere myth and shows instead that global racism is embedded in the ideologies and structures of global capitalism. Put briefly, in 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 any other commodity. More recently, Percy C. Hintzen has shown the fundamental role race has played in shaping Caribbean identity, which has served to hide a racialized division of labor and a racialized allocation of power and privilege: closely linked to constructions of *créolité*, notions of “white purity continue to reinforce and legitimise a system of globalised dependency.”¹⁰ In its latest and most general incarnation this approach posits that the fall of the Berlin Wall has ushered in a new era of globalization 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: “Westernization,” it is held, has resulted in the spread of racism 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.” In Brazil, for instance, sophisticated social vocabularies indicate traces of whiteness, from a *brancarao* who is so light-skinned a mulatto as to appear almost white, all the way to a small and dark *mulequinho*. Probably the best example, however, is a series of studies on cosmetic surgery in Japan—most purporting to demonstrate how the racial ideology of whiteness has 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.¹¹

All three explanatory models are powerful in their simplicity but ultimately fail by interpreting racism as a uniform phenomenon, as if there were only one form of racism 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, Amer-

ica, 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 historical agents around the globe interpreted, adapted, transformed, and possibly even rejected racism in their own specific ways. Far from being fixed or static entities, the polyphony and adaptability of racial discourse in different historical circumstances should be recognized if their enduring appeal is to be understood. The interactive model of interpretation proposed here emphasizes the worldviews constructed by local historical agents, analyzing the complex cognitive, social, and political dimensions behind the indigenization and appropriation of racist belief systems: put briefly, it highlights inculturation where others see acculturation.

But the interactive model, based on reception studies, immediately encounters a major challenge: if local understandings of racism 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 racist belief system outside Europe and America published, providing detailed evidence about the emergence, spread, and consolidation of racism in the specific case of China.¹² A body of work has since appeared on other parts of the world as well, consolidating the interactive model of explanation which sees appropriation, differential usage, and resignification as the keys to understanding the rapid spread of racist worldviews in parts of the globe outside Europe.¹³

Cognitive Traditions and the Emergence of Racial Categories of Thought

The first significant point to emerge from the study of racism outside Europe is the importance of pre-existing cognitive and social traditions. In a path-breaking 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.”¹⁴ The conventional wisdom assigns the power to label to Europeans alone, as they 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 Netherlands and the English in the Northeast continued to see the world in terms of Christians and Indians until about the 1730s, when they started describing themselves as “white”—a term which could be literally translated into native languages, unlike the notion of “Christian.”

By the 1760s most 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 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.”¹⁵

In China, to turn to another part of the world, the color “yellow” had positive connotations well before the arrival of racist belief systems from abroad. In Europe the notion of a “yellow race” probably only originated at the end of the seventeenth century as a reaction to reports of the Jesuits in China on the symbolic value of the color yellow. The concept did not exist in the ancient world, and was not used by travelers 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 “*Etrennes 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 emperors and symbolized the Center. 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 more popular discursive registers, 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. Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), aged twenty, recorded in his diary that "all people are fashioned out of yellow mud." At fifty-four, as one of the most outstanding reformers of the late imperial period and an important proponent of racial theories, he publicly wondered: "Why is the yellow race not the only race in the world?"

In the case of China—so well documented thanks to the existence of a large literary heritage in the official language—one can find a strong resonance between indigenous social worldviews and racist belief systems at other levels too, patrilineage being a key example. The last dynasty, founded in 1644, was marked by a consolidation of the cult of patrilineal descent, center of a broad movement of social reform that emphasized family and lineage (*zu*). Considerable friction arose between lineages throughout the nineteenth century in response to heightened competition over natural resources, the need to control market towns, the gradual erosion of social order and organization problems caused by demographic pressures. The militarization of powerful lineages reinforced folk models of kinship solidarity, forcing in turn more loosely organized associations to form a unified descent group under the leadership of the gentry. At court level too, ideologies of descent became increasingly important, in particular with the erosion of a sense of cultural identity among Manchu aristocrats—the founders of the Qing dynasty in 1644. Pamela Crossley has shown how group identity through patrilineal descent became important in the Qianlong period (1736–95), when the court progressively turned towards a rigid taxonomy of distinct descent lines (*zu*) to distinguish between Han, Manchu, Mongol or Tibetan.¹⁶ Within three distinct social levels—popular culture, gentry society, and court politics—the common notion of patri-

lineal descent came to be deployed on a widespread scale in the creation and maintenance of group boundaries. We will see, in a later section, how patrilineality was racialized at the end of the nineteenth century.

So far we have indicated that elements of cognitive continuity were crucial to the emergence of new racial vocabularies, which 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, 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.”¹⁷

The very cross the Portuguese carried was known among the Kongo well before the arrival of Europeans and understood to represent a link between spiritual and earthly realms. 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 with docile attitudes. While it was successful in transforming the material culture of the BaKongo, it failed to instill 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 pre-colonial 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. It also meant that the BaKongo only

participated passively in colonial institutions, as two worlds of meaning were segregated without much communication. Admission to the world of understanding, power, and wealth from which they had been excluded would finally come with independence in 1960, or so many believed, as the world would “turn upside down” and ancestors who had been enslaved would return from America along with the secrets of technology. The Congolese might even wake up to find that they had become white.¹⁸

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 colonialists arrived in Rwanda in the early twentieth century they differentiated not only between Europeans and Africans in racial terms, but they also racialized local 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 system of population registration 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 colonialists rewrote a history of the country which fitted foreign assumptions and conformed with Tutsi interests.¹⁹ Administrators, scholars, and missionaries thus helped chiefs, poets, and historians, as Tutsi elitism became racist dogma thanks to the tools of physical anthropology: “Bantu” and “Ethiopoid” came to describe Hutu and Tutsi as 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 eight hundred thousand Tutsi were slaughtered. As Peter Uvin has argued, racist 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.²⁰

The Politics of Racism

It seems almost trivial to underline that racism is a matter of politics: racist belief systems, like all belief systems, are always linked with issues of power and prestige. The real question is whether we can better specify the political dynamics of racism, despite a wide diversity of global examples. It will be argued here that while it is common to stress the extent to which racism legitimizes social hierarchies and social exclusions, a 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 dehumanizing 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 are dynamically related.

Let us turn briefly to the history of racism in America. As George Fredrickson—a key historian of racial ideologies who has done more than others to relate virulent racism to equalitarian societies²¹—has shown, a social order based on racial distinctions only developed in parts of North America by the late seventeenth century.²² In the earlier decades free black men were not overtly or 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.²³ 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 contrast made by Fredrickson with South America is illuminating: Spain and

Portugal were still feudal societies attuned to a 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 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 in the United States. 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.” 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 a 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.²⁴ The novel *Ivanhoe*, published in 1820 by Walter Scott, popularized the word “race” more than any other work, as relations between Anglo-Saxons and Normans were presented as a struggle between two races. In other European countries the word race came to be used in similar political circumstances. 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 diffi-

cult 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 this essay stresses the global dimensions of racism.

While certain cognitive traditions may have created a fertile terrain for the reception of racial theories in China, a racist belief system appeared only with the reform movement which gained momentum after the country's defeat against Japan in 1894–95. Leading figures like Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Kang Youwei (1858–1927) selectively appropriated scientific knowledge from foreign discursive repertoires to invent a new sense of group identity. 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 (1839–42), the reformers used new evolutionary theories from England to present the world as a battlefield in which different races struggled for survival. They also appealed to patrilineal culture in order 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 they implied a degree of relativism that undermined the bases of their sinocentric universe.

Not only did the reformers attempt to destroy existing social hierarchies in favor of a politically integrated concept of race, they also projected internal divisions of rank and status upon the world at large, now seen as a racial hierarchy of “noble” (guizhong) and “ignoble” (jianzhong), “superior” (youzhong) and “inferior” (liezhong), “historical” and “ahistorical races” (youlishi de zhongzu). The formal distinction of rank between “noble people” (liangmin) and “ignoble people” (jianmin), widespread in the empire until the early eighteenth century, found an echo in Tang Caichang (1867–1900), who opposed “noble races” (liangzhong) to “igno-

ble races” (jianzhong). He phrased it in evenly balanced clauses reminiscent of his classical education: “Yellow and white are wise, red and black are stupid; yellow and white are rulers, red and black are slaves; yellow and white are united, red and black are scattered.”

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, 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 the nationalist ideology of the first decade of this century, minzu was thought to be based on a quantifiable number of people called “Han,” a group with clear boundaries by virtue of imagined blood and descent. Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) became one of the principal proponents of a Chinese minzu, which he claimed was linked primarily by “common blood.” In short, not only was “race” deemed 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. Even the “peasants with weather-beaten faces and mud-caked hands and feet” could be represented as the “descendants of the Yellow Emperor.”

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 in the same way that apes were not eligible to vote—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 path-breaking study published in 1992,²⁵ 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: Africa was represented as the land of the black race, as blood, skin, and hair determined negritude. Followers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese physicist, would even see the erosion of the race concept as an ideological assault on Africans, who he portrayed as the superior descendants of “Negroid primacy.” Others would develop a theory of melanic superiority according to which people rich in melanin have a better central nervous system and higher sensitivity to other people’s magnetic fields.²⁶

The Language of Science

Politics is a key component of racism, in particular the modern notion of equality—whether upheld in a vision of racial inclusion or rejected in a effort at racial exclusion—but another core-identifying element is the language of science. Whether proposed by Tutsi historians, Afrocentric politicians, or Chinese reformers, a language grounded in science is shared by global racism, 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 racism portrays social groups defined as “races” as fixed and immutable entities—hence their permanent exclusion from exercising the vote. The evidence, however, is far more complex. In France, for instance, soft interpretations of heredity were more popular than the hard language of genetics, and they allowed “race” to be portrayed as a flexible rather than a fixed entity, open to change for the better: neo-Lamarckism rather than neo-Darwinism underpinned it. A neo-Lamarckian approach to heredity, in which nature and nurture were seen as mutually interdependent factors while acquired characteristics could be transmitted from parents to their offspring, led to environmental determinism rather than biological determinism. France harbored some of the most outspoken defenders of a neo-Lamarckian approach to eugenics, but the case of Latin America illustrates that soft approaches which combined an emphasis on the environment with hereditarian explanations were far more widespread than had been previously suspected. In three countries examined by Nancy Stepan—Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico—neo-Lamarckian notions were more important than strictly Mendelian explanations of heredity, an emphasis which supported a preventive approach to eugenics in which the environment had to be cleansed of all deleterious factors damaging racial health.²⁷ In many parts of the world neo-Lamarckism was either prevalent or appeared as a widespread discourse that often mingled with Mendelian 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,²⁸ but also for parts of the world where supporters of “hard” inheritance were widespread, for instance the United States. As George Stocking has clearly shown, neo-Lamarckism lingered in American anthropological and social thought even after Mendel’s theories had been widely accepted.²⁹

A fresh historical appraisal of the available material including countries outside Europe might reveal that the hard Mendelian eugenics familiar from Britain and Germany was not a dominant approach in many developing parts of the world.³⁰ In China, the reformers mentioned in the previous section selectively appropriated evolutionary theories which supported a soft interpretation of heredity. Rather than appealing to Charles Darwin’s emphasis on competition between individuals of the same species,

most were inspired by Herbert Spencer's focus on group selection. For reformers like Yan Fu, Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, processes of evolution were directed by the principle of racial grouping, as individuals of a race should unite in order to survive in the struggle for existence much as each cell contributed to the overall health of a living organism. Apart from the individualistic basis for competition, the reformers also ignored the neo-Darwinian emphasis on the branching process of evolution. They adopted a Neo-Lamarckian theory of linear evolution, which viewed human development as a single line of ascent from the apes: the embryo developed in a purposeful way toward maturity, and this process could be guided by changes to the social and political environment. Neo-Lamarckism offered a flexible vision of evolution which closely suited the political agenda of the reformers, as human progress in the realm of politics was seen as conducive to the racial improvement of the species.

A whole range of possible positions could thus be defended in the name of science—whether appealing to hard genetics to portray “races” as fixed entities or appropriating soft notions derived from Lamarckism to promote “racial improvement” through education. This flexibility is precisely what allowed “race” to connive with other forms of identity. In the case of the Parsees—followers of the religion of ancient Zoroastrians who fled Persia after its conquest and settled in India in the eighth century—notions of religious purity could easily migrate into the realm of science: Sapur Faredun Desai, in a book prefaced by the eugenicist Harry H. Laughlin, thus had no difficulty talking about “purity of the blood” and the need to eliminate “inferior” children at birth in order to improve the quality of the race. As the Parsees were confronted with the loss of the “precious germplasm of a distinguished race,” the race would be “fast decaying, putting forth the feeble-minded, the epileptic, the imbecile, and the insane; the deaf-mutes, the diabetics and the paralytics; the consumptives and the lepers; the cataractual and the blind; the paupers and the degenerated”; the consequence would be that at the time of resurrection all would have to answer for this unconscious behavior.³¹ As John Efron has illustrated, some Jewish scholars too were keen to show that Jews were a distinct race: such was the centrality of race in nineteenth-century Europe that they conducted large-scale statistical experiments to determine Jewish skull shape and the prevalence of blue-eyed blond Jews.³²

As we can see in the case of eugenics, which continued to flourish for decades after World War II, many individuals and institutions operating in the name of science continued to subscribe to the credibility of racial the-

ories 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 sterilizations. 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 eugenicists 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.³³

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 have coincided in scientific research since the 1980s.³⁴ 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 palaeoanthropologists 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): “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 as-

sessed by anthropometrists who attempt to identify the “special characteristics” (tezheng) 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 the measurement 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 [huangzhongren de Dongya leixing].” As a theory of common descent is constructed by scientific knowledge, the dominant Han are represented as the core of a “yellow race” which encompasses in its margins all the minority populations. Within both scientific institutions and government circles, different population groups in China are often represented as one relatively homogeneous descent group with a unique origin and uninterrupted line of descent which can be traced back to the Yellow Emperor.

Finally, while the evidence from China today might be rejected as the product of perverted science produced by 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 essay has not tried to provide a comprehensive history of how the world was racialized, but has merely suggested that racist belief systems share a common language based on science, that they have a common political tension derived from an egalitarian philosophy, and that they can also diverge considerably according to local cognitive traditions and political agendas: the article contends that an interactive approach alone can take into account how racist belief systems were negotiated, appropriated,

and transformed within historically specific contexts. An interactive approach highlights how racism 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 racism. Finally, given the continued relevance of both science as a foundation for knowledge and of the notion of equality as a modern political ideology, we should not be surprised at the global dimensions acquired by racism in a relatively short span of time since the late eighteenth century. As distinctions of rank, class, and status became increasingly less formal, concern with “racial” differences expanded, all the more as the movement of people was facilitated by increased openness across the earth—a process still unfolding today. The likelihood of the world moving back to some sort of “color-blindness” is thus extremely unlikely in the near future, as people on all continents express profound interest in the outward appearance of people and are likely to divide humanity along some sort of racial classification—“white” and “black” being poles now adopted almost everywhere, from Latin America to East Asia. However, it is also important to recognize that racism as an organized ideology 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 racism has become global does not mean that it is either uniform or universal.

Notes

1. Su Xiaokang, “River elegy,” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 24, no. 2 (1991): 9.
2. Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge, UK, 1987).
3. On the complex relationship between Volk and Rasse, see Christopher M. Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich: Linguistics, Racial Anthropology and Genetics in the Dialectic of Volk* (Cambridge, UK, 2005).
4. Marek Kohn, *The Race Gallery: The Return of Racial Science* (London, 1996).
5. See Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the two World Wars* (Cambridge, UK, 1992).

6. See the overview by Nikolas Rose, "Introduction to the Discussion of Race and Ethnicity in Nature Genetics," *BioSocieties* 1 (2006): 307–11.
7. Joanna L. Mountain and Neil Risch, "Assessing Genetic Contributions to Phenotypic Differences among 'Racial' and 'Ethnic' Groups," *Nature Genetics* 36, no. 11 (November 2004): 52.
8. Troy Duster, "Buried Alive: The Concept of Race in Science," in *Genetic Nature/Culture: Anthropology and Science Beyond the Two-Culture Divide*, edited by Alan H. Goodman, Deborah Heath, and M. Susan Lindee (Berkeley and London, 2003), 258.
9. Niall Ferguson, "We Must Understand Why Racist Belief Systems Persist," *The Guardian*, July 2006.
10. Percy C. Hintzen, "The Caribbean: Race and Creole Ethnicity," in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, edited by David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos (Oxford, 2002), 493.
11. Among others, see Eugenia Kaw, "Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (March 1993): 74–89; Mikiko Ashikari, "Cultivating Japanese Whiteness: The 'Whitening' Cosmetics Boom and the Japanese Identity," *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005): 73–91.
12. Unless otherwise indicated, all references in the case of China are to Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford, 1992).
13. On Japan, see Frank Dikötter, ed., *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Honolulu, 1997); pioneering is John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986).
14. Nancy Shoemaker, "How Indians Got to be Red," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (June 1997): 624–44.
15. Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (Oxford, 2004), 3.
16. Pamela K. Crossley, "Thinking about Ethnicity in Early Modern China," *Late Imperial China* 11, no. 1 (1990): 1–35.
17. Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, 1986), 199; Wyatt MacGaffey, "The West in Congolese Experience," in *Africa and the West: Intellectual responses to European culture*, edited by Philip D. Curtin (Madison, 1972), 49–74; see also Suzanne Preston Blier, "Imaging Otherness in Ivory: African Portrayals of the Portuguese, ca. 1492," *Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (September 1993): 375–96.
18. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Education, Religion, and Social Structure in Zaire," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 238–50.
19. Alison Des Forges, "The Ideology of Genocide," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 23, no. 2 (1995): 44–47.
20. Peter Uvin, "Prejudice, Crisis, and Genocide in Rwanda," *African Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (September 1997): 91–115.

21. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, 2002).
22. George M. Fredrickson, *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequity* (Hanover, NH, 1988), 189–205.
23. The reader should note that there is a substantial literature that disputes the existence of a less racialized first third of the seventeenth century in North America. An excellent overview of the debate and the evidence is presented in Manfred Berg, “Die Ursprünge der Sklaverei in Nordamerika,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 54, no. 9 (2006): 741–60.
24. Michael Banton, *Racial theories*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1998), 29.
25. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In my Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford, 1992).
26. Kohn, *The Race Gallery*, 152–59.
27. Nancy Leys Stepan, “The Hour of Eugenics”: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America (Ithaca, 1991).
28. Mark B. Adams, ed., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia* (Oxford, 1990).
29. George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Chicago, 1982); see also Jessica Blatt, “‘To Bring out the Best that is in their Blood’: Race, Reform, and Civilization in the Journal of Race Development (1910–1919),” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 5 (September 2004): 691–709.
30. Despite the publication of such a pioneering work as Peter J. Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore, 1988).
31. Sapur Faredun Desai, *Parsis and Eugenics* (Bombay, 1940).
32. John M. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in fin-de-siecle Europe* (New Haven, 1994).
33. See Frank Dikötter, “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (April 1998): 467–78; and more specifically Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, 1996); Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, eds., *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing, MI, 1996); Frank Dikötter, *Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects and Eugenics in China* (New York, 1998); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, 2005).
34. The following two paragraphs draw on Frank Dikötter, “Reading the Body: Genetic Knowledge and Social Marginalisation in the PRC,” *China Information* 13, no. 2–3 (1998): 1–13.