Quantifying the Dark Continent: 19th Century Colonialism and the Science of Race

Ellen Dupont
Arizona State University

Background

There was much dissemination in Europe during the 1800s, as there has always been, spanning every field of study and topic of conversation. There was one thing, though, upon which everyone seemed to agree: it was a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of dark skin, must be wanting for intelligence. Though opinions differed concerning the implications of racial difference in intelligence for both domestic and foreign policy, the fact of black inferiority was essentially unspoken.

Scientists, politicians, philosophers, authors, and lay people alike subscribed to the same idea—that individuals of races other than white were intellectually, and often morally, inferior. With the rise of craniometry and phrenology in the 1800s and ongoing arguments about monogeny and polygeny, scientists offered increasingly quantified "proof" to support the claim of racial difference; toward the end of the century, there was a massive European colonial expansion now known as the Scramble for Africa, prompted in part by calls to "civilize the savage." What, if anything, did the two movements have to do with each other? How did they shape each other, and how were they both shaped by the dominant social attitudes of the time?

Europe in the 1800s

Race

"Racial prejudice may be as old as recorded human history," stated biologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould in the introduction to The Mismeasure of Man, his 1981 deconstruction of biological determinism. The 1800s were a century steeped in racial tension, with abolition movements achieving slow but steady success throughout the century in various parts of the West. Still, the predominant social attitudes in Europe and America regarding the relative status of the races remained, for the most part, unchallenged, and were held by political and religious authorities. On this side of the Atlantic, Thomas Jefferson wrote that he suspected, but could not say with certainty, that all the Negroes in the American colonies were of the same origin, both of body and mind" (Gould 32). Abraham Lincoln, American symbol of black emancipation, scrupled three years before he signed the Proclamation, "Negro equality! Pardon!" (Gould 39).

Science

Cranioogy — the measurement of physical attributes of human skulls and the first quantified sciences of racial differences — had its height during the first half of the 19th century in America, then gained rigor and respect in Europe later in the century. While scientists had acknowledged and posited explanations for racial differences before, cranioogy provided what Gould calls "the first biological theory of race" supported by extensive quantitative data (31).

There was a debate raging among scientists engaged in the study of man during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. One camp, the monogenists, believed that the races of man, while displaying an extreme range of diversity, nonetheless comprised a single species. Polygenists, on the other hand, claimed that the human races were different species entirely. Polygeny was a popular view among slavery apologists. Both groups were comprised of white European and American scientists, and the debate was heavily influenced by religious belief; while Christian polygenists were forced to search the Bible for evidence of multiple centers of creation, or explained the discrepancy by way of the lines of descendance from Ham. The publication of Darwin's On the Origin of Species in the second half of the century provided a blow to polygenists who claimed that different races were separate species entirely, but didn't keep scientists from relegating blacks to a branch on the evolutionary tree closer to that of apes than of whites.

Colonialism

Late 18th- and early 19th-century abolition movements were successful on both sides of the Atlantic, but a burst of colonialism followed on their heels. Europe had some small claims in Africa before the 1880s, but that decade saw the beginning of a massive thirty-year land grab, now known as the Scramble for Africa, that added ten million square miles to the overseas empires of the European powers, notably Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium.

Conclusions

While politicians seem not to have been overly attentive, 19th century scientists promulgated varied proofs and examples of racial differences in intelligence, and many were unwilling to advocate, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, policy to reflect these findings. Science was not the reason colonial policy was formed, or even one of the reasons; those were primarily political and economic greed, and to a lesser extent, a misguided, paternalistic, and Eurocentric humanitarianism.

European proponents of colonialism didn't need scientific arguments to validate what was already an almost universally accepted attitude about black inferiority. Science did play a subtle role, though, by reinforcing and legitimizing the racial angst of the time; at the same time, social attitudes about racial difference shaped science as much, if not more, than science shaped them.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported in part by funds from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute through the Undergraduate Science Education program, and by the Science/Technology Undergraduate Research Program. I would also like to thank my mentor, Dr. Andrew Rabinovich, for my research, and Cari Hozyer, M. D., for her hard work and my favorite coffee.

References