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# Antiracism and the uses of science in the post-World War II: An analysis of UNESCO's first statements on race (1950 and 1951)

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## Abstract

As part of its antiracist agenda under the impact of the World War II, UNESCO tried to negate the scientific value of the race concept based on meetings and statements engaging natural and social scientists. It is our interpretation that, contrary to what UNESCO had expected, the Nazi Genocide had not led scientists to a meeting of the minds about a scientific corpus that radically questioned the concept of race. A range of positions could be heard in the discussions by the panel of experts (1949) who produced the First Statement on Race (1950). Our argument is that UNESCO was influenced by a perspective centered on the assumption that amassing scientific data would be the best way to sustain a political agenda that sought to negate the concept of race as well as to fight racism. Reactions to the First Statement were quick in coming and UNESCO called another meeting to debate race in 1951.

**Keywords:** race; racism; Unesco; anthropology; history of science; Statement on race.

## Resumo

Como parte de sua agenda antirracista e sob o impacto da Segunda Guerra Mundial, a UNESCO buscou negar o valor científico do conceito de raça a partir de reuniões e declarações envolvendo cientistas sociais e naturais. Consideramos que, ao contrário da expectativa da UNESCO, o genocídio nazista não levou os cientistas a um consenso sobre um conhecimento científico que questionasse radicalmente o conceito de raça. Um leque de posições foi observado nas discussões do painel de especialistas (1949) produzindo a primeira Declaração sobre Raça (1950). Nosso argumento é que a UNESCO foi influenciada por uma perspectiva centrada no pressuposto de que a acumulação de dados científicos seria o melhor caminho para sustentar uma agenda política que procurasse negar o conceito de raça bem como combater o racismo. Reações à Primeira Declaração surgiram de imediato levando a UNESCO a convocar uma nova reunião para debater o conceito de raça em 1951.

**Palavras-chaves:** raça; racismo; Unesco; Antropologia; História da Ciência; Declaração sobre Raça.

# Antiracism and the uses of science in the post-World War II: An analysis of UNESCO's first statements on race (1950 and 1951)

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## Introduction

In September 1949, the Fourth Session of the General Conference of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) approved an anti-racist agenda in response to a request by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), through its Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities. Organized by UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences, then headed by Brazilian anthropologist Arthur Ramos (1903-1949), the agenda called for convening an international meeting of scientists to debate the scientific status of the concept of race. In the invitation to the event, Ramos informed potential participants that their goal was to “form a committee of experts in physical anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and ethnology to draw up a preliminary definition of race from an interdisciplinary perspective. This [would be] the indispensable starting point for future action by UNESCO in 1950.”<sup>1</sup> Entitled “Meeting of experts on race problems,” the event took place in Paris in December 1949 and was attended by eight participants.

The document they produced was circulated among some experts and was the object of criticism during the first half of 1950. Released in July 1950,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of invitation from Arthur Ramos to Costa Pinto, Oct. 14, 1949, p. 1, in Reg File 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146). UNESCO Archives.

UNESCO's first Statement on Race included this incisive affirmation: "Race is less a biological fact than a social myth and as a myth it has in recent years taken a heavy toll in human lives and suffering."<sup>2</sup>

UNESCO's 1950 Statement on Race has been analyzed as a radically anti-racist manifesto, that is, as an expression of criticism toward the racial thought born in the post-World War II period, still under the impact of Nazism. When it was made public, the UNESCO document met with harsh criticism from biologists, geneticists, and physical anthropologists, who pointed out what they felt were a series of inconsistencies regarding the scientific construct of race. In light of these criticisms, UNESCO convened a second meeting of experts, this time comprising mostly geneticists and physical anthropologists, who were charged with revising the alleged conceptual weaknesses found in the First Statement.

In this analysis of UNESCO's First Statement on Race and its repercussions, based on meeting minutes, correspondence, and other records from UNESCO's archives, we aim to show that the substance of controversies that followed its publication had already been debated during the December 1949 forum on the scientific status of the concept of race.<sup>3</sup> Even when participants had engaged in discussions at the 1949 meeting, there was no consensus regarding knowledge on issues like the relationship between race and behavior, miscegenation, or the principle of equality. This possibly happened because there was no common ground when it came to the concept of race nor was there any clear agreement about the role of race in either the biological or social realms. On a broader level, our interpretation is that UNESCO's perspective was to try to combat a political, ideological and moral issue grounded in science. The divergences that emerged during and after the meeting of experts challenged the optimistic belief that Nazi atrocities had led the scientific community to a consensus about the debatable heuristic value of the race concept.

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2 "UNESCO Launches Major World Campaign Against Racial Discrimination." Paris, UNESCO, Jul. 19, 1950, p.1, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

3 Our arguments in this paper takes into consideration a set of historical documents that, with the exception of Maio (2007), has not been analyzed in previous works on the UNESCO race statements (Banton 1996; Barkan 1992; Brattain 2007; Gastaud, 2007; Gayon, 2004; Haraway 1988; Maio 2001; Malik 1996; Maurel, 2010; Reardon 2005; Santos 1996; Selcer 2012; Stepan 1982, among others). The documents analyzed include the minutes of the Expert meeting that resulted in the draft of the First Race Statement (December 12-14 1949) (SS/Conf. 1/ SR 1-6, UNESCO Archives, 29 Dec. 1949-24 Feb. 1950).

## The dawn of UNESCO and the struggle against racism

The November 1945 founding of UNESCO transpired in a unique historical and political juncture, in the interval between the end of World War II and the emergence of the Cold War, before the new framework of international nations had been clearly defined. The new agency's constitution was seen as "the last great manifesto of eighteenth-century Enlightenment" (Lengyel 1986: 5) in the struggle against Nazi obscurantism. The statement of principles found in the preamble to the charter reflected the institution's liberal leanings: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed." (UNESCO 1945: 93)

UNESCO's founders, which included scientists, intellectuals and governmental representatives, believed the organization should assure everyone "full and equal access to education, the free pursuit of objective truth, and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge" (idem). UNESCO was counting on education, culture, and science to overcome ignorance, prejudice, and xenophobic nationalism, with the ultimate goal of forging a consensus about the need for a more harmonious world (Maurel 2010). Driven by a rationalist spirit which saw science playing a demiurgic role in a new world to be rebuilt upon the ashes of Hitlerist genocide, right from its earliest years UNESCO fostered research projects and surveys and organized meetings of intellectuals and scientists (Angell 1950: 282-7).

Within UNESCO, issues dealing with racial prejudice and discrimination were at first linked indirectly to the project "Tensions Affecting International Understanding," approved during the Second Session of UNESCO's General Conference, held in Mexico City in 1947. Among the project's broad goals was the investigation of the multiple causes of war, national rivalry, and the creation of stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the December 1948 release of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), through its Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities, proposed that UNESCO establish a program to combat racial discrimination (Wirth 1949: 137).

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4 "Resolutions Adopted by the General Conference During its Second Session." Mexico, Nov.-Dec. 1947. Paris, UNESCO, April 1948, p. 25, UNESCO Archives.

In response to ECOSOC's request, the Fourth Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, held in Paris in 1949, added a special chapter to its social sciences program, which it entitled "Study and dissemination of scientific facts concerning questions of race." There were three key goals: 1) "To study and collect scientific materials concerning questions of race"; 2) "To give wide diffusion to the scientific information collected"; 3) "To prepare an educational campaign based on this information."<sup>5</sup> UNESCO undertook three initiatives: first, it convoked a meeting of physical and cultural anthropologists and sociologists to draft a scientific declaration on the concept of race; second, it conducted a research project on race relations in Brazil;<sup>6</sup> third, a series of brief studies in the fields of biology, genetics, anthropology, history, and social psychology was published in order to increase awareness of scientific knowledge of race and race relations (Unesco 1956).

## Setting the stage of the 1949 meeting

The scientific status of the concept of race as a valid tool in classifying the human species and in measuring the intellectual capacity of different human groups had first been challenged in the early twentieth century. At the close of the 1910s, German anthropologist Franz Boas, who was then teaching at Columbia University released research findings that showed changes had occurred in the cranial measurements, height, and cephalic indexes of first-generation U.S. descendants of European ethnicity and nationality (Boas 1911: 99-103; Stocking 1982 [1968]:175-80). While arguing in broad terms that the environment was responsible for the observed changes, Boas also questioned a basic tenet of the anthropology of his day: the belief in the invariability of the physical characteristics of race (Boas 1912: 530-562).

This was during the early days of Mendelism, when it was also commonly believed that one or a few genes were responsible for physical or social traits like color, height, behavior, and so on. As the field of genetics developed during the first decades of the twentieth century, the complexity

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5 "Records of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Fourth Session, Resolutions." Paris, UNESCO, 1949, p. 22, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

6 "The Programme of UNESCO Proposed by the Executive Board, Part II – Draft Resolutions For 1951." Paris, 1950, p. 40, UNESCO Archives. On the debate on UNESCO's First Statement on Race and the research project on race relations in Brazil, see Maio (2001; 2007).

of inheritance became apparent (Mayr 1982). With new analyses distinguishing between phenotype and genotype and suggesting that genes may have a broad gamut of consequences, findings far from confirmed the reductionist interpretations of Mendelian inspiration grounded on the notion of “racial types” (Barkan 1992: 7).

The research by Boas and his disciples shifted steadily away from the concept of race to the concept of culture, while biologists and geneticists gradually effected a conceptual change that replaced the category of race with the category of population (Barkan 1992; Santos 1996: 125). The latter shift was even more visible in the 1930s and 1940s, when a new generation of geneticists introduced the so-called evolutionary, or neo-Darwinian, synthesis. As Santos has pointed out (1996: 126), “this ‘synthesis’ made it possible to reconcile Mendelism (which explained the transmission of hereditary characters), biometry (which addressed gene behavior and the morphological characteristics of populations), and Darwinism (which dealt with the origin and evolution of species).” So there was a move away from the notion of race as something with an invariable nature to the notion of population, which underscored the diversity, dynamic nature, adaptability, and variability of the human species (Mayr 1982, chap. 12). This diversity of knowledge was reflected in the UNESCO event.

The Experts on Race meeting was originally proposed by social psychologist Otto Klineberg, coordinator of the Unesco’s “Tensions Affecting International Understanding” project in 1948-1949. Klineberg,<sup>7</sup> who took his doctorate in anthropology in the 1920s under Franz Boas, was professor of social psychology at Columbia University, where he did research on intelligence testing and came to challenge the notion that blacks are inferior to whites. Thanks to his studies and their political implications, Klineberg became an important intellectual in the struggle against racism. He in fact took part in Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944), a study on race relations in the United States that had a major impact on the civil rights movement from the 1940s through the 1960s (Jackson 1991).

Klineberg’s initial step towards drawing up the First Statement was to compile a series of manifestos against racism that had been published

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7 The information on Otto Klineberg was taken from an interview granted by the social psychologist to the Columbia Oral History project, Columbia University, in 1984. See also Klineberg, 1974, 163-82.



before and during World War II.<sup>8</sup> This material would be used by the group of experts “in the various social and biological sciences” (Klineberg 1949: 20). Brazilian anthropologist Arthur Ramos, a specialist in Afro-Brazilian studies, who succeeded Klineberg as head of UNESCO’s Department of Social Sciences, implemented his predecessor’s proposal. The expert meeting was held in Paris on December 12-14, 1949. Attendees included sociologists Franklin Frazier (U.S.), Morris Ginsberg (England), and Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto (Brazil); anthropologists Ernest Beaglehole (New Zealand), Juan Comas (Mexico), Ashley Montagu (U.S.), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (France); and philosopher, educator, and politician Humayan Kabir (India). These participants came from the major Western powers as well as those Third World members who were influential in defining UNESCO policy in such countries as India, Brazil, and Mexico. As detailed below, they exemplify diverse origins, intellectual trajectories, personal and institutional ties, and engagement in political issues in the field of ethnic and race relations.

Social anthropologist Ernest Beaglehole (1906-1965) conducted studies on ethnic relations in New Zealand as a participant in “Tensions Affecting International Understanding,” the main project run by UNESCO’s Department of Social Sciences (Ritchie 1967: 68-70).

Morris Ginsberg (1889-1970), a Lithuanian-born sociologist who was a naturalized British citizen, had done research exploring the boundaries of philosophy, political science, and social psychology. He was a professor at the London School of Economics and in 1949 became vice-president of the International Sociological Association, founded under the auspices of UNESCO (Bulmer 1985: 5-14; Fletcher 1974: 1-26).

At the time of the UNESCO meeting, French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) had already earned great renown for his book *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, published in 1949. From 1935 to 1938, he was a member of the French mission that helped set up the Universidade de São Paulo’s School of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters; while in Brazil, he undertook ethnographic fieldwork (Lévi-Strauss 1955; Massi 1991: 132-53). During World War II, he lectured at the New School for Social Research in

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8 These manifestos included documents issued by the Royal Anthropological Institute, the American Anthropological Association, and the Brazilian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology (BSAE), among others (Ramos 1943).

New York. When peace came, he returned to Europe and joined France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. He was also a member of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1990).

Sociologist Franklin Frazier (1894-1962), professor at Howard University, received his doctorate from the University of Chicago. He was in Brazil in the early 1940s to study race relations, principally in Bahia (Helwigg 1991: 87-94). Frazier wrote on blacks in the United States and also contributed to the research project coordinated by Myrdal for *An American Dilemma*. In 1948, he became the first black president of the American Sociological Association (Edwards 1975: 85).

With a degree in philosophy from Oxford, Humayun Kabir (1906-1969) represented India at the Third Session of UNESCO's General Conference, held in Beirut in 1948, where he participated in a forum on democracy in the post-war world (Kabir 1951; Datta 1969).

Spanish anthropologist Juan Comas (1900-1979) went to Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, where he became a professor in physical and cultural anthropology. Comas was secretary-general of the Inter-American Indigenist Institute and editor of the journals *América Indígena* and *Boletín Indigenista* (Genovés et al. 1965).

Ashley Montagu (1905-1999) was a British-American anthropologist and former student of Franz Boas who had taken up residence in the United States. He had been active in the discussion of the race concept and in the struggle against racism since the 1920s. During World War II, he published his seminal book *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942), in which he questioned the concept of race. As yet another contributor to Gunnar Myrdal's project, Montagu analyzed the physical characteristics of blacks in the United States (Myrdal 1944: xiii; Barkan 1996: 96-105). He became a professor at Rutgers University in 1949.

Lastly, the Brazilian sociologist Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto (1920-2002) was a professor with the Department of Social Sciences at the National Faculty of Philosophy in Rio de Janeiro, and Arthur Ramos' former student.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the perspectives of this diverse group of scholars, UNESCO sought to produce more than a consensus document. It was also considered

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9 Letter from Arthur Ramos to Jorge Kingston, Sep. 14, 1949, Coleção Arthur Ramos, I:35,16,215a, Seção de Manuscritos, Biblioteca Nacional.

imperative that this document be made public in order to influence social and political efforts related to race and racial relations on a global scale.

## The 1949 meeting on race

The tasks set before the expert committee were threefold: 1) to define race; 2) to evaluate knowledge of the topic from a critical perspective; 3) to offer proposals for future research that might better substantiate the issue.

<sup>10</sup> At Lévi-Strauss's suggestion, the meeting was chaired by Franklin Frazier while Ashley Montagu served as rapporteur.<sup>11</sup>

Ginsberg was at first skeptical about arriving at a definition of the concept of race, both because existing formulations were inconsistent and because there was no consensus on the matter. In his opinion, the committee should nevertheless make a general compilation of definitions of race, including a genetic one, in order to avoid any ambiguities concerning use of the term. He also felt it would be important to identify its social effects, the scope of racial prejudice around the world, and the various ways in which the phenomenon manifested itself.

Ashley Montagu, on the other hand, argued that physical anthropology and genetics had been reshaping the concept of race in recent years.<sup>12</sup> In tune with Montagu, Lévi-Strauss thought the field of genetics was qualified to provide a foundation for a scientific definition of race. He believed that an in-depth examination of existing knowledge about race could only occur if there were a minimum consensual understanding of the issue.<sup>13</sup> Lévi-Strauss's position found voice on several occasions during the UNESCO forum.

Edward Lawson, the United Nations Human Rights Commission observer assigned to sit in on the Paris meeting, emphasized the need of implementing practical initiatives. On this matter, he stated: "[The United Nations] had asked UNESCO not to concern itself with theoretical considerations, but to take practical measures to solve the problem of racial prejudices. After much consultation, the Division of Human Rights of

<sup>10</sup> 10. SS/Conf. 1/SR 1, Paris, Dec. 29, 1949, pp. 1-2. UNESCO Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

the Department of Social Affairs [...] had come to the conclusion that the concept of a definition of race was scientifically illegitimate, and that there was no way of defining race in any generally acceptable sense.”<sup>14</sup> Not far from Lawson, Costa Pinto thought the Committee should “be more concerned with social relations than with genetic factors.”<sup>15</sup>

Frazier called attention to the complexity of the race concept, citing as an example the system for classifying blacks, which “varied widely [by country]: it would be defined very differently in the U.S., Brazil, Puerto Rico, or Jamaica.”<sup>16</sup>

This brief sketch of the positions taken by Committee members illustrates the distinct views about the meeting’s goals. This diversity of opinions is apparent in Ginsberg’s statement that “it was essential, in any declaration on the equality of race, to distinguish clearly between universal moral law, the equality of men, and a declaration of equality based on objective facts.”<sup>17</sup> That is, he felt the committee should limit itself to moral issues like the universal equality of men, without tying these to scientific data.

When Montagu seconded Ginsberg’s premise that men are equal, however, he held that the principle had scientific grounding. In his opinion, “according to the most recent research carried out in the United States, it was henceforth possible to state that neither mental characteristics nor behavior had any genetical significance.”<sup>18</sup> Contrary to Ginsberg, who stated that individuals varied in mental levels, Montagu felt that “educational, social and economic conditions had a very definite bearing on the results of intelligence tests.”<sup>19</sup> He also criticized the relationship drawn between physical and mental traits. In his words, “it had been proved that temperamental characteristics were determined by cultural factors.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Montagu raised doubts about negative views on miscegenation and criticized “the theory that a marked lack of harmony resulted in a high percentage of cases from cross-breeding of individuals

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 6; SS/Conf. 1/SR 3, Paris, Dec. 30, 1949, p. 8. UNESCO Archives.

<sup>16</sup> SS/Conf. 1/SR 1, Paris, Dec. 29, 1949, pp. 9-11. UNESCO Archives.

<sup>17</sup> SS/Conf. 1/SR 2, Paris, Feb. 24, 1950, p. 3. UNESCO Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

with widely different ethnical characteristics.”<sup>21</sup> Montagu’s understanding of the influence of the environment touched on controversial points like the mixing of different species and the existence of “mental differences” between human beings.

Concerned about the direction of the meeting, Lévi-Strauss enumerated the topics he felt should guide its final document: 1) a definition of race based on physical anthropology and biology; 2) the need for an analysis of racial prejudice.<sup>22</sup>

Ginsberg reiterated his position that it was impossible to arrive at a consensus regarding a definition of race. He felt it would be more productive “to indicate the main groups in which men had been classed in accordance with widely differing criteria, adding that the classification was arbitrary and relative.”<sup>23</sup> For Montagu, the Committee could state what “race was not.”<sup>24</sup> He further proposed that the concept of race be replaced by that of “ethnic groups,”<sup>25</sup> in greater consonance with the cultural characteristics of the world’s existing human groups.<sup>26</sup>

With a series of disagreements among the experts, Montagu, as rapporteur, presented a draft declaration on the second day.<sup>27</sup> The document had five points: 1) the biological differences between human groups derive from the action of evolutionary forces, and the human species is formed of “populations,” in the neo-Darwinian sense of the term; 2) “race” refers to a group or population characterized by a concentration of hereditary particles (genes) or physical traits, which may vary over time; 3) human groups do not differ in their mental characteristics, including intelligence and behavior; 4) miscegenation is a positive phenomenon that should not be confused with

21 Ibid., p. 5.

22 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

23 Ibid., p. 8.

24 Ibid., p. 9.

25 Ibid., p. 9.

26 SS/Conf. 1/SR 2, Paris, Feb. 24, 1950, pp. 8-9. UNESCO Archives.

27 Since each attendee was allowed to propose the text of a statement, Costa Pinto presented one entitled “Declaração sobre os aspectos sociológicos das relações de raças” (Statement on the sociological aspects of race relations). As the title itself tells us, Costa Pinto’s document diverged from the proposals put forward on the first day of the meeting. At the end of the reading of this proposal, New Zealand anthropologist Ernest Beaglehole suggested that the variety of sociological reflections on the topic would prevent a thoroughgoing evaluation within the allotted time. According to Costa Pinto, what thus prevailed was the meeting’s overriding precept, that is, “that the existing biological differences between the races do not justify any attempt to establish categories of superiority or inferiority between them” (Costa Pinto 1950: 6).

degeneration; 5) modern biology shows that man has an innate tendency toward “universal brotherhood.”<sup>28</sup>

Ginsberg criticized two points in Montagu’s text. First, he objected to its incisive denial of any relation between physiological characteristics and temperament.<sup>29</sup> Whether or not “the working of glands had a genetic basis, [they] in any case affected temperament.” Second, he took issue with casting miscegenation in a positive light. For Ginsberg, “race-mixture, as such, produced neither good nor bad results: the results depended on the genetic constitution of the individuals who inter-married.”<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the first point, Montagu countered that “the genes connected with secretions were not indissolubly united in inheritance with the genes affecting the potentialities of behavior.”<sup>31</sup> As to his positive perspective on miscegenation, Montagu contended that “studies had been made of the mixing of varieties of men which had shown that the results were lasting: for example, crosses between Bushmen, Hottentots and Dutchmen had lasting effects, as had also crosses between Indians, Whites and Negroes in Brazil.”<sup>32</sup> From a sociological angle, Montagu’s outlook was tied in with a research proposal by Frazier on “the position of [the] half-breed in various parts of the world.”<sup>33</sup> In his research into European and North American attitudes toward people of color in Brazil, Frazier noted that “the differences were due not only to psychological but also to political, economic, religious and even demographic factors.”<sup>34</sup>

Sociologist Costa Pinto, on the other hand, believed that “it had been demonstrated by all disciplines that no pure races existed, but that there were nevertheless racial problems of a purely sociological nature. [...] Relations between groups were based on ideology and not on any scientifically definable differences and, therefore, UNESCO should begin by recognizing that race prejudice had its roots in social and political differences, not in physiological or mental aspects.”<sup>35</sup> Once again, Costa Pinto’s stance

28 SS/Conf. 1/SR 3, Paris, Dec. 30, 1949, pp. 2-5. UNESCO Archives.

29 Ibid., p. 5.

30 Ibid., p. 5.

31 Ibid., p. 5.

32 Ibid., p. 6.

33 SS/Conf. 1/SR 4, Paris, Feb. 24, 1950, p. 4. UNESCO Archives.

34 Ibid., p. 4.

35 SS/Conf. 1/SR 3, Dec. 30, 1949, p. 8. UNESCO Archives.

was indicative of the degree of disagreement among the experts on the UNESCO panel. If the scientific community was uncomfortable about the evils perpetrated by Nazism in the name of race, this did not redound in a common critical perspective of the race concept.

Montagu's noted anti-racist activism during World War II, represented in his book *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942), in conjunction with his biological expertise, had a decisive influence on the text's final version. Following further debate, which did not change the general lines of Montagu's proposal, the committee arrived at its own proposal on December 14, 1949, the third and final day of the meeting. The document showed support for an egalitarian outlook while refuting the existence of racial hierarchies. As outlined in Montagu's proposal, it thus underscored the fact that mental ability is similar in all races while it denied that miscegenation had any negative ramifications. Human beings, according to the text, have a vocation for solidarity; the concept of race was a merely ideological role.<sup>36</sup>

Ginsberg suggested that the 1949 document should be submitted for criticism to a group of selected scientists.<sup>37</sup> Sociologist Robert Angell, acting Head of UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences, and Swiss-American anthropologist Alfred Métraux, director of the Division for the Study of Race Problems, acted as mediators between the reviewing scientists and the document's final version, having Montagu as rapporteur.

## The reactions to the draft from the 1949 Expert Meeting

The proposal drawn up by the expert panel was submitted for review to twelve scientists, most from the natural sciences.<sup>38</sup> As we argue below, it was remarkable how the comments elicited from these scientists actually foreshadowed some of the reactions to the final statement, released by UNESCO in July 1950. We will take a closer look at the criticisms lodged by

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<sup>36</sup> SS/Conf. 1/6, Dec. 28, 1949, pp. 1-5. UNESCO Archives.

<sup>37</sup> SS/Conf. 1/SR 5, Dec. 30, p. 2. UNESCO Archives.

<sup>38</sup> These scientists were Hadley Cantril (social psychologist), E.G. Conklin (biologist), Gunnar Dahlberg (geneticist), Theodosius Dobzhansky (geneticist), L.C. Dunn (geneticist), Donald Hager (anthropologist), Julian S. Huxley (biologist), Otto Klineberg (psychologist), Wilbert Moore (sociologist), H.J. Muller (geneticist), Gunnar Myrdal (economist and sociologist), and Joseph Needham (biochemist) (Montagu 1951: 7-10).

geneticists Leslie Dunn and Theodosius Dobzhansky, social psychologist Otto Klineberg of Columbia University, anthropologist Don J. Hager of Princeton University, and biologist Julian Huxley.

Although the reviewers were in general agreement with the content of the document, they felt certain postulates lacked any scientific proof. Huxley suggested the statement should include a detailed presentation of the different “racial groups,” in the hopes of steering clear of any statements that were not properly grounded, for example, an affirmation that no correlations existed between the genetic formation of different human groups and certain social behaviors. Huxley expressed his position drawing on some rather biologically deterministic examples: “it would be probable that there would be some degrees of genetic basis for the phenotypic differences in temperament between various groups, cf., the expansive and rhythm-loving Negro temperament and the shut-in temperament of many Amerindian groups.”<sup>39</sup> While Hager agreed with Montagu’s text for the most part, he argued that there was no scientific evidence of a biological inclination towards brotherhood and universal cooperation. He also asked whether “replacing ‘race’ with ‘ethnic group’ would add any measure of clarity” (Hager 1951: 54).

Leslie Dunn felt it inaccurate to claim there was no evidence of innate differences between human groups. He also believed that no consistent scientific knowledge supported the postulate that there are no connections between morphological and mental traits; further, he thought a distinction should be made between race as a biological phenomenon and race as a myth. According to Dunn, “the myth is the ascription to race of powers for which there is no biological foundation.”<sup>40</sup>

Much like Dunn, Dobzhansky advised that the following phrase be omitted: “the biological facts may be totally disregarded from the standpoint of social behavior and social action.”<sup>41</sup> Klineberg felt the declaration should be “less dogmatic.” He thought definitive pronouncements about

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39 Letter from Julian Huxley to Robert Angell, Jan. 26, 1950, p. 4, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

40 Letter from Leslie Dunn to Robert Angell, Jan. 11, 1950, pp. 1-2, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

41 Letter from Theodosius Dobzhansky to Robert Angell, Jan. 17, 1950, p. 2, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.



the absence of any correlations between biological data and psychological characteristics would be premature. He also felt it somewhat precipitous to wholly preclude links between different genetic heritages and “cultural achievements.”<sup>42</sup>

Klineberg’s criticisms revealed a concern shared by Dobzhansky, who suggested changing some observations that he felt were “overstatements and hence might open the whole ‘statement’ to attack by racialists.”<sup>43</sup> When Klineberg, a Boasian, said correlations might exist between biology and culture, it might appear that he was in contradiction with his own scientific criticisms of intelligence tests. It is possible that Klineberg’s criticisms of Montagu had more to do with his political concern about how racialists might react to Montagu’s stances than about the existence of any substantive differences between the two of them.

Montagu stood firm against these criticisms and made only superficial changes to the 1949 document. He refused to eliminate the alleged tenet of universal brotherhood. In a letter to Alfred Métraux, Montagu wrote: “Sorry, this [tenet of universal brotherhood] is a scientific fact, now demonstrable beyond question.”<sup>44</sup>

For apparently different reasons, UNESCO leaders like Torres Bodet, Robert Angell, and Alfred Métraux and prominent scientists like the biologist Julian Huxley had reservations about the content of the revised version. For UNESCO heads, there was a concern that the document might express the ideas of only one group of scientists rather than standing as a more overall statement endorsed by the international agency.<sup>45</sup>

The biologist Julian Huxley, UNESCO’s first Director-General, proclaimed his disagreements with Montagu in no uncertain terms: “I fear that I would not like my name to appear on the document.”<sup>46</sup> He failed to make good on this threat. Apparently there was a consensus regarding

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42 Letter from Otto Klineberg to Robert Angell, Jan. 25, 1950, p. 2, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

43 Letter from Theodosius Dobzhansky to Robert Angell, Jan. 17, 1950, p. 1, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

44 Letter from A. Montagu to R. Angell, May 1, 1950, Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box 146), UNESCO Archives.

45 Letter from Robert Angell to Ashley Montagu, Apr. 26, 1950, p. 1, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

46 Letter from Julian Huxley to Ashley Montagu, May 24, 1950, p. 1, in Reg file 323.12 A 102. Part I (Box Reg 146), UNESCO Archives.

Ashley Montagu's scientific authority and about the need to preserve the still-fledgling international institution and to recognize the political weight of this scientific manifesto (Barkan 1996: 100).

In July 1950, following the Fifth Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, and after six months of consultations and internal debates, the First Statement on Race was made public. The substance of the statement by the expert panel that met in Paris in 1949 went basically unchanged. As we will see, some of the same concerns exhibited by Huxley, Dunn, Dobzhansky, and Klineberg were also raised by other researchers after UNESCO officially released the document, known as the First Statement. That is, the criticisms first heard in tight circles were now echoed widely, prompting UNESCO to convoke a new meeting of experts.

## Repercussions and reactions

The text of the First Statement is a peculiar blend of genetic postulates drawn from the neo-Darwinian synthesis and ideas derived from the Boasian tradition in anthropology. For Proctor (1988: 174), it in fact represented the triumph of the latter. This amalgamation resulted in a document where race is posed as secondary to the concept of population ("*Homo sapiens* is made up of a number of populations"), hard to apply ("human races can be and have been differently classified by different anthropologists"), biologically meaningless ("‘race’ is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth"), and having little influence over mental traits ("there is no definitive evidence that there exist inborn differences between human groups") (UNESCO 1952: 98-103).

Bespeaking the influence of evolutionary theory, the First Statement contained an excerpt from Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, where evolutionism merges with the cooperative spirit and social tolerance: "as man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him" (UNESCO 1952: 101-102).

It may seem a bit surprising to attempt to reach an integrated position on the concept of race by conjoining the Boasian anthropological tradition, which criticized racial determinism, with neo-Darwinism, which proposed

“population” as a basic unit of analysis, although, as mentioned earlier, the Boasian line of thought had already cast doubt on the foundations of racial typologies in the early years of the twentieth century (Boas 1940; Stocking 1982 [1968]). Geneticists, or at least a good number in this field, were intimately involved with the eugenic movement (Stocking 1982 [1968]; Provine 1973; Stepan 1982; Bowler 1989). In other words, if some versions of Darwinism, along with other doctrines of evolutionary biology, had a direct influence on the production of an authoritarian, racist brand of science prior to World War II, after the war there emerged a type of biology—or at least a group of its researchers—that advocated a “universal man biologically certified for equality and rights to full citizenship” (Haraway 1989: 197–203). Authors like Haraway (1989) and Greene (1990) trace the “evolutionary humanism” pervading the First Statement not to a conceptual transformation in biology but to the ideas held by a group of biologists that included Theodosius Dobzhansky and Julian Huxley, who had also helped develop the so-called neo-Darwinian synthesis. For these evolutionists, it was possible to conjoin evolutionary biology and humanism, as we can deduce from the text of the First Statement (Greene 1990).

Reactions to the First Statement were quick in coming. Shortly after its release, ethnologist William Fagg, editor of *Man*, published the document in full and invited some physical anthropologists and geneticists to comment on it. The responses received by the British journal range in tone from conciliatory (Fleure 1951; Little 1951) to not so conciliatory (Hill 1951; Vallois 1951), with direct attacks aimed not just at ideas but at individuals as well. For the most part, the criticisms targeted three concerns: (1) the document did not make a proper distinction between race as a biological concept and a social concept, while it also invalidated the first dimension; (2) contrary to what the text suggested, it had not been scientifically proven that there were no racial differences in terms of mental abilities; (3) the assertion that biological studies showed that human beings are predestined to universal brotherhood was baseless (UNESCO 1952: 7).

Many physical anthropologists defended race as a biological category and clearly took a dim view of the First Statement. For some, it contained contradictions or “overly categorical” statements and “poorly justified denials” (Vallois 1951:16); for others, some of its statements were more akin to philosophical and ideological doctrine than “modern scientific” ideas

(Little 1951:17). There were also those who argued that the document's conclusions reflected nothing more than the opinions of a "particular school of anthropologists" whose affirmations seemed to be guided more by "wishful thinking" than by "established scientific facts" (Hill 1951:16). The author of this last comment, British primatologist W.C. Osman Hill, illustrates the latter; he not only made a scathing attack on the ideas and proponents of the First Statement but was also quite out-spoken in his comment on race and temperament, rife with stereotypes: that range of mental capabilities is "much the same" in all races is scarcely a scientifically accurate statement. It is at most a vague generalization. It is, however, scarcely true, for temperamental and other mental differences are well known to be correlated with physical differences. I need but mention the well known musical attributes of the Negroids and the mathematical abilities of some Indian races (Hill 1951: 16-17).

Lastly, it is interesting to note that critics of the First Statement also invoked Darwin's support by citing an excerpt from *The Descent of Man*, in this case to underscore the existence of differences between the races. C.D. Darlington wrote: "[human] races differ also in constitution, in [their capacity for] acclimatization, and in liability to certain diseases. Their mental characteristics are likewise very distinct; chiefly in their emotional, but [also] partly in their intellectual, faculties" (cited in UNESCO 1952: 27).

The year after this exchange of comments—and of insults—in the pages of *Man*, UNESCO called another meeting to debate race. Their rationale for doing so was:

"Race is a question of interest to many different kinds of people, not only to the public at large but to sociologists, anthropologists, and biologists, especially those dealing with problems of genetics. At the first discussion on the problem of race, it was chiefly sociologists who gave their opinions and framed the Statement on Race. That Statement had a good effect, but it did not carry the authority of just those groups within whose special province fall the biological problems of race, namely the physical anthropologist and geneticists. Secondly, the first Statement did not, in all its details, carry the conviction of these groups and, because of this, it was not supported by many authorities in these two fields" (Dunn 1951:155).

The second meeting of experts took place in 1951 and comprised only physical anthropologists and geneticists. It was carefully organized from a

political standpoint: French physical anthropologist H. Vallois, a critic of the First Statement, was appointed committee chair, while U.S. geneticist L.C. Dunn held the strategic role of rapporteur. Dunn, who had personal ties to Dobzhansky and theoretical ties to the neo-Darwinian synthesis, had helped revise the text of the First Statement. Although Montagu was not initially invited, he later joined the committee as representative of the writers of the first text.

What are the differences between the two documents? For Dunn, the second text preserved the main conclusions of the First Statement, “but with differences in emphasis and some important deletions” (Dunn 1951: 155). The Second Statement is actually more biological and factual in tone, with fewer observations of a philosophical tenor; it is also less emphatic about “cultural determinism” (see Barkan 1992: 342-3). Although race was reinstated as a biologically valid concept, this was only in light of genetics: “The concept of race is unanimously regarded by anthropologists as a classificatory device [...] by means of which studies of evolutionary processes can be facilitated” (UNESCO 1952: 11). As far as intellect, temperament, culture, and race, committee members preferred to take an inconclusive position, claiming that available data neither proved nor denied the existence of associations between these features. Paraphrasing Haraway (1989: 197-203), we can say that the human being portrayed in the Second Statement is, while universal, biologically less certified for equality and rights to full citizenship. Whether biologically limited or not, the human being outlined by geneticists and physical anthropologists in this document is not defined according to typological or racialized models but in the light of neo-Darwinism.

## Closing remarks

This paper has explored the context of the debates surrounding UNESCO’s 1950 and 1951 statements on race.<sup>47</sup> It was a singular moment,

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47 There is a growing literature on the repercussions of the UNESCO Statements. STS (Science, Technology and Society) scholars Donna Haraway (1988: 208-216) and Jenny Reardon (2005: 23-36) have argued that the UNESCO statements had major impacts upon research on human biological diversity in the second half of the 20th century. Maio (2001) has written on the cycle of studies on Brazilian race relations sponsored by UNESCO in the beginning of the 1950s (see also Maurel 2010: 226-232). More recently, Selcer (2011) has discussed an initiative of UNESCO in Africa, more specifically in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), to study race relations.

when the world was looking towards the past, and above all to the atrocities of war, in hopes of forging a new future for humanity. Contrary to UNESCO's expectations, the debate hardly proved an arena propitious to forming a consensus.

UNESCO's main reason for convoking the 1951 meeting to discuss the concept of race was based on the argument that a sociological vision would have trumped a biological vision in the First Statement, thus thwarting a more authoritative scientific assessment of the question. The debates that took place at the December 1949 meeting already indicated that the group of experts, which included mostly social scientists, was far from a consensus. Sociologists like Franklin Frazier and Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto were closer to Montagu than to the sociologist Morris Ginsberg. Together with Montagu, social anthropologist Lévi-Strauss insisted that the concept of race be grounded in the field of genetics. Ginsberg, on the other hand, thought it pointless to seek any consensus on the scientific definition of race given the degree of dissent on the matter. He felt it was an issue of a moral nature that fell within the realm of defending the legitimate principle of equality between men, regardless of any scientific underpinnings. In point of fact, Ginsberg foresaw how hard it would be to shape an agenda for addressing racism that was grounded on scientificism, that is, on scientific concepts guiding political actions or moral principles.

In this sense, the First Statement's alleged lack of scientific authority was possibly much less associated with the hegemony of any given field than with the ambivalence over the scientific status of the concept of race that persisted even after the war, in both the social and natural sciences. This was made patently clear in the process of writing the statement and during its subsequent reception.

On a broader perspective, contrary to what UNESCO had expected, the Holocaust had not led natural and social scientists to a consensus about a scientific corpus that radically questioned the concept of race. UNESCO was influenced by a perspective centered on the assumption that amassing scientific data would be the best way to sustain a political agenda that sought to negate the concept of race and therefore would be the best way to fight racism. Presenting itself as a "scientific agency of the United

Nations,”<sup>48</sup> UNESCO tried to combat a moral, political, and ideological issue by grounding itself in science. The divergences that became evident both during and after the meeting of experts challenged UNESCO’s optimistic belief that the Nazi atrocities had led the scientific community to join unanimously in questioning the dubious heuristic value of the race concept.

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