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Reseña de "The Equality of the Human Races. (Positivist Anthropology)" de Anténor Firmin
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Prentice-Hall.


**Notes**


3 Quoted in Joseph C. Dorsey. 2000. “Women without History: Slavery and the International Politics of Partus Sequitur Ventrem in the Spanish Caribbean.” P. 637 in *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader*, edited by Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers. It should be noted that Boxer’s counter-Tannenbaumist position was indirect. His principal target was Portugal’s dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar, who used Tannenbaumist reasoning—together with the ahistorical tenets of “Luso-Brazilian Tropicalism,” promoted by the well-meaning Brazilian sociologist, Gilberto Freyre—to justify the continuity of rigorous colonial oppression in Portuguese Africa, especially in Guinea Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique.


The translation of Anténor Firmin’s *The Equality of the Human Races* from the French language, appears like a contemporary treatise. Along the years, the author’s thesis, the equality between the human races, remains valuable. When the author wrote this book, in 1885, his ideas were ahead of his time.
by many decades over the general formulations adopted in the new field of anthropology. Firmin studied “the Man” (considering men and women) in his global environment and his culture. He realized both a work of consolidation of the field and critical anthropology by challenging the more common ideas and beliefs in usage in the dominant intellectual circles in Europe and elsewhere.

The translation of the book is itself a tour de force, realized by Dr. Asselin Charles by “reproducing in modern English Firmin’s modulate French style” (p. ix). One the other hand, the translation is a (late) recognition of a valid effort made by a Haitian scholar, at the end of the nineteenth century, to counter the racist ideas presented as founded and scientific. We deeply regret that so much time passed before this work could be revealed to an English speaking audience. The volume waited more than a century before it could be translated into English; meanwhile the de Gobineau’s propaganda against the Blacks inferiority and the mixing color people—one of the aspects of the Firmin’s contestation—was immediately translated into English (1856), only 2-3 years after its publication in French. The Firmin study was ignored or marginalized in the world of academia. It is so important that today two open-minded scholars: Dr. Asselin Charles and Dr. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, in a common effort, put Firmin’s views in the contemporary debate on race and racism issues. In doing so, they recognize the value and actuality of the Firmin’s ideas. In fact, Dr. Fluehr-Lobban considers The Equality of the Human Races as a remarkable and pioneering work of Anthropology and Pan-Africanism. She points out that this work was both a scientific enterprise and “a positive assertion of the potential of the anthropology objectivity to study human differences without the bias of biological and social ranking” (p. xv).

The Equality of the Human Races is the first scholarly book that attorney Anténor Firmin published at the relatively young age of 35 year-old. But Firmin, a gentleman with a Greco-Latin culture, came from a postcolonialist tradition, in its connotation of challenging the Western dominant discourse about the inferiority of the Blacks and the quest for innovations. Firmin’s work extends
the nineteenth century Haitian political and historical thoughts, which defended the Haitian Independence, the equality of races, and the pride of Black achievements in world history. On many occasions, Haitian writers challenged the ideas of the inferiority of the Blacks. For example, they did so in a collective work entitled: *Les détracteurs de la race noire et de la République d’Haiti* (1882) edited by the prolific author and thinker Louis-Joseph Janvier. Two years later, the same Janvier published a solo book entitled: *Égalité des races* (1884) (Equality of the Races). Throughout the 1880’s, Haitian intellectuals in Haiti and in Paris continued to publish a series of works about the same subject. Among them were: Arthur Bowler’s *Une conférence sur Haïti. En réponse aux détracteurs de ma race* (1888), and the posthumous Hannibal Price’s *De la réhabilitation de la race noire par la République d’Haïti* (1900).

*The Equality of the Human Races*, as a continuity of Haitian thoughts, was itself a remarkable contribution to anthropology. To write this book, Firmin read many works on ethnology, ethnography, biology, philosophy, history, and literature published mostly by European writers. He also studied many artistic representations. The author wanted to discover by himself the foundations and the arguments that asserted the inequality of the human races along history. In his endeavor, he used positivism, a method that allowed him to find a fact or evidence to corroborate every point of view. At the end of his quest, it appears that Firmin did not find the facts that confirmed the inequality thesis. On the contrary, he discovered the weakness of the ideas and inconstancies in the arguments. He asked himself: “In a century when all scientific questions are studied either by the experimental method or by observation, should the opinion that the Blacks race is inferior to all others rest on nothing more than the faith of its authors?” (p. 328). Firmin came to the conclusion that, in their erudition, knowledge, and dissertations, many authors presented their own beliefs, faith, and presumptions as scientifically correct and others expressed merely ambiguous thoughts.

In his quest, Firmin also confronted the ideological founda-
tions of racism. He made it clear when he wrote that the racialists and some anthropologists “draw false conclusions, this is not due to their reasoning but to their positing as their initial premise the innate and radical inequality of the human races” (pp. 205-206). Firmin believed in science and the truth. He wrote his own book hoping that in it “the truth will emerge so convincingly that those who divide humanity into inferior and superior races will surrender to the evidence and abandon this false notion which has caused so much harm to so many peoples” (p. 203).

_The Equality of the Human Races_ is a book of contestation of racist ideas, a plea for the equality and “perfectibility” (i.e. improvement) of all human beings. Firmin responded to Count Arthur de Gobineau who divulged, with sonority, the thesis of inequality. More fundamentally, he demonstrated the falsity of the common methods utilized in biology to justify this thesis, and he defended the equality of human beings. In his attempt, Firmin not only realized a systematization of the ideas of races, cultures, and the representation of nations in the anthropological literature in Europe, he also put his own oar in the debate. He offered an integral and integrated vision of the human being in his environment when he defined anthropology as: “the study of the Man in his physical, intellectual, and moral dimensions, as he is found among the different races which constitute the human species” (p. 10). In fact, Firmin put more emphasis on the Man’s moral and intellectual dimensions than physical and biological dimensions. Particularly, he put emphasis on history, culture and environment. Firmin’s view of “races” was social (and historical), not necessarily biological. As a matter of fact, he cited the radiant civilizations in Egypt and Ethiopia (in the past) and Haiti (in his time and the New World) as accomplishments realized by blacks.

It goes without saying that Firmin rejected the criteria for classifying human races as superior, intermediate, and inferior. He thought that the supposed hierarchy between the human races was one of the doctrinal inventions of his time; an arrogant one made by white racialists (p.135). He pointed out: “The differences among the human races are not sufficiently demarcated by
nature to enable us to devise any rational system of classification” (p. 117).

Firmin tried to destroy all the elements and arguments of classifications, including craniology and the anthropometry methods of comparison, hair and skin pigmentation, and the linguistics paradigm. In general, he considered all those as artificial and bizarre. Particularly, he considered craniology and anthropometry as false and presumptuous. In the same frame of mind, he discarded the idea of measuring the intelligence of the man by measuring the size and weight of his brain, which is a variable organ. He argued that by its nature, the brain develops and it changes continuously depending of the use that is made of it. Almost a century before Stephen Jay Gould, Firmin saw in craniology the “Mismeasure of the Man.” In fact, he implied that these theories and methods used in Anthropology were merely capricious. “Nothing is fraught with more confusion than those arbitrary calculations intended to measure ethnic aptitudes. The more one gets involved with them, the more lost one becomes” (p. 272).

Other questions discussed by Firmin were polygenism and monogenism. He rejected both as factors that can explain the differences between the human races. Firmin adopted as hypothesis the constitutional unity of the species. The author emphasized the idea that only environmental conditions can explain the differences among the different human groups. For him the human species, with its unique original constitution and organic uniformity, came from a single blueprint, but appeared in various parts of the world, under certain geological conditions in the earth. Later, the species was diversified in different peoples and races under the influence of the climate and the general environment (pp. 82-83). In other words, geographical conditions on earth change the “Man’s” physical appearance. Firmin’s explanation is based on geology, paleontology, and environment.

As Firmin embraced the intellectual and moral dimensions of Anthropology to defend his thesis of the equality of the human species, it becomes logically natural that he presented intelligence and morality as principal criteria of differences. He pointed out,
without prejudices and vanities, these elements are found in whatever race, or human groups. He repeated on many occasions that “intelligence is the common patrimony of the entire human species” (for example pp. 208 and 276). The author posited that the human races are equal under the same conditions. Whites as well as the Blacks are capable of “perfectibility” through a continuous educational process and through civilization. To underscore this argument, he made reference to the glorious history of the ancient Egyptians, the Ethiopians, and the foundation of Haiti in the Americas as achievements of human intelligence, before they can be considered as accomplishments of the Black race.

It is a historical fact for Firmin that the Egypt of the Pharaohs was a black nation. In this regard, he contradicted the white racialists and some anthropologists who represented the ancient Egyptians as a White people and the Egyptians of the nineteenth century as blacks without any factual evidence, or even a biological demonstration that could explain this sudden metamorphosis. Firmin asked himself: “If the ancient Egyptians were White, how come the most handsome types found here and there among their monuments have a distinctive character, a general physical appearance, that is so different from the Caucasian types.” (p. 230). The author continued, this is: “a pure practical joke in which a lie passed on as the truth” (p. 230). According to Firmin, many thinkers and anthropologists in Europe refused to recognize a superior civilization in the Black race. As a result, they changed the Egyptians’ features. This was a refusal to recognize one of the powerful origins of the “Western Civilization,” a subterfuge to hide a cultural and archeological reality that marked the history of humanity. The author pointed out that the Greeks were, through the influence of Rome, the educators of Europe. They have taken from Egypt the most fundamental ideas of philosophy as the principles of science (p. 395). In sum, Firmin considered the Egyptians a capable, intelligent people, equal to other races and civilizations.

In the case of Haiti, Firmin emphasized the emergence, the existence and the influence of this nation in international affairs.
He saw Haitian Independence as a Black achievement, an accomplishment of black intelligence and capacity. He acknowledged the success realized in 1804 by the former slaves of the French colony of Saint-Domingue who had fought against slavery and colonialism and founded the first Black Republic in the concert of the nations. In his historical account, Firmin cited the Founding Fathers of Haiti: François Cappois, Henry Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and particularly, General Toussaint-Louverture, who all had great intelligence and demonstrated an enormous capacity in their project for independence. The author believed that Haiti was one of the best examples of the equality of the human races and a source for the regeneration of Africa. Among the Haitians of the 19th century who continued the work of their ancestors for equality and regeneration of the Black, he cited such scholars and writers as Louis-Joseph Janvier, François-Denis Légitime, Demesvar Delorme, and particularly Edmond Paul, his mentor. Moreover, like others individuals in others countries, the author showed that Haitians are successful in the fields of politics, law, medicine, social studies, economics, music, poetry, literature and the arts. “Haiti alone is destined to resolve the great problem of the aptitude of the Black race to civilization” (p. 219).

Besides the examples of Egypt and Haiti, Firmin accounted for other Blacks around the world who accomplished many exceptional actions and discoveries that the Whites tended to cover up or simply ignore. At that juncture, Firmin affirmed that the Black race has a history as rich as other peoples and races, and a positive one at that. Only some White authors who presented the ancient Egyptians as White men falsified it. Firmin arrived at the conclusion that the idea of the inequality of the human races was a European strategy to maintain the racial domination of Europe over the rest of the world, and by extension, to keep the political and economic exploitation among peoples and races and to justify the social domination within their respective societies (pp. 398 and 438).

In this book, Firmin revealed another thesis: The unity of the human race. But he did not expound specifically on it. He
recognized that: “There is not a single zootaxic difference among human beings besides hair and skin color” (p. 81). Secondly, he pointed out that such terms as white, yellow, black, brown, red, and so on, used to designate the human species are simple invention or convention of the human spirit (p. 116). In fact, all the elements of a theory of racial unity are present in Firmin’s book, but he did not explicitly elaborate on it. The idea of the unique original constitution and organic uniformity of human being that he developed in his work is no other thing, than the existence of a unique human race. In his days “race” was synonymous with color, traits, character, and physiognomy. Race had a connotation of peoples’ color and physical appearances derived from a country, area or continent. Has Firmin accepted those common ideas by established convention? His primary purpose was to demonstrate the equality of the human “races;” and he did not emphasize in his concluding biological and environmental analysis on the principle of the psychic unity of mankind. As he wrote about a unique “autochthonous origin,” it would have been another contribution, if one of his conclusions were the unique human race.

_The Equality of the Human Races_ is a valuable book of anthropology. The weakness of the arguments presented by some anthropologists and racialists gave to the work a powerful resonance. Yesterday, as today, there is no real argument to sustain the racist thesis of the inequality of the races. As matter of fact, Firmin remains our contemporary thinker.

Besides all, _The Equality of the Human Races_ is a book of combat. In addition that it expressed Firmin’s disagreement with the Western scholars on race, it offered a vision of anthropology that is both critical and integrated into the reality of human nature. He criticized the European tendency to minimize the achievements and accomplishments of blacks around the world by confusing ideas in a sort of innate supremacy of the White people, and at the same time, he invited us to see the actions of human beings in their historical context. His integrative approach—study of human communities from cultural, social, linguistic, historical, and archaeological perspectives—recalls Franz Boas’s work in
the early 20th century. Definitively, in race and culture matters, Firmin is the precursor of many great 20th century thinkers such as Cheik Anta Diop, Frantz Fanon, or Frank M. Snowden. From another point of view, analyzing Firmin’s global discourse, we can see he was an anti-racist, a democrat, and a progressive intellectual. He preached the equality of the human races as he dreamed harmony between peoples, nations, and human beings. He thought through an enlightening process whereby, the Man can reach progress, social democracy, and finally “civilization.” *Equality of the Human Races* is a book calling for human emancipation. Firmin constructed a utopia: its pillars were evolution, progress, and democracy.

However, the book is not without problems. Personally, I would have preferred more careful editing. Some segments of the book are repetitive; some chapters that are far too long (Chapter 4), and others far too short (Chapters 13 and 20). Moreover, I think that some chapters could have been annexed to others, or simply unified. For example, chapters 6 and 8 could have been combined, as well as chapters 11 with 12.

In conclusion, Firmin’s work can help us understand the historical construction of racism throughout the 19th century and its permanence in the challenging 20th century. Furthermore, he reveals the mechanisms, schemes of domination, and ideological artifices that kept racism a major problem in the 21st century. Finally, this book reveals the reality of Firmin’s ideas in the debate surrounding issues of race and racism. Unfortunately, “race” remains the concept on which color line divisions among human beings on earth continue to be based.

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References


The Cuban Republic (1902-1959) has received a measure of attention from historians lately. Previously sandwiched between the Wars of Independence (1868-1898) and the revolution of 1959, which loomed much larger in the historiography, it was rendered mostly as a period of transition, largely under the thrall of the U.S. and its Platt Amendment. As such it was both a source of deep corruption and a generator of the popular movements that eventually overthrew Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Recent literature has initiated a rethinking of the teleological narrative in which the Republic empties directly into the revolution and focused on it as a period in its own right. This edition of *Op. Cit.* edited by José Antonio Piqueras, is a rich contribution to this trend, looking closely at the complexity of Cuban politics and culture during the early decades of the twentieth century. Ten historians, working in Spain, Cuba and Germany offer finely