

Book Review

R. McMahon (ed.), *National races. Transnational Power Struggles in the Sciences and Politics of Human Diversity, 1840-1945*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.
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While in recent years, the histories of the concepts of race and scientific racism have been the subject of much research and investigation, less attention has been paid to their influence on nationalist discourse and the making of national identities. Indeed, the growing ethnic entrenchment of nationalist ideologies from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards has been heavily influenced by evolution and race theories. The development of morphometric, biometric and statistical techniques made the observation of data objective and implemented the study of man from a biological point of view. In this context, physical anthropology became established as an autonomous discipline – the foundation of the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* by Paul Broca in 1859 was a key turning point in this process. As physical anthropology deals with the origin and evolution of human beings, it is also concerned with human varieties and their significance. Yet, scientific research into 'human varieties' had already emerged in the previous century when Johan Friedrich Blumenbach started investigating the physical variations of humans by observing the shape of the skull to identify five human varieties: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Ethiopian, and American. The need to quantify the observation of data led the Swedish anatomist Andres Retzius to theorize the cephalic



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index (1842) (the percentage of breadth to length in any skull), which became a key element in racial studies and taxonomies and theories on the evolution of populations. The impact of physical anthropology and its significance for nation-making processes was soon understood by the political and intellectual elites of modern nation-states, who used its findings to 'scientifically' define the specific characteristics of (national) communities, establish their ancientness, justify territorial claims, etc.

The volume *National Races. Transnational Power Struggles in the Sciences and Politics of Human Diversity, 1840-1945*, by Dr. Richard McMahon addresses these very issues, paying particular attention to the influence of 'scientific' race classification on the narrations of national identities. It corresponds to the changing trends that have occurred in recent years in two research domains, namely: the field of nationalism studies, the development of a new approach aimed at analysing the fundamental role that intellectuals and artists played in the formation of national identities; the field of the history of knowledge, the growing interest in the ideological entanglements of sciences. The volume collates papers from the two-day conference 'National Races: Anthropology, classification and politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', organised by Richard McMahon himself, and hosted by University College Cork, in July 2014. Expanding upon his previous research on the scientific attempts to define the biological races of Europe in the years 1830s-1945,¹ in this volume McMahon explores the interaction between politics and transnational race science from 1840 to the end of the Second World War; it was in this period that powerful racialised identity discourse was produced. The concept of 'national races', embraced by the author, aims to explicate precisely how they were created by race scholars using 'characteristics such as bone structure and pigmentation to identify race types' and linking 'certain types to nations' (1).

McMahon relies on three elements in the introduction of this book to illustrate that 'race classification of modern nations was a key project':

the transnational dynamics which characterised its development, as well as the interaction between science and politics, and between emerging academic disciplines; the power relations that permeated scientific practices; and a peripheral perspective, i.e. transcending the north-western European conventional core (comprising France, Germany, and England) that produced the most internationally influential racial identity narratives. These three aspects can be found in all chapters of the volume, which brings together a wide range of national cases.

In line with his previous book, McMahon attempts to overcome the 'territorial trap' of 'methodological nationalism', in order to emphasise the transnational dynamics that characterised the spread of race classifications in the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century, through the exchange of skills and practices, ideas and discourses, as well as the communication that took place between various social actors, including specific networks and communities – in this case, race classification community. In particular, Chapter 1, 'Transnational network, transnational narratives', authored by McMahon himself, after outlining the history of race classification, identifies two key elements of this transnational dynamics in the organisation of a transnational community of race classifiers, and the 'narratives about racialized national identity' (34). To conduct his convincing and well-argued analysis, the author uses qualitative and quantitative methods, based on a large amount of data he had gathered during his research.

The chapters of the volume, arranged in chronological order, cover a relatively large geographical area, ranging from Italy to Korea, although they focus mainly on the Central and Eastern European area. Without discussing the details of the eleven essays that make up this volume (introduction and conclusion included), I would like to focus on a few issues that, to varying degrees, run through them transversally, and which seem to me to be particularly relevant from the point of view of nationalism studies. Far from covering all the (many and complex) issues

raised by the book, they are more concerned with how race science adapted to national needs, but also how the divergences about the definition and delimitation of races eventually had a major impact on the narrative of national identities.

One of these issues concerns how the category of race was articulated to meet the specific (cultural, political, historical) needs of national identification. There were indeed significant methodological or conceptual disagreements that divided anthropologists when studying the 'racial composition' of modern populations, which had major repercussions on the visions (and definitions) of nations themselves. If the existence of distinct races was not questioned, in fact, anthropologists nonetheless disagreed on several issues, such as the definition of race, the number of human races and their identification. This, of course, had its ramifications when it came to selecting the materials (cultural, ethnological, historical, etc.) best suited to define and describe nations, especially in a geographical area where populations were ethnically highly mixed, as was the case in Central and Eastern European countries. Amos Morris-Reich's chapter on the scholarly classification of Jews in terms of *Volk* and *Rasse* at the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, illustrates the tensions between these two terms by focusing on the work of three Central and Eastern European Jewish authors (Samuel Weissenberg, Arthur Ruppin, Erich Brauer). Despite their very different biographical, political, and scientific background, Morris-Reich argues that the three of them shared similar convictions about the fact that Jews were a nation despite being racially varied, and that the category of *Volk* was superior to that of *Rasse*. The essay by Maciej Górny on 'Racial anthropology on the Eastern Front, 1912 to the mid- 1920s', on the other hand, illustrates the tension that existed between the category of race and that of nation. The author analyses how wartime anthropology, particularly in Austria-Hungary and Germany, abandoned Rudolf Martin's conception whereby there was

no identification between a race and a nation, to move towards the study of the racial typology of humanity. This, Górný explains, proved in fact to be 'a powerful tool in symbolic distancing from the enemy, which was foreign not only in a spiritual or a metaphorical sense, but also in its biology' (272). So, even though 'liberal' physical anthropology persisted in international academia and in war-related research, a variety of the discipline's growth was more politicised and racialised, and also often entailed physical violence, since it used prisoners of war (POWS) as subjects of anthropological research. He therefore focuses on the work of certain Austrian, Ukrainian, Pole and Finnish anthropologists, who used measurements of POWS to demonstrate that war was seen as a struggle between races. In her chapter on Cracow anthropology from 1870 to 1920, on the contrary, Maria Rhode shows that the term 'race' was hardly used in the local context (except for Jews), while it was considered to be more appropriate for classifying non-Europeans. Rhode's chapter also highlights how three spaces (national, transnational, and imperial – the Habsburg and the Russian) combined to produce particular concepts of race, but also that 'elasticity or rigidity of scientific concepts depended not only on the place where they were used, but also on the very object of inquiry and the space of communication' (129). This can explain why even on those occasions when the term 'race' was used to describe local populations, far from being a biologically restrictive and unifying concept, rather it aimed to identify any similarities and points of contact between different somatic groups.

This idea of racial mixing was also present in the work of Clon Stephanos, who was the first Greek scholar to systematically research the racial origins of his country. In sketching the history of the founding of anthropology in Greece, Ageliki Lefkadiou explains that, 'in keeping with contemporary anthropological views, which presented European nations as mixtures of diverse racial elements and ethnic groups,

Stephanos argued for a modern Greek nation that incorporated Frankish and Albanian elements next to the Greek populations' (150). Even though he was never fully committed to an idea of complete mixing, and rather defended the idea of continuity against alternative interpretations, Stephanos did see 'impurity of blood' as the 'driving force of biological and cultural improvement' (152). Stephanos' case is also interesting because it shows how racial science had to come to terms with national needs: highly committed to the ideal (and imperatives) of scientific objectivity ('the cult of facts'), this eventually represented what distanced him from the national mission, since he refused to enter the realm of day-to-day politics.

Racial heterogeneity was equally a fundamental question for racial scientists and anthropologists in interwar Yugoslavia. As illustrated by Rory Yeomans in his chapter on the evolution of Yugoslav racial theory in the 1920s and 1930s, it was thought to account for the superiority of Yugoslavs, even when, after the establishment of a unitarist state, the need to find a synthetic racial identity became more pressing. The Dinaric prototype – embodying Yugoslav racial uniqueness – appeared to represent such a racial synthesis, since it was able 'to provide a racially unifying explanation' for the many traditions, cultural habits, and psychology of the different national and religious communities that composed the state.

It was rather an 'annexationist logic', Arnaud Nanta argues, that is, claiming 'cultural and racial proximity between conqueror and conquered', that was used in Ireland and Slavic Eastern Europe, as well as colonial Korea (241). Nanta presents the history of the Anatomy Section of the Imperial University in Keijo, between 1924 and 1945, during the time of Japanese rule. The university belonged to the network of Japanese imperial universities, and the Anatomy Section had the task of 'validating discourse about the "common ancestral origins"' with the aim of justifying the annexation of the Korean peninsula, and therefore

uniting colonies and ‘home nation’. But this discourse began to clash in Japan in the 1930s with eugenicist doctrine, so ‘whereas colonial researchers claimed “racial” proximity to justify the annexation, the eugenicists sought to prevent any intermixing between the metropole and its colonies’ (242).

By shedding new light on under-researched aspects of the nineteenth-century nation-building process, such as the interaction between nationalism and race science, this volume also contributes to the understanding of the vexed ambivalence between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalism. The cases reported in the volume, in fact, not only call this clear-cut dichotomy into question, but also explain why this distinction is problematic, precisely by analysing the close nexus between politics and science. Far from being an exclusive resource of what has been defined by Hans Kohn as ‘Eastern’ (ethnic and cultural) nationalism – focused on language, culture, historical territory and common descent or ethnicity – as opposed to ‘Western’ (civic and voluntaristic) nationalism – based on the idea of nation as a voluntary adherence to a political community – the concept of race has indeed served both kinds of nationalism as a powerful identifying factor. Moreover, in countries with a high rate of ‘ethnic mixing’, the defense of a ‘pure race’ was not a viable path, and physical anthropology was often assigned the task (together with other nonbiological sciences, such as history, linguistics, psychology, etc.) of producing a vision of a civic and multi-ethnic society. Similarly, nations that (now) are considered as being representative of a civic, voluntaristic type of nationalism were not exempt from using racial or biological categories in their nationalist narratives.

Maria Sophia Quine’s chapter on Giustiniano Nicolucci, for example, shows, among others, how the biological concept of race influenced the debate on the Italian nation in the 1840s-60s. Nicolucci, an anthropologist with liberal and democratic ideas, defended the monogenist thesis, combining it with a secular and scientific perspective,

and opposed the theories of polygenism and white supremacy championed by the American school of anthropology, whose main exponent was Samuel George Morton. In Nicolucci's opinion, human beings derived all from one stock, and 'racial differences were contingent upon history, not biology'; this meant also that culture and civilisation were within the reach of the supposedly inferior races. As Quine explains, his taxonomic system (a mix of craniology and morphology) became the basis of physical anthropology in Italy. Moreover, 'he was the first scientist in Italy to conceptualize nation as a biological race, to define the Italian race scientifically, to juxtapose this construct of inherent Italian-ness with definition of "other" national races, and to propound an entirely new kind of racial nationalism' (81).

On the contrary, Marina Mogilner states that 'no nationalism or anti-nationalism' played a role in the development of Russian race science in the nineteenth century, that centers of modern knowledge production were not under the thumb of the imperial state, and that the language of race science was 'suitable for representing hybridity as a fundamental human condition in the empire and the basis of a future better humanity' (209). In the Russian imperial context, in fact, peoples were identified according to their religion, language, region, etc., rather than in terms of their nationality or race. By presenting the case of the Moscow school of anthropology (the leading and largest subgroup of Russian anthropology) and its classificatory discourse, Mogilner illustrates how hybridity and racial miscegenation came to be seen as 'dominant pattern of "natural history" of humankind and of Russian imperial humanity in particular' (212).

It seems that the idea of 'racial mixing' has somewhat lost its appeal nowadays; in fact, as Catherine Nash explains, notwithstanding the idea of racial purity 'is now rarely part of the lexicon of liberal nationhood [...], ideas of variation and distinctiveness are the entangled terms that dominate national genomic projects' (340). We can find many of the

forementioned arguments in Nash's stimulating essay that closes the volume, a reflection on the continuities between the racial anthropology of the past and contemporary projects to map and describe human genetic variation. Interestingly, using the example of two recent research projects – one analysing the genetic code of an entire nation, Iceland, the other attempting to map patterns of genetic variation in the UK – Nash notes how both projects share with the past projects of defining 'national races' a clear focus on the 'national', even if they are now careful not to introduce racial categories. Yet, Nash continues, 'the collective category of the national is as much entangled with ideas of race and ethnicity and the politics of national identity, inclusion, and belonging in the early twenty-first century as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, albeit in distinctive ways' (343).

No doubt, the national framework (whether understood as a source of inspiration, context of action or a purpose to achieve) continues to inform scientific research, be it late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century physical anthropology or contemporary genomics. In this respect, while emphasising how racial science and race classification developed in, and through, a complex interplay of transnational exchanges, having unfolded the specifically national dynamics that stimulated them is another of the achievements of this volume.

I would add one final remark before concluding, which relates to the fact that nearly all the case-studies taken into consideration are geographically and culturally localized in Central and Eastern Europe. This choice, as already noted, is motivated by the editor's explicit intent to observe what happened on the periphery of the core of the industrialised countries of northwestern Europe. However, the presence of only one non-European case study, Korean, while adding richness to the overall geographical and cultural perspective, tends to make this volume somewhat unbalanced from a geographical point of view. This is why, with the aim of making the picture more complex and more

complete, perhaps the introduction of other case studies taken from non-European areas, would have been desirable.

This does not change the fact that the volume is insightful, coherent, and keeps its promise. As a historian concerned with how human and social sciences participated in the formation of national identities, I have no doubt that, as its editor hopes, *National Races* will garner interest among historians and scholars of nationalism, and anyone else interested in understanding how race theories became increasingly entangled with the many forms that nationalism took from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

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Endnotes

¹ R. McMahon, *The Races of Europe. Construction of National Identities in the Social Sciences, 1839-1939* (London: 2016).