

*H-France Forum*

Volume 9, Issue 2 (Spring 2014), No. 3

Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. 392 pp. Notes and bibliography. 79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-3755-7; 26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7878-9 (pb).

Review essay by Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Harvard University

Race is a social construction, not a biological reality. In the twenty-first century, this is a known fact. We know that the DNA of every human being is 99.9% similar to that of any other human being. But in the twenty-first century, we also can trace our “ancestry” to its “roots” by comparing an individual’s DNA to that of the supposed “ancestral populations” of the world, an exercise that presupposes the existence of these isolated groupings and makes inferences based on sometimes questionable markers of genetic belonging.[1] In another era or put to unethical ends, this “racial science” might better be termed “racist science.”[2] But the enterprise is also supported by anti-racists such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the Harvard professor who has profiled the surprising results of DNA testing in his television series “Finding Your Roots.” The show features individuals who tell stories of their ancestry, only to have what they thought they knew often debunked by the DNA “evidence.”[3] “Finding Your Roots” is not intended to show that biology trumps culture; rather, the show’s biologically based revelations make for good drama, while at the same time calling into question everything we thought we already knew about race and belonging.[4] In Gates’ hands, biological research exposes the power of culture. In this way, although trained as a literary scholar, Gates joins a long line of anthropologists who have struggled to make sense of both the biological and cultural histories of the human species. These anthropologists—and the fuzzy boundary between “racial” and “racist” science—are the subject of Alice Conklin’s deeply researched new book, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology and Empire in France, 1850-1950*.

As her title suggests, Conklin trains her eye on anthropologists working in France, and particularly (although not exclusively) those working at the Musée de l’Homme. But the lessons of the book are much broader, for Conklin aims to understand how an academic discipline that began as a “natural science” (“anthropology”) metamorphosed into “ethnology,” which was also a social science. How did a discipline which originally aimed to establish biologically-based racial hierarchies through “science” become the very discipline whose expertise undergirded the 1950 UNESCO statement that “race was less biological fact than social myth” (pp. 5 and 329)? Although the discipline’s problems of squaring biological and social knowledge were not unique to French anthropologists, the French schools of anthropology—and Conklin makes clear there were multiple schools—themselves provide interesting laboratories for investigating this fascinating question, together with its moral and ethical implications.

*In the Museum of Man* explores how “racial science” became less “racist” and more “humanist” over the course of a century that saw the apogee of European overseas colonial expansion and the cataclysm of two world wars. The story you might expect—that the shift came following the horrors of the Third Reich’s racist warfare—is only partly true. The timing is right, but the impetus for the change is older and perhaps more surprising. Although a belief in racial superiority—backed by the “science” of physical anthropology—helped rationalize European colonial expansion in the first place, ultimately colonial territories also provided laboratories in which a new generation of anthropologists came to critique the assumptions of physical anthropology and build the case for a non-hierarchical understanding of a common humanity. This was perhaps ironic, as Conklin shows in chapters five and six, two of the most original in the book, since it was colonialism that provided the opportunity for field work: first, it placed the “field” within French reach and, second, the colonial ministry literally bankrolled a good deal of ethnographic research, investing in the idea that the “science of man” could benefit the empire by

increasing “knowledge” about the people being ruled. In the end, science in the pay of colonialism produced scholars who “discovered the failed exchange that colonialism represented” (p. 281). Indeed, as Conklin tells it, colonies were never simply (or only) “laboratories of modernity” in its more pernicious forms, as some scholars have argued.<sup>[5]</sup> They also happened to be the milieu in which modern French anti-racism was incubated among the very anthropologists who uncritically accepted the financial and infrastructural support of the colonial state. This is the kind of nuanced history that characterizes Conklin’s carefully argued book.

To explain how we got to this surprising conclusion, Conklin takes her readers back to the origins of French anthropology, when Paul Broca founded the Société d’Anthropologie in 1859 and then the École d’Anthropologie in 1876. Both organizations represented Broca’s effort to institutionalize a science whose main laboratory experiments involved the measurement of skulls in order to correlate the physical features of the brain to intelligence and then connect these correlations to racial hierarchies. From the beginning, Broca had rivals. Broca was a polygenist, meaning that he believed there to be more than one “original” human race from which all subsequent races descended. His main contemporary rival, Jean Louis Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau, who held the first chair in anthropology at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, was a monogenist. Like Broca, Conklin writes, Quatrefages

accepted the irreversibility of racial characteristics, the historic stability of human groups over the long term, and the fundamental inequality of the races. As a monogenist, however, he never gave up arguing that environmental influence had formed and continued to shape human varieties, and that underneath all the variety the species was fundamentally one, a position that always made his anthropology less biologicistic than that of Broca and more open to questions regarding the historical development of cultures (p. 30).

In Broca and Quatrefages and their intellectual descendants, then, one finds a microcosm of the anthropological dilemma: was human diversity primarily a product of culture or of biology, and how, for that matter, did the two interact? Conklin traces this debate through the complex institutional shifts that occurred in the wake of Broca’s death, through the First and Second World Wars to the Liberation. She shows how some “racial science” was more “racist” than others, and what institutional, intellectual, and ethical frameworks contributed to the growth of an increasingly “antiracist racial science” (p. 162).

If “antiracist racial science” seems like an oxymoron, this book may at first flummox you, but be patient; for Conklin, this is not a distinction without a difference. At the beginning, I was not sure why we would consider anyone who believed in racial hierarchies, even if they believed them “mutable,” to be anything other than “racist.” But Conklin shows how a group of scholars who, although having escaped only incompletely some of the foundational vestiges of physical anthropology, nonetheless managed to contest some of the underlying racist assumptions built into it by emphasizing the importance of society over “somatic” explanations for human behavior. After Broca’s death, the institutions he founded struggled to maintain their relevance, and a new group of anthropologists heavily influenced by Durkheimian sociology entered the scene, forming new institutions and lobbying for recognition as a discipline at the university level. Among the most important of these institutions was the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, founded in 1878 and replaced by the Musée de l’Homme (Museum of Man) in 1938. The “Troca,” as it came to be called, was chaired by a young anthropologist named Ernest-Théodore Hamy. In 1882, Hamy teamed up with Quatrefages to found a new journal, the *Revue d’Ethnographie*; he then used the Troca and the journal to mount support for a science of ethnography that, while not eschewing osteology, would also examine human cultural artifacts, or “ethnographica,” which themselves provided rich evidence regarding “extinct ‘primitive’ civilizations and races” (p. 41). Hamy, as Conklin makes clear, had not abandoned the standard assumptions of the day about racial hierarchies, but he had shifted the *method* for studying them from bones to artifacts; in so doing, he

opened the door to a deeper appreciation of the cultural production and intelligence of populations hitherto regarded as “primitive.” As Hamy built this new discipline, Broca’s disciples seemed mired in internecine debates still familiar in academic circles today: should science be “pure” or “applied”? And, if the latter, what standards of “science” would be upheld? The answer, for the Brocans, seemed to be a descent into ever more blatant racism, which was reflected in the career of the “hardline hereditarian” Georges Vacher de Lapouge (p. 49), whose participation in the Société d’Anthropologie helped put a scientific imprimatur on the racist theories of Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau. Vacher de Lapouge’s pseudo-scientific “anthroposociology,” however, was no match for the Durkheimian sociologists, who by the 1890s were “sufficiently well organized to recognize and counter scientifically the threat that Vacher de Lapouge’s anthroposociology posed not only to all students of the ‘human,’ but to the founding principles of the [Third] Republic itself” (p. 51). Eventually, under a new generation, the Musée de l’Homme would mount exhibits deliberately aimed to “relativize ‘white’ achievements by showing that technical accomplishment was the shared heritage of all humanity” (p. 149).

The Durkheim school’s innovation was to show how society shapes individuals more than the other way around. Under the influence of sociology, the “ethnographers” grew ever more distinct from their “anthropologist” forbears. Partly this was thanks to a new generation of scholars led by Paul Rivet and Marcel Mauss. Rivet was a doctor turned anthropologist who, heavily influenced by Franz Boas and “Americanist” anthropologists, would eventually found, lead, and expand the Musée de l’Homme thanks to his institution-building savvy and good timing. Mauss, of course, was Durkheim’s nephew but was most influential after Durkheim’s death when he emerged from his uncle’s shadow to advise a group of young scholars who made experience in the “field” and early forms of what today we would call “participant observation” essential to their science (p. 83). Albeit very different in temperament and approach—Rivet was, Conklin tells us, still a scientist of “man,” whereas Mauss studied the “science of the social” (p. 75)—the men made common cause in developing “ethnology” as an object of university study. Although Vacher de Lapouge’s influence was rooted out, Vacher acolytes, including Georges Montandon, would continue to crop up and present both intellectual and institutional conflicts for the fledgling social science in the years to come. The details Conklin shares of the institutional battles between these camps are too complex to reiterate here,<sup>[6]</sup> but they include fascinating chapters on the Musée’s evolution as an institution, the novel methods of Marcel Mauss’s students, and the reversals in personnel during the era of Vichy rule—which landed a number of the Musée personnel and researchers in concentration camps or facing firing squads and allowed others, perhaps unscrupulously, to take advantage of Aryanization to ascend the institutional ladders of professional anthropology. Conklin’s rich detail reveals a number of innovations by the social-science camp, including their move toward conducting “field” research (often at Colonial Ministry expense), as opposed to relying on osteological evidence, and the effort to popularize, under Rivet’s leadership, the study of “man” via the Musée, while at the same time seeking additional funding for the Musée’s research wing.

Without the rivalry between physical anthropology and the emerging social science of ethnology/ethnography,<sup>[7]</sup> we are led to conclude, the former might have continued to dominate professional anthropology in France. Instead, the Musée de l’Homme and the Institut d’Éthnologie to which it was loosely connected helped to found structural anthropology which, in emphasizing the “structures” that all human cultures shared, paved the way for a relativist line of thinking about human difference. It was the French luminary of structuralist thought, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who would help pen the 1950 UNESCO statement on race as a “social” construct, long before post-structuralists would argue much the same. Fittingly for a book built on complexity, *In the Museum of Man* ends with the irony of Lévi-Strauss’s cultural relativism: in its own way, it reified difference and justified inequality. Perhaps that leads us back to where we began, with the observation that race is a social construction. Like Lévi-Straussian relativism, this observation unfortunately does not make racism go away. But to remove race from biology *does* give us the tools with which to fight that racism—tools partly honed, it turns out, in the French Museum of Man. In the age of genomics, this lesson has never been more important.

## Notes

[1] For instance, DNA ancestry search companies often make assumptions about ancestry based on the presence of a particular allele that is “common” to that population. But “common” does not mean necessary, and one can descend from that population without possessing the allele in question or one can have it and not be related to that population at all. “The Science and Business of Genetic Ancestry Testing,” *Science* 318 (19 October 2007): 399-400.

[2] For a chilling example of how such “evidence” can be misused, see Duana Fullwiley, “Can DNA ‘witness’ Race? Forensic Uses of an Imperfect Ancestry Testing Technology,” in *Race and the Genetic Revolution*, eds. Sheldon Krimsky and Kathleen Sloan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 116-26.

[3] See the information provided on the show at: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/finding-your-roots/about/> (accessed 13 May 2014).

[4] To be sure, the project originated in a rather conventional hope that DNA research on African Americans “would be to reveal the ethnic group from which their maternal or paternal slave ancestors descended back in Africa,” an exercise Gates thought would be “fun,” a sort of “*Roots* in a test tube,” referring to Alex Haley’s book and the 1970s television miniseries *Roots*. But based on his findings, Gates expanded and changed his goals to explore the ontological questions raised by DNA testing.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., blog post “Exactly How ‘Black’ Is Black America?,” 11 February 2013: [http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2013/02/how\\_mixed\\_are\\_african\\_americans.1.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2013/02/how_mixed_are_african_americans.1.html) (accessed 13 May 2014).

[5] There is a great deal of stimulating work in this vein, including Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and more recently Richard Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For a valuable assessment of the trend and its limitations, see Clifford Rosenberg, “The Colonial Politics of Health Care Provision in Interwar Paris,” *French Historical Studies* 27:3 (2004): 637-68.

[6] The depth of research in this book is dazzling, but it also makes for dense reading. I found myself sometimes wanting a flow chart of “organigram,” as the French might call it, which would allow me to understand what each institution was, when it was founded, who ran it when, and what its relationship was to other institutions such as the university of the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle.

[7] As Conklin explains, “ethnology” and “ethnography” are not identical, the former implying belonging to the natural sciences more than the latter. Using the former term rather than the latter thus allowed the French anthropologists who were distancing themselves from osteology to lay claim to their work as a “science.” See Conklin, p. 87.

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