

UNESCO Man

Changing the concept of race, 1945-65

Abstract

From 1945 and the following 20 years UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – was at the heart of a dispute in international scientific circles over the correct definition of the concept of race. This was essentially a dispute about whether the natural sciences or the social sciences should take precedence in determining the origins of human difference, of social division and of the attribution of value. The article provides an overview of the work on race carried out by UNESCO, examines the measures it took to combat racism, pays special attention to their political and social impact in various member states, and demonstrates how UNESCO played a major part in imposing a new view of man: UNESCO Man.

“UNESCO came out with a study,” Reverend Jesse Jackson recalls, “that said that blacks – at that time Negroes – were not inferior, and there was no fundamental genetic difference between blacks and whites. We were determined in our differences by social conditions.”

The renowned American civil rights activist was a 20-year-old university student from North Carolina when he became aware of the work done by UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – to combat racism, and it made a deep impression on him and others in the civil rights movement: “We went around the South giving speeches, holding up the UNESCO study, saying that blacks were not inferior. A world body had studied and concluded that we were not inferior. It was a big deal. UNESCO, a world body – not some Southern segregated school, not some Southern governor, not even the President – UNESCO said we were not inferior.”¹

What was clearly an intellectual landmark in the eyes of Reverend Jackson seems to have been ignored by historians. UNESCO’s initiatives on race of the 1950’s and 1960’s have not provoked much literature until very recently.² Rather the showdown with people’s thinking in terms of superior and inferior races has been seen by historians as immediate Post-war response to the Holocaust that was isolated from other historical events.

But changes in attitudes and general conceptions rarely happen overnight. It is simply impossible to eliminate any particular way of thinking and acting among a large number of people unless a comprehensive foundation has been laid in the form of information countering the existing belief system and offering new and meaningful, common ground for thinking, describing and acting. UNESCO’s initial

mission was to carry out such a piece of mental engineering in the shadow of the Holocaust, and as an international organization it could speak with some weight.

This article will provide an overview of the work on race carried out by UNESCO, examining the measures it took to combat racism and paying special attention to their political and social impact in various member states. Essentially this work paved the way for a new view of man in the post-war period by introducing an alternative to the widespread notion that the world was inhabited by superior Nietzschean Supermen on the one hand and subordinate masses on the other. This alternative I call UNESCO Man.

The UNESCO spirit

The extent of the Nazi violence during World War II - and against Jews during the Holocaust - led to a widespread recognition among national leaders of the need for political leadership on a global level, and the United Nations came into existence in October 1945. Its task was to ensure collective security and create an international declaration of human rights based on the ethical principle that all human beings – regardless of their differences – were equal and shared the same fundamental rights.³

The organization was to ensure peace through military, economic and social measures. But there was also the recognition that peace could only be maintained if it was based on a genuine solidarity between people. To achieve this end, in November 1945 44 countries agreed to the establishment of UNESCO. The constitution's preamble formulated the task of the new specialized agency: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."⁴

UNESCO soon established its domicile in what had been the German military headquarters in France during the war, a former hotel in Avenue Kléber near the Arc de Triomphe – a beautiful old building full of elegance and gilded ceilings and chandeliers. It was a symbolic take-over, and the first Director General, the English biologist Julian S. Huxley, housed himself in the German commandant's office at the head of a budget of eight million US dollars and around 800 employees.⁵

Right from the beginning UNESCO was characterized by the viewpoint that totalitarian ideologies indoctrinated and manipulated people by instilling in them prejudices made to look like scientific facts, whereas UNESCO was an organization that would help to overcome these errors by enlightening humanity with the “objective truth”. Therefore UNESCO's overall mission was to provide opportunities for a basic education for all and to ensure the free exchange of ideas and knowledge throughout the world.⁶

However, it soon turned out that it was far from all kinds of knowledge that were considered beneficial to the maintenance of peace. This was expressed by Huxley in his philosophical manifesto for the organization, in which he identified what he called “scientific world humanism” as the organization's overarching principle. According to Huxley, some disciplines were more likely to dismantle the idea of inequality and promote equality than others and should therefore be given higher priority. At the forefront were the social sciences, whose practitioners had been active in criticizing racism before and during World War II. Huxley knew they mastered the arguments that could be used in the organization's combat against human inequality since as a biologist he had himself already done his own studies on

race in the 1930's and believed that, by promoting such views, they would trickle down through the educational system almost by themselves.⁷

In the years that followed, UNESCO made a significant effort of controlling all branches of science. Within the social sciences the organization founded a number of world-wide associations in the fields of economics, law, political science and sociology to encourage these disciplines to work in accordance with the ethical standards of the UN system. The associations were supported economically and their members often invited to carry out projects or serve as advisors for the UN system. UNESCO also supported their internationalization by publishing a number of international bibliographies, launching new international journals, establishing common guidelines for the use of concepts, theories and methods, and by contributing financially to the establishment of new social science university studies.⁸

Even when Huxley was no longer heading UNESCO, his thoughts continued to map a direction for the organization. That was still the case when UNESCO at long last adopted its first official program in 1950. "No attempts to better the lot of man can meet with success unless they take account of his environment. UNESCO must therefore place social sciences in the foreground of its field of study", it proclaimed.⁹

A global dilemma

An important issue in the post-war era was colonialism, and the objective of promoting self-determination was included among the purposes of the UN in the Charter's preamble. But delegates from the Philippines, Brazil, Egypt, India, Panama, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Venezuela – as well as

lobbyists from the US National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – also pressed for a position on racial discrimination. That was much to the discomfort of the US government and of some colonial powers. The efforts were, however, supported by China, France and the Soviet Union, and had brought to the charter a fundamental change, namely the notion of everybody being equal “without distinction to race, sex, language, and religion.”¹⁰ Hence UNESCO’s preamble also specifically mentioned “the doctrine of the inequality of men and races” as one of the problems the organization had to combat.¹¹

Awareness of the Holocaust made it relatively easy for member states to agree on dealing with fundamental educational issues in Germany by establishing special UNESCO institutes there that would focus on social science research and youth education. The sense that racism posed a potential danger and that it might come to dominate as a doctrine in some countries also prepared the ground for a project relating to racism and international relations. The project went by the name of “Tensions Affecting International Understanding” and was designed to examine social tensions and the spread of stereotypes and generally to explore the causes of war and opportunities for creating peace. The project was led by the Canadian-American social anthropologist and psychologist Otto Klineberg from Columbia University in New York, well-known for a study which showed that African-American children’s IQ rose when they were placed in integrated schools, thus showing that lack of skills was a social and not an inherited biological problem.¹²

In March 1948 the UN Social and Economic Council, ECOSOC, which was working on the design of the human rights declaration, appointed the former Swedish Trade Minister Gunnar Myrdal – author of *An American Dilemma* – as Executive

Secretary of ECE, which was responsible for the daily management of ECOSOC's work in Europe. In his groundbreaking book Myrdal had called for an "educational offensive" to reduce the gap between public opinion and social science in the whole area of race relations. It might be a coincidence, but one month after his appointment, ECOSOC adopted a resolution on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in Europe, which recommended that UNESCO launched "a program of disseminating scientific facts designed to remove what is commonly known as racial prejudice."¹³

A few months later, on 10 December 1948, the UN human rights declaration was adopted, while the Brazilian ethnographer Arthur Ramos – an outspoken critic of racial inequality in South America – was approved as head of UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences, with special responsibility for its new race project.¹⁴

The basis of the new project was a memorandum on preliminary research carried out by UN researchers on the basis of works by scientists like Julian Huxley, Otto Klineberg and Gunnar Myrdal – all of whom had described racial hierarchies as social constructs. "Contemporary science does not admit the concept of race as meaning a division of mankind into different parts, each of them characterized by a complex of special traits, both physical and mental. Anthropology has failed clearly to establish such a concept", the memo concluded.¹⁵

In accordance to this memo Ramos formulated the details, and at UNESCO's fourth General Conference in September 1949 the member states agreed upon three goals: a) to study and collect scientific materials concerning questions of race, b) to give wide diffusion to the scientific information collected and c) to prepare an educational campaign based on this information.¹⁶

Ramos immediately began designing the paper that would form the basis for a statement endorsed by scientific authorities from around the world. The initial steps were taken in close co-operation with the United Nation's Human Rights Division and in the spirit of its preceding memorandum by claiming that racial hierarchies were a social construct and that the consequences of racial inequality were profound not only in human but also in economic terms.¹⁷

To adjust and approve a globally agreed statement of this kind, Ramos invited a team of ten scientists all of whom were recruited from the marginal group of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and ethnographers who perceived the race concept primarily as a social construct. Most of these had at some point either been affiliated with the scientifically marginalized groups of cultural anthropologists, that were mostly students of Franz Boas at Columbia University in New York, or had carried out studies in South America, where certain countries were often cited as examples of how people of all kinds could live peacefully together. Among them were Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French ethnographer from Musée de l'Homme in Paris, Edward Franklin Frazier, the American sociologist from Howard University in Washington, and Ashley Montagu, professor of anthropology from Rutgers University. Montagu was already widely known in the US at the time as an outspoken critic of racial inequality. A physical anthropologist by training, he was now invited to represent biological views on the concept of race alongside the Spanish-Mexican professor of anthropology, Juan Comas – also a prominent critic of racial hierarchies. Altogether these men were expected by UNESCO to come up with “a global scientific consensus on race.”¹⁸

On 30 October 1949, less than two months before the meeting, Ramos died just 46 years old. As an emergency measure, the American Robert C. Angell, professor of sociology from the University of Michigan, took over as acting director of UNESCO's Social Science Department. Angell hastily arranged the meeting, though he was not an expert on race and unable to finalize Ramos' outline for the statement. Montagu agreed to do the job, and with his sudden intervention in the writing process the immediate control of the content and the ability to set the agenda slid out of the hands of UNESCO.¹⁹

Race – a social myth

In December 1949 the panel met at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris with Franklin Frazier as moderator and Montagu as “rapporteur”. In wake of the first meeting Montagu wrote most of his proposal for a final statement on race during one night at a nearby hotel, and over the following days the participants discussed the race concept in the light of Montagu's draft.²⁰

Its central argument was in line with Ramos' paper in asserting that mankind belonged to a single species, but in some areas Montagu went further than it had been Ramos' intention. The draft was his attempt to create a single, universal rejection of the concept of race, which he found scientifically indefensible, and he was convinced that, by discrediting the concept, UNESCO would effectively prevent any racial theories for being used for political purposes in the future.

UNESCO had a number of external people to read the preliminary results, among them Julian Huxley, Gunnar Myrdal, Otto Klineberg and Joseph Needham, all well-known critics of racial inequality and involved in various fields within the UN and

UNESCO.²¹ Its conclusion, however, that race was entirely a social myth made shocking reading for some of them. Huxley in particular was dissatisfied with certain passages that he found too dogmatic or provocative. He suggested that Montagu revised the statement so that the concept of race was not reduced solely to a myth but dealt with the fact that people did at least look different in different parts of the world. If the statement only addressed racial differences that had social or cultural origins and that might be dismissed as “pseudo-racial”, or if it was too negative in its design, it would not last for long and at worst would damage the reputation of UNESCO.²²

Montagu promised to make the statement “bomb proof”. Meanwhile UNESCO created a new unit entitled the Division for the Study of Race Problems under its social science department. Montagu immediately put himself forward for the new post, and several other names were considered. The post was, however, given to the Swiss-American ethnographer Alfred Métraux in April 1950. Métraux already knew the organization very well from within – and was even described by Julian Huxley as the “UNESCO Man” – and he knew several of the experts on racial issues through his profession.²³

Métraux was briefed on the status of the statement. But confidence that Montagu would change the text on his own initiative soon proved misplaced. As in other parts of his life, Montagu went his own way. In particular he did not believe in inherited mental characteristics, and this could be seen in the draft presented at the General Conference in Florence in May-June 1950.²⁴

The content immediately led to internal criticism. Huxley wrote an angry letter to Montagu and announced that if his corrections were not accepted, he would not sign the statement. This meant that Montagu had to re-write the draft once again.²⁵

In July the final version was complete. It began by stating that all people belonged to the same biological species. There were indeed several different groups with distinct physical characteristics, but the differences between them were small and insignificant in the context of the overall similarities. From a biological point of view one could therefore consider a “race” – Montagu added the quotation marks – as a population characterized by certain overlapping features that were associated with the frequency and distribution of hereditary facilities and were a result of geographical or cultural isolation. These differences and their role were often over-estimated and seen as more fundamental than was the case, so that national, cultural, religious, geographic and linguistic groups had been called “races” on false premises. As a result the idea of racial superiority was unscientific, and the statement recommended that the race concept was replaced by the culturally-rooted concept of “ethnic group”. This concept made more sense scientifically, because people gravitated into marriage and procreation on the basis of cultural similarities and subjective feelings of belonging to the same culture, which were crucial for the spread of individual genes. This meant that culture steered human biology and not vice versa.²⁶

Due to Huxley, however, the statement ended with a passage stressing that equality between ethnic groups should not be understood to mean that all individuals were necessarily equally well-equipped in intelligence and character. This grandson of Charles Darwin’s loyal defender, T.H. Huxley, preferred to believe that history

was a continuation of the general process of evolution that would eventually culminate in a unified world, and on that basis he recommended that people stick together.²⁷

This *Statement on Race* was published on 18 July 1950 and accompanied by a press release with a headline proclaiming: “No biological justification for race discrimination, say world scientists: Most authoritative statement on the subject.” A second press release, which explained the statement’s historical background, declared that “race is less a biological fact than a social myth”, while the *UNESCO Courier* promoted the news as “the scientific basis for human unity.”²⁸

UNESCO in retreat

The first statement on race was undeniably an intellectual landmark, and UNESCO estimated that the arguments legitimizing racial prejudice and racial discrimination would collapse and disappear by themselves as the news spread.²⁹

The statement did, in fact, receive plenty of publicity. An inventory of the press clippings that UNESCO managed to collect in the year 1950 shows that it was mentioned in 133 news articles, 62 in-depth articles and leaders, and in eight major news reports from all over the world. The text was also reproduced in full in three magazines, and it was estimated that there were an additional 50-75 articles that UNESCO staff had not yet tracked. In addition, there was some radio publicity and the distribution of the thousands of copies of the statement itself. “Whenever it is, whatever form it takes, racism is an evil force, and to the extent that UNESCO can kill it by the truth, it will do good,” the *New York Times* proclaimed.³⁰

Nevertheless, it soon appeared that the environmentalist statement – despite Julian Huxley’s moderations – went beyond what mainstream scientists accepted as factual evidence about race, and it could most certainly not be said to represent a universal definition of race at the time. By failing to involve a selection of physical anthropologists – and especially any with a wide reputation – in the preparation of the statement, its authors found that it simply lacked the support of those who considered themselves as the most obvious experts.

Criticism appeared in the English newspaper *The Times* in July and again in the magazine *UNESCO Courier* in July-August 1950. It was formulated by the English anthropologist William H. Fagg, editor of the prestigious journal *Man* and president of the British Royal Anthropological Institute. Fagg expressed his disagreement with the conclusions of the statement, which he characterized as “the Ashley Montagu Statement of Race published by UNESCO”, and he was considering setting up his own panel of experts that would formulate a new statement.³¹

Fagg’s objections did not make much of an impression on the organization until October 1950, when a new volume of *Man* appeared. It turned out to be a collection of critical observations on the UNESCO statement written mainly by British and American anthropologists. The criticism was directed against its ideological attempt at eliminating the concept of race at all costs in order to promote universal brotherhood. The articles defended the concept as a meaningful biological category, as opposed to the concept of ethnicity, which, according to the critics, had nothing to do with hereditary issues. The division of mankind in white, black and yellow categories seemed to have a particularly large fan club.

It is worth noting that the criticism was not directed against the overall spirit of

humanity in the statement. That would not have been particularly popular in the shadow of the Holocaust and did not make much sense in light of the UN Declaration of Human Rights either. It is also worth noting that the concept of “racialism” turned up several times in the articles, supporting the thesis that racial theories promoted inequality and discrimination. In this regard, UNESCO’s work had already had an impact.³²

The debate caused renewed publicity, and UNESCO later concluded that the “dogme raciste” was one of the most talked-about topics in the news media over the following months. Since its release the statement had been the subject of some 500 news stories, reports and columns in newspapers. But it was far from all positive press, and the American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, a staunch supporter of UNESCO’s race program, wrote an alarming letter to Alfred Métraux urging the organization to come up with immediate countermeasures, otherwise its work was in danger of being discredited and ridiculed. She also indicated that Montagu was neither respected nor liked by his colleagues and that he exploited the crisis to its own advantage by writing a book about the work on the statement in which he claimed the honour of having composed it and justified his personal view of race. Regardless Mead’s attempt to persuade Montagu not to jeopardize the case, Montagu published his work in spring 1951 under the title *Statement on Race: By Ashley Montagu*.³³

Métraux had from the beginning of his tenure, been aware of the weaknesses of the UNESCO statement and noticed Montagu’s “exhibitionistic demeanors”, but he had entered the project too late to do anything about it. Instead he and UNESCO’s

Director-General, Jaime Torres Bodet, recognized the need to have the statement revised by assembling a new panel of experts.³⁴

Race – without political implications

Métraux began to piece together a new group of experts to address the problematic aspects of the first statement. Julian Huxley and perhaps the most recognized geneticist of the time, Theodosius Dobzhansky from Columbia University and author of *Genetics and The Origin of Species*, both tried to influence him by suggesting names of physical anthropologists and geneticists whose viewpoints were not too extreme. Fagg, too, tried to influence Métraux and suggested some of the anthropologists who had participated in the debate in wake of the first statement. Alongside these various proposals Métraux wrote a “maybe” or “no”, indicating by his choices that he preferred the researchers recommended by Huxley and Dobzhansky.³⁵

Meanwhile there was a lively discussion going on particularly in South Africa and Holland about the race concept, and UNESCO’s motives were being questioned. Métraux realized, therefore, that UNESCO should not replace the old statement with a new, a move which would give the impression that the organization had a political agenda that was manipulating the scientific facts and which would undermine its legitimacy. Instead Métraux made a controversial choice. He asked Ashley Montagu to participate in the design of the new statement, even though Montagu had proved difficult to work with. This would give the impression that UNESCO would only be strengthening the existing declaration by providing a “supplement” designed by anthropologists and geneticists. Montagu agreed because he wanted to put his stamp

on the new statement, but this time Métraux left it to the American geneticist, Professor L.C. Dunn from Columbia University, to formulate the outcome.³⁶

The other experts on the panel were, like Dunn, all renowned scientists, such as J.B.S. Haldane from University College London and Harry L. Shapiro of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In order to make sure that the second statement would not differ too much from the first, UNESCO clearly stated this time that the aim of the statement was to be the foundation of a “campaign against racialism” and “the abatement of racialistic ideas by the propagation of truth in the form of the findings of science.”³⁷

The seven anthropologists and five geneticists met in Paris in June 1951, and, as expected, there was substantial disagreement between them. Montagu defended the continued rejection of race as a scientifically meaningful concept, because humanity existed only as a species with a great number of genetic variants and could not be broken down into a few fixed or well-defined groups. Dobzhansky on the other hand argued that it would make sense to categorize humanity according to the frequency of different genes but preferred to replace the politically loaded race concept with the concept of “populations”. Yet others were advocates of using the concept of race as long as racism was denounced.³⁸

Extension discussion of the draft ensued, and by December 1951 Dunn had incorporated the many comments. The main conclusion of the first statement was retained since the experts had agreed that all people had the same origin and were fundamentally equal. But on other issues the new statement seemed rather vague, since the intention was to make it both politically and scientifically watertight this time. For example, it did not make much use of the race concept. On the other hand it

did not reject the concept and acknowledged that it did make sense to divide humanity into three main races, black, yellow and white, as long as the division only was claimed to hold true for physical and not for mental differences.³⁹

It could be said that the second statement was a clear retreat from the first since it came up with a way to retain race as a meaningful category, which then received official approval from UNESCO. But at the same time the concept of race was defined in a non-racist way by rejecting the notion that mental traits could be used in classifying races, which was a reinforcement of the first statement and directly opposed to Huxley's approach. In that way the concept of race lost its potential to legitimize racial discrimination and could form the basis of UNESCO's efforts to combat "the evil of racism."⁴⁰

The main conclusions were immediately leaked to the press, so that UNESCO could take into account any criticisms before releasing the statement officially. At the same time it was circulated for comment among some 100 geneticists and physical anthropologists to ensure that they could familiarize themselves with the content. This turned out to be a highly effective strategy. UNESCO received several letters, most of which accepted the statement without comment, though there were others that were bitterly ironic or even aggressive. One of these was Montagu, who was annoyed at the fact that he had been on the panel only to justify the first statement without his presence having been crucial for the second and who did not think that the two statements were given equal rights – even though his book on the first statement had been chosen by American literary critics as one of the most remarkable books published in the US the previous year.⁴¹

The claim that the statement was an expression of doctrinaire thinking, however, came mainly from German anthropologists, and Professor Walter Scheidt from Hamburg saw it as cold premeditation on UNESCO's part to get German anthropologists to comment on the statement when any criticism would be interpreted as relapse into Nazi ideas. Scheidt was right in the sense that the German objections caught Métraux' eye, and he soon launched the idea of reproducing all the objections in a special supplementary chapter in the printed version of the statement. This was an amendment that would not cast favourable light on, for example, the comments made by Professor Hans Weinert in Kiel, who wanted to prohibit marriage between races and posed the rhetorical question whether any experts in the panel would be prepared to let their daughter marry "an Australian Bushman." By exposing the German anthropologists, the world could see what kind of dangers it was still facing.⁴²

Some of the comments were incorporated, and in April 1952 the final *Statement on the Nature of Race Differences* was published. The statement came out in several languages, and Métraux made sure that it was reproduced in full in the British journal *Man* as well as in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* and in the French *L'Anthropologie*.⁴³

Once again the publication was followed by criticism but on a much smaller scale and mostly by extremist groupings who did not feel that their views had been heard.

Fine aims – but wide of the mark

UNESCO was, however, obliged to go further than simply reviewing the scientific fact of race. The content needed popularization to educate the public.

The head of UNESCO's Department of Mass Communications suggested that the organization engaged a number of recognized researchers to write about race, and the following years UNESCO launched three series – *The Race Question and Modern Science*, *The Race Question and Modern Thought*, and *Race and Society* – to combat racial inequality. Each of the series consisted of a number of small pamphlets in French and English and for some of them also in other languages.⁴⁴

Among the titles were *Racial Myths* by Juan Comas, which tried to expose the prejudices behind many racial theories, Otto Klineberg's *Race and Psychology*, which analyzed the results of psychological tests performed on different racial groups and explained how the environment played a part in relation to intelligence and temperament, *Race and Culture* by the French ethnographer Michel Leiris, which tried to clarify the difference between nature and culture in connection with racial theories (a book that received an extremely good review by his countryman, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre), L.C. Dunn's *Race and Biology*, which presented the latest theories about the relationship between racial classification and genetics, not to mention Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Race and History* from 1952, which sought to avoid an interpretation of cultural differences as an expression of inequality, seeing it rather as an expression of diversity developed under the influence of historical events.⁴⁵

Métraux claimed in 1952 that UNESCO's pamphlets on race were the organization's best-selling publications, and today Lévi-Strauss' work is still considered to be the best selling book of the organization's entire history. Nevertheless the pamphlets did not seem to be very effective for educational purposes in the short run. They had problems reaching the "man in the street" in

most of the member countries. This was first and foremost because they were written in foreign languages but also, as a study from New York University showed, because they were too difficult to understand. The reader requires at least a high school degree to grasp the contents. In addition, their layout was not very compelling.⁴⁶

Maybe it was naively optimistic to think that UNESCO could resolve conflicts and tragedies only by disseminating the knowledge of researchers. In the long run, however, the publications proved their ability to infiltrate national education systems because they were written by recognized scientists, were discussed and used in leading scientific journals, and represented a steady bombardment of publications that at least physical anthropologists had to deal with. In the early 1950s the pamphlets represented a substantial proportion of all the new titles published in the US in the field of anthropology, and in the late 1950s the pamphlets had been translated into 13 languages and printed in more than 300,000 copies.

Slowly the discipline of anthropology changed its content. The number of anthropologists that based the career on physical measurements or family studies was reduced, and those that were left began to characterize themselves only as physical anthropologists. According to the historian Robert N. Proctor, as a result of UNESCO's authority as a worldwide organization the campaign against racism played the major role in this and worked so effectively that the race concept was left without a politically useful content. Now even paleoanthropologists could only refer to the human diversity of the prehistoric man with a certain amount of anxiety.⁴⁷

Conversely ethnographers and cultural anthropologists grew in numbers and espoused the concept of anthropology as a science providing clear evidence that culture rather than race was becoming the unifying concept in mainstream

anthropology, and when the prestigious Collège de France later created a “chair d’anthropologie social” for Claude Lévi-Strauss, he gave a lecture on anthropology in general, and defined it as a scientific discipline that was built upon the work of the founder of American cultural anthropology, Franz Boas, and the father-figure of sociology, Émile Durkheim, and in interviews he claimed that it was because the showdown with the old-fashioned and prejudiced physical anthropology was largely over.⁴⁸

A bumpy ride

All UNESCO’s member states had to have a national commission in order to call conferences for the discussion of matters relating to the activities of the organization, and to distribute material coming from UNESCO.

In most European countries the commissions worked efficiently, the organization was popular in the aftermath of the war, and only few of them had problems convincing politicians and educational boards to use the publications issued by UNESCO. In November 1951 the Assembly of the French Union adopted a proposal to publicize the statements on race and to include them in school syllabuses, and many other European member states revised school textbooks in accordance with the guidelines of UNESCO – not least in West Germany.⁴⁹

A similar interest in UNESCO’s work was to be found in other parts of the world, and some countries even came to play an active role in the race project. That happened when, in order to give instructions on how to create harmonious relations, Alfred Métraux alongside his other duties initiated several studies on race, including studies of places where people of different origin apparently lived peacefully

together. The most ambitious of these studies was carried out by a number of Brazilian anthropologists, among them the Brazil's future president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and was based on the idea that this country was a "racial paradise" where the different communities cohabited in harmony. However a Brazilian formula of "racial democracy" where the practice of social cohesion ignored colour proved, like similar studies of other countries, to be an illusion.⁵⁰

In Rhodesia UNESCO helped to found a university institute on "race relations" that would help spread the organization's pamphlets in the segregated country, and an employee in India and Indonesia, where UNESCO had permanent offices, later recalled that there had been "great interest among scientists as well as laymen in those parts of the race problem [the racial inequality] and UNESCO's pamphlets" in these countries in the early 1950's.⁵¹

A national commission was also set up in the US, since the country had evident national interests in helping to shape an organization with the power to influence international cultural attitudes in the post-war world. The commission consisted of 100 members from all states and professions and a nineteen-member executive board that would take care of the daily business. The board urged its members, the organizations they represented and their local branches to help to carry out the UNESCO programme including its race programme, and they agreed that the most effective way to eliminate racial prejudice and diminish discrimination in the US was through progressive education of the public. Thus the statements of 1950 and 1951 were distributed and were used and taught in "re-education" workshops in schools and churches all over the country.

But in the US it did not happen without some resistance. Wesley C. George, professor of anatomy at the School of Medicine, University of North Carolina, was one of the critics – being a strong supporter of segregation. “The real purpose,” he declared, “is to indoctrinate people, somewhat clandestinely, with the particular ideologies of those directing the re-education.” That was apparently done by the national commission controlling the distribution of information by giving “favorable press to party-line books.”⁵²

Another outspoken American segregationist of the time criticized the fact that so many UNESCO employees were students from Columbia University, meaning that they were environmentalists and members of what he referred to as the Boas cult. “The public had some familiarity with a majority of these names,” he later recalled. “Almost all the tracts on race distributed by UNESCO and similar organizations were authored by them, as were most of the books and articles available in bookstores and on newsstands. Their views were often aired on network television and radio. But their personal backgrounds were not so well known.”⁵³

One pamphlet in particular was under attack in the US. That was L.C. Dunn’s pamphlet *Race and Biology* from 1951, which claimed that income, education, cultural advantages, and other opportunities determined intelligence and not race. That viewpoint provoked Congressman Andrew J. May from Kentucky to discredit the pamphlet and caused officials of the United States Army to ban it.⁵⁴

That summer there was also a hearing before the Senate Appropriations Committee on the work and costs of UNESCO, which revealed “an attitude more critical than at any previous time” and which was supported by the criticism from the general public.⁵⁵

The State Department almost felt obliged to teach UNESCO some kind of a lesson. That was to be seen in the reception of another pamphlet. It was the pamphlet that was supposed to show that the organization had learned from previous mistakes by making an attempt to reach the broad public comprised of laypeople and school children. The pamphlet, *What Science Says about Race*, was written by Diane Tead of UNESCO's Mass Communication Department on the basis information in the existing pamphlets and it relied heavily on illustrations to convey its points. Tead's work was only given limited distribution in 1951 before the State Department asked it to be withdrawn on the grounds that it was believed to contain "inaccurate and misleading information about the race problem in the United States."⁵⁶ There were indeed some errors, but the particular problem stemmed on the one hand from what was referred to as a rumour claiming that the pamphlet had been refuted by scientists working closely with UNESCO and in the other from a wish on the part of the State Department to approve UNESCO's future publications on controversial issues. The pamphlet created a tense situation that extended over six months, and Director General Jaime Torres Bodet feared that it would "bring forth additional dangerous criticism of UNESCO."⁵⁷ The author's background was checked by the State Department, and she almost left the organization in protest, while the content was reviewed and the pamphlet finally released under the name *What is Race?: Evidence from Scientists*.⁵⁸

The US sentiment towards UNESCO became even more hostile when Dwight D. Eisenhower came to power in 1953. The administration announced that the United States had decided to abandon the UN human rights declarations, since it harboured

communistic ideas. Anybody working on human rights now risked being labelled a Communist and thereby being politically ostracized.⁵⁹

In the years that followed, anti-Communism in the US manifested itself in public debates on the goals of the UN and UNESCO, and a noticeable portion of US citizens viewed the two organizations as enemies of the American state. Some were afraid that the organization would be used as a brainwashing weapon during the Cold War, and a former local UNESCO chairman spoke of how he had been asked to push UNESCO literature to the teachers and their associations, and that he had been instructed never to speak against UNESCO.

In Los Angeles UNESCO programmes and publications were eventually banished from the public school system in 1953, and this successful fight of “patriotic” groups soon led to apprehension among school administrators all over the country concerning the use in public schools of any of UNESCO’s publications, regardless of their content.⁶⁰

UNESCO in court

The US in the 1950’s was a country that attracted attention both for its political democracy and for discrimination on the basis of skin colour. In the American South theories of white supremacy were still particularly outspoken in their ideological and institutional forms. How people were schooled, where they could sit and whom they could marry were still matters determined by racial classifications. But the 1950’s were also the time in which many of these attitudes changed as a result of the outcome of several legal cases on racial segregation conducted by the NAACP.

But the cases were also important for other reasons, one of which has not been recognized until recently. This relates to the new role played by social scientists. Thurgood Marshall, the head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, called in social scientists as consultants to give advice regarding the current scientific position on the issues being debated, as well as on the manner in which that would be best integrated into the legal argument, and from 1950-1952 a number of prominent social scientists were called in as witnesses and were heard at the lower courts.⁶¹

At the beginning the defence drew heavily on the groundbreaking research on race and intelligence conducted by Otto Klineberg, who was called in as a witness in one of the cases on educational segregation – the Briggs case in South Carolina – and who would testify that there were no differences in intelligence among the races.⁶²

Through his involvement Klineberg saw the opportunity to promote the work of UNESCO, which had for a long time used social scientists, and at a meeting in Paris in August 1952 he and fourteen other prominent psychologists expressed their full support for UNESCO's work on race, which had "not only scientific interest but very important practical implications."⁶³

From now on, as the cases on segregation reached the US Supreme Court, the outcome of UNESCO's race program would play a more visible role. The first time was in the appeal argument for the Supreme Court in the Spottswood Thomas *Bolling vs. C. Melvin Sharpe* case in 1952. During the appeal, and among the many pieces of social science research brought up, some of the UNESCO pamphlets were referred to, and the first UNESCO statement on race was used in an attempt to discredit the idea of racial inequality.⁶⁴

A year later a social science statement on the effects of segregation and the consequences of desegregation was presented to the Supreme Court by the NAACP. It was signed by 32 American social scientists. Among the names were several actively involved in the work of UNESCO – including Otto Klineberg now Head of UNESCO’s Division of Applied Social Sciences. The signatories had come to a consensus that enforced segregation was psychologically detrimental to members of the segregated group as well as to those of the majority group, and they claimed that fears based on the assumption of innate racial differences in intelligence were not well founded. The statement came to form the basis of many of the questions to which the Supreme Court Justices addressed themselves during the final hearings of the civil rights cases.⁶⁵

One of these was the historic decision in the case *Oliver Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas*, of May 1954, which settled the question as to whether segregation was a form of discrimination that was prohibited by law. Here UNESCO’s work was referred to by the defence as the newest available scientific evidence, and when the Chief Justice later argued that social scientific evidence had been the cornerstone of the court’s decision, he specifically mentioned the first UNESCO statement and a couple of the pamphlets. “We have come too far not to realize that educability, and absorption and adoption of cultural values, has nothing to do with race. What is achieved educationally and culturally, we now know to be largely the result of opportunity and environment,” he concluded.⁶⁶ In other words separating children in public schools on the basis of race was discrimination and thus unconstitutional. This milestone decision by the Supreme Court marked the

end of legalized racial segregation in public schools and had an immediate effect on one-third of the American states.⁶⁷

All of a sudden social scientists – with the authority of UNESCO – had become social engineers. The extent of the attention paid to them during the trials had diminished the authority of biological arguments and confirmed the impression that segregation was of a political and historical character.

Subsequently pro-segregation organizations did their utmost to question these decisions by linking UNESCO and other “liberal” organizations with the Communists, and by going on to say that the Supreme Courts ruling was “based on bias, misinformation and a distortion of scientific evidence.”⁶⁸ In 1957 a handful of American social scientists – with Otto Klineberg in the lead – even felt it necessary to address the resistance by making a new joint statement on racial inequality. In its brief review of the relevant evidence it highlighted the two UNESCO statements on race alongside the former American social scientist statement, and repeated the views on mental characteristics and their environmental causes. “These statements still stand, and in our judgment represent the consensus among experts who have studied this question as objectively and as scientifically as is at present possible.”⁶⁹

Dealing with Apartheid

In South Africa controversies over race and intelligence had been going on for decades, and conclusions pointed in very different directions. Systematic studies of comparative abilities of various races were carried out by the state-supported South African Council for Educational Research, and this council claimed that the educability of “the natives” was limited due to their inferiority when compared with

European pupils of the same age. They could not, therefore, derive proper benefit from education. The South African Institute of Race Relations, a private organization based in Johannesburg, was sceptical, however, claiming that these studies had numerous errors and inconsistencies and were based on false assumptions.⁷⁰

Despite its *de facto* segregation South Africa had nevertheless become a member of UNESCO in June 1946, and the country had immediately benefited from the organization's work on adult education and its scholarships for South African students wishing to study abroad. The issue of race did not arise as a problem until the ideology of white supremacy was institutionalized with the apartheid laws of 1948, making South Africa the only country in the world with an official racist policy.

As early as in July 1948 the South African government was accusing UNESCO of interference in "domestic matters" by distributing material that included views on race that conflicted with the apartheid ideology within the borders of the country. The government acted by refusing to spend further money on its national commission, which was soon to be described as "practically dead".⁷¹

UNESCO's new race programme inevitable struck at the heart of the apartheid ideology, and from now on the tactic employed by UNESCO headquarters was to move carefully in order not to cause South Africa to withdraw from the organization. The country's continued membership would allow the organization to operate legally within its borders, where the material coming from UNESCO was now being advertised and distributed primarily by the South African Institute of Race Relations under the leadership of Quentin Whyte, who was one of the country's more outspoken liberal and humanitarian voices.

A couple of years passed with tolerant diplomacy. The South African government predictably objected to what they deemed “irresponsible” statements on the race question, but it was the circulation of the subsequent race pamphlets that caused real concern and increased the government’s already high levels of concern. In September 1952 a South African newspaper revealed that the government had banned the pamphlet *Roots of Prejudice* by the American sociologist Arnold Rose. The pamphlet outlined the causes and effects of racial prejudice and contained a passage stating that “the strongest prejudice and the largest number of false beliefs about negroes are to be found in South Africa.”⁷² The pamphlet was immediately banned as “objectionable, indecent and obscene” literature and caused a debate within the government over UNESCO’s right to distribute its publications in the country.

At a meeting in Paris in November 1952 the South African delegate to UNESCO, Harry T. Andrews, urged that the organization’s budget was maintained rather than increased as proposed. That position brought India’s ambassador to France, Sadar H.S. Malik, to his feet. He asked to take the floor and congratulated UNESCO on its scientific studies on race, adding: “It is work of this kind that exposes the hollowness and indeed preposterousness of the assumption of racial superiority with all the injustice, bitterness and strife that it entails,” and with his head pointed directly at the South African delegate he said: “Let there be no mistake about it. Much of the tension that exists in the world today is due to this arrogant nonsense of racism.”⁷³

Another incident occurred the following year with the series *The Race Question in Modern Science*, which also contained pamphlets with content banned in South Africa. One was *Race and Society*, in which the Scottish social anthropologist

Kenneth L. Little analyzed four cases of race relations. In April 1953, Quentin Whyte, addressed a letter to the Director General of UNESCO, drawing his attention to what were referred to as “certain inadequacies in the section dealing with South Africa” and warning UNESCO against giving the South African government an occasion to relinquish its membership of the organization.⁷⁴

But that was exactly what the government now found that it had. In December 1953 the South African Prime Minister, Daniel F. Malan announced that non-whites would be excluded from South Africa’s two English-speaking universities, Cape Town and Witwatersrand, as a step towards erasing all intermingling between whites and non-whites in the educational system. On the same day the official Nationalist party organ *Die Burger* confirmed that the Government was considering withdrawing from UNESCO and disclosed in an editorial that the root of the trouble was the South African Government’s dislike of the UNESCO campaign as regards racial matters, and in particular the pamphlets, which were referred to as propaganda.⁷⁵

To retain South Africa within UNESCO was more essential than ever – even if it meant that the country would take even less part in activities, make only essential gestures and avoid as far as possible any participation in UNESCO’s activities. But the prospects were poor. A session of the South African parliament in April 1955 was dedicated the race pamphlets and to the amount of money spent on UNESCO, and one of the members asked the Minister of External Affairs, Erik H. Louw, to consider withdrawal from UNESCO. The minister’s response was that the government had already made up its mind. As a result of the general criticism levelled by UNESCO and of its interference in South Africa’s racial problems, the country would withdraw from UNESCO with effect from 31 December 1956.⁷⁶

Both an informal approach and an official appeal were made in an attempt to bring about a reconsideration of the decision – without a positive result.

The Cologne incident

There remained substantial problems relating to race that had to be addressed in South Africa, the US and in some of the former colonies. On the other hand there was an optimistic confidence in the impact of the existing information as well as in the positive impact of economic growth, and the late 1950's was indeed a time of relative social stability and increasing economic wealth. Anti-Semitism no longer dictated official policy in any country, not even in South Africa, and was only propounded by politicians who had little influence on law-making and public opinion, and few people believed that there would ever be another Holocaust.⁷⁷

The very same day as South Africa officially withdrew from UNESCO, the organization closed its race division and transferred Alfred Métraux to a programme on desert nomads focusing on Africa and Iran. The following three years passed without the organization taking any major initiatives concerning the question of race.⁷⁸

But on Christmas Eve 1959 swastikas were smeared on a new synagogue in Cologne in West Germany, which the country's Chancellor had helped to inaugurate three months earlier. The incident triggered a wave of similar incidents across West Germany, and in January 1960 there were, according to UNESCO, between 2000-2500 anti-Semitic incidents in about 40 countries – even in countries with relatively few Jews – including everything from large demonstrations to depictions of swastikas in schools and churches. It was a surprising and remarkable phenomenon.⁷⁹

The United Nations decided to condemn the many manifestations of anti-Semitism, racial prejudice and religious intolerance and recommended that UNESCO and its member states immediately took precautions to tackle the problems, by addressing their causes and motives.⁸⁰

The American Jewish Committee decided to fund a report prepared by UNESCO on these manifestations of anti-Semitism. The report, released in October 1960, showed that the participants had been relatively young, and that the extent of the problem was greatest in West Germany, where so-called neo-Nazism appeared to be deep-rooted. The conclusion was that UNESCO's member states had done too little in previous years to dispel racial prejudice through their national educational systems, while the organization itself had done too little to translate and disseminate the organization's works to countries that had no previous experience of racial prejudice.⁸¹

UNESCO therefore found the money for new activities, and Alfred Métraux would once again be dealing more extensively with race. Among the organization's first visible activities was the publication of a pamphlet on racism, which was translated into all languages and subsequently distributed in schools in all member states, while behind the scenes the organization tried to persuade ministers of education of all nations to launch revisions of textbooks in order to promote mutual understanding.⁸²

In December 1960 the UNESCO General Conference also adopted two anti-discrimination documents as a result of a demand by several new countries of the post-colonial world that wanted standards of what constituted equality of opportunity in education regardless of race, sex or religion. One of these documents was a

convention that would oblige any country ratifying it to eliminate all forms of discrimination in education.

Other initiatives from UNESCO included the republication of their entire series of writings about race. This was issued in 1960-61, which was the point at which the young Jesse Jackson became aware of UNESCO's work. The organization also launched a thorough investigation of the causes of modern anti-Semitism – a comparative study of ethnocentric attitudes of young people in Britain, France and Germany carried out by the German sociologist Max Horkheimer.⁸³

Setting the record straight

Expressions of racial prejudice had made it clear to the United Nations that action had to be taken. In December 1962 the UN General Assembly adopted three resolutions on race. One of them requested the Human Rights Commission to draw up proposals for a legal binding convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination and religious intolerance.⁸⁴

During the preparation of the convention UNESCO was asked to convene a panel of experts to re-examine the concept of race in the light of scientific advances of the previous 12 years and to make a new and updated statement on race.

This took place at a time when Alfred Métraux was about to retire, to be replaced by one of his colleagues from the nomad project, the young Spanish anthropologist Francisco Benet – a man with an extremely adventurous life and a student of Margaret Mead at Columbia University. Although he now became a programme specialist on race, Benet described himself as a “layman”, and the plan was that Métraux should temporarily take over as the scientific director of the panel of experts

and make a draft for the new statement. But the sudden and tragic death of Métraux in April 1963 was a major blow that put paid to that plan.⁸⁵

Francisco Benet, who did not feel comfortable taking on the job himself, looked desperately around for an alternative. “I saw [Claude] Levi-Strauss this morning,” Benet wrote days later. “He refused. We are now back to where we started”.⁸⁶

After some reflection the Assistant Director-General of UNESCO decided to move on with organizing the meeting of experts, since it was a meeting “which could be a landmark in our race program and our member states, especially in Asia and Africa, look to UNESCO for leadership.”⁸⁷ This meant that it fell to the director of UNESCO’s social science department André Bertrand – who described himself as a “non-spécialiste” on race – to be scientific director in name, while Francisco Benet – the “layman” – was left to figure out all the practicalities.⁸⁸

Concerning Coon

Benet’s first task to choose the scientists for the meeting, which was not an easy task given the many conflicts generated by the race concept. At the time old stereotypes seemed constantly to be re-appearing in anthropology in various forms. One of the proponents of such theories was Carleton S. Coon – a colourful character who had undertaken adventurous exploits all over the world. Coon had been trained in physical anthropology at Harvard University, which represented the antithesis to the cultural anthropology of Columbia University, focusing on the definition and study of race rather than on its dissolution.⁸⁹

In 1962 he had published his major work, *The Origin of Races*. The book claimed that the human species was divided into five races with differing physical and mental

characteristics, and contained the thesis that humans had separated into these racial groupings at the stage of Homo Erectus and had evolved into Homo Sapiens separately and at different times, the white race reaching this stage 200,000 years before the black race. It was easy to see that the segregationists could use Coon's book as a defence of their claim that African-Americans were unfit for full participation in American society.

Coon claimed that he himself was not interested in the political consequences of his work but only in science, and the analysis of the fossil evidence won widespread applause from fellow-experts such as the renowned evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr at Harvard University. The very same year Coon won the Gold Medal of the Philadelphia Athenæum and was elected president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists.

Coon's deep-rooted suspicion of cultural anthropology was shared by his cousin, Carleton Putnam, the founder of Delta Airlines, who had published several articles and speeches based on the assumption that African-Americans were biologically inferior. Coon helped his cousin with information on the relation between brain size and intelligence and similar topics, and Putnam's book *Race and Reason: A Yankee View* from 1961 received widespread acclaim from segregationist leaders including Governor Ross Barnett of Mississippi.⁹⁰

Coon's own book was selling widely in the US at the time and by September 1963 it had sold its 30,000th copy and its basic assumptions had been incorporated by the publishers of *Life* magazine in a special volume on human evolution. Coon had in other words become impossible to ignore in any debate on human origins.

In Paris it had been decided that the signatories of the third UNESCO statement should not be the same as those who signed the first two, and Benet went to various conferences where experts were gathered and visited or wrote to a number of prominent scholars in order to discuss the upcoming meeting with them. One of these was Julian Huxley.⁹¹

“I am glad you are going to issue a revised statement on race,” Huxley wrote, “as I only signed the earlier one with reluctance, and do not think it was at all satisfactory.”⁹² Huxley wanted to make sure that this time UNESCO took a stance in between the two extreme positions of the environmentalists and hereditarianists, and he asked Benet to read Coon’s book, which he found had a sound thesis on evolution despite his exaggeration of the genetic differences of races and his location of their origin in a period too remote in time.

Colin M. Turnbull, assistant curator of African ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, also suggested that Coon was someone who could contribute some balanced judgements to the statement despite the fact that some of the content of his book could be described as nothing but “educated guesswork.”⁹³

But most of the researchers were concerned about involving Coon, whose polygenic approach to human origins “immediately provides data and ammunition for the racists and segregationists who are particularly concerned with the debasing of negroes categorically.”⁹⁴

Benet decided to pay Coon a visit to form his own impression of the man, and in October 1963 he spent a day in Coon’s home in West Gloucester, Massachusetts. Coon and Benet had much in common. Both were experts on the Middle East, Coon

had been excavating caves in Iran and at the time Benet visited him one of Coon's children was living in Teheran, where Benet, who was married to a princess of the Iranian royal family, had his home. Altogether Benet felt that he had a pleasant day with the man who was causing so much concern within UNESCO. "We talked it over in the middle of the Essex River in my boat," Coon later recalled. "He [Benet] assured me that the subject of the meeting was to be race in general, and its members would not be asked to vote on the prime question on the intellectual equality or inequality of different races," and Coon agreed to go on those conditions.⁹⁵

The preparations involved considerable difficulties, to such an extent that Benet could hardly wait to get the job done and leave the organization. The fact that Coon was due to take part caused particular concern, just as Montagu's participation had done many years earlier, and, as had happened in the 1950's, it was decided to divide the convention in two. The first part which would include the controversial physical anthropologist from New England – would be about biological aspects of race, while the second would extend the scope so that a new statement would focus on both the biological and the sociological aspects. The drafting and signing of a joint statement would thus be left to the sociologists a couple of years later, so that UNESCO had a chance to see what came out of the first meeting before going public with the statement.⁹⁶

In August 1964 the so-called "reunion" took place at The Palace of Friendship in Moscow in conjunction with the Seventh Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. The Belgian biologist, Professor Jean Hiernaux was appointed scientific director and was to formulate the final proposals

made by the total of 22 physical anthropologists, geneticists and biologists from 16 countries.⁹⁷

Coon arrived, presented a paper on human convergence, took an active part in the discussions and made several remarks on the papers of the other participants. When the Indian representative gave a warning about the negative implications of racial stereotypes, Coon's dry comment in the margin of his paper was: "Don't worry about it."⁹⁸

But the other participants did worry, and during the meeting "the stay-behinds had changed the agenda" according to Coon and had suddenly decided that they would have to "vote about who was brighter than whom". Everybody but Coon held up a hand in the support of racial equality. "When two Africans and one Hindu, both highly intelligent and friendly scientists, looked at me, I may have wiggled a finger or two involuntarily. The whole thing was getting ridiculous ... When I came home I discovered that the newspapers had included me among the signers, and the telephone began ringing: 'Why the hell did you do that?'"⁹⁹

One of the people requiring an explanation was Carleton Putnam. "I reached one of them [the participants] on the long distance telephone," Putnam later wrote in his memoirs, "a man whose privacy I respected and whom I would not designate by either name or nationality. I asked this gentleman what had occurred to make him sign such a document and his reply, freely translated, ran somewhat as follows: The Moscow meeting had been suffused with a sense of urgency. Something was going on behind the scenes 'which made ruddy-cheeked men turn ashen'. It became apparent that the cause was the explosion by China of an atomic bomb. The point immediately was made that now of all times China should be deprived of any

propaganda argument against the West. Afro-Asian nations would be quick to listen, and consequently something must be done to remove from the West the 'racist tag.' There could be no better way than by signing the equalitarian declaration".¹⁰⁰

The surprising news was immediately leaked, and according to the press the proposals of the meeting were to be incorporated into the UN convention on racial discrimination to be adopted a year later as an important legal binding supplement the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁰¹

The approved paper consisted of 13 points. It began, as the earlier statements had, by claiming that humanity belonged to the same species. The experts were also unanimous in rejecting the concept of inferior and superior races, and they agreed on a draft statement that all people had the potential to attain any level of civilization. It even introduced an alternative to the concept of race, namely the concept of "population", as it was used in Human Genetics to cover smaller groups with a certain frequency of the various genes. By this means the concept of race was reduced to a term confined to daily usage. Finally, the paper pointed out that it was common cultural values that determined people's choice of partner and which therefore guided the biology, and that the differences between the achievements of various peoples could be explained only by their cultural history: "For long millenniums progress made by man, in any field, seems to have been increasingly, if not exclusively, based on culture and not on the transmission of genetic endowment."¹⁰²

Julian Huxley was far from surprised but also far from satisfied with the content: "It is a great pity that the very natural anti-racist feeling aroused in recent years has allowed the experts to play down the role of genetic determination. Any future

committee *must* pay attention to the scientific discussion of the necessary collaboration of heredity and environment in the formation of all characters,” he commanded.¹⁰³ But Huxley’s influence was not what it used to be, and soon a publication – *Proposals on the Biological Aspects of Race* – circulated in English, French, Russian and Spanish.

A year later the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was adopted. Its goal was to ensure that all people had access to equal treatment by obliging member states to prohibit and punish racial discrimination, and at this convention the definition of the concept of racial discrimination was extended to include discrimination based on cultural differences. In the wake of the ratification and subsequent implementation of the convention in national legislation, discrimination was criminalized, and to this very day the convention represents the principle legal text against racism and racial discrimination in UN member states.¹⁰⁴

UNESCO Man – the judgement of posterity

The proposals of 1964 came to play an important role in US politics since mixed-race marriages were still illegal in some states. Three years later, the US Supreme Court drew heavily upon the proposals in its landmark decision to declare those laws unconstitutional, because the proposals specifically said that racial intermixture posed no danger and that there was no biological reason to ban interracial marriages – and it was emphasized that even Carleton S. Coon had approved them!¹⁰⁵

In September 1967 the fourth UNESCO meeting on race took place in Paris. A new generation of scientists had taken over. The meeting was arranged by Dr.

Marion Glean, who was of Caribbean descent and had been actively involved in the work against racial discrimination in Great Britain, while the sociologist Professor John Rex from University of Durham worked as the principal draftsman of the final *Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice*. For the first time it was signed by experts from literally all over the world, including a number of representatives of former colonies, and went further in the environmentalist direction than had any of the previous statements by focusing mainly on the social causes and on motives for racial prejudice. But at the time it had already been superseded by the UN Convention that was being implemented in member states.¹⁰⁶

“The revolution was now complete,” as the historians John P. Jackson, Jr., and Nadine Weidman claim.¹⁰⁷ Or was UNESCO’s race project – as has been proposed by another historian, Michelle Brattain – on the contrary a short-lived and even ineffective project that proved a failure in reshaping ideas about race – at least in the US?¹⁰⁸ The two extremes show how difficult it is to determine the real extent of UNESCO’s impact, as the outcome depends very much on the eyes of the beholder. The fact is that UNESCO was there and made an effort to change people’s conceptions of race, and, as Reverend Jesse Jackson puts it: “When it’s real dark, a little light goes a long way.”¹⁰⁹

¹ “Strategies and Tactics in the Struggle for Civil and Human Rights with Reverend Jesse Jackson”, 18.11.2002, p. 2, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum, Boston, MA.

² The most recent and thorough pieces of published research being Claudio Pogliano, “‘Statements on Race’ dell’UNESCO: Cronica di un Lungo Travaglio,” *Nuncius. Annali di Storia della Scienza*, 2001, 6:347-341; Jenny Reardon, *Race to the Finish* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2004); Harald Prins & Edgar Krebs, “Vers un monde sans mal: Alfred Métraux, un anthropologue à l’UNESCO (1946-1962),” 60

ans d'histoire de l'UNESCO. (Paris: UNESCO, 2007), pp. 115-125; Wiktors Stoczkowski, "Racisme, antiracisme et cosmologie lévi-straussienne: Un essai d'anthropologie réflexive", *L'Homme*, 2007, 182:7-52; and Michelle Brattain, "Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Post-war Public", *American Historical Review*, 2007, 112:1386-1413.

³ *Charter of the United Nations: June 26, 1945, entered into force Oct. 24, 1945*, preamble.

⁴ *Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization: Adopted in London on 16 November 1945*, preamble.

⁵ Julian Huxley, *Memoires* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 2 vols., Vol. 2, pp. 13-36.

⁶ Alain Finkielkraut, *The Undoing of Thought* (London: The Claridge Press, 1988).

⁷ Julian S. Huxley, *UNESCO: Its Purpose and its Philosophy* (London: Preparatory Commission for UNESCO, 1946), p. 8; Julian S. Huxley and A.C. Haddon, *We Europeans: A Survey of "Racial" Problems* (London: J. Cape, 1935).

⁸ UNESCO Secretariat: "UNESCO and the Social Sciences", *International Social Science Journal*, 1949, 1:9-10; Jennifer Platt, *Fifty Years of the International Social Science Council* (Paris: ISSC, 2002), pp. 7-20.

⁹ *The Basic Programme: UNESCO and its Programme*, 2 vols., Vol. 2 (Paris: UNESCO, 1951), p. 7.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 12-13; "Public Demand made for Race Equality at San Francisco Parley" 3.5.1945, Box A640, Group II, UN Unesco 1950-1954, NAACP Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

¹¹ *Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization: Adopted in London on 16 November 1945*.

¹² "United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization", *International Organization*, 1949, 3:354-356; Robert C. Angell, "UNESCO and Social Science Research", *American Sociological Review*, 1950, 15:282-284; Otto Klineberg, *Tensions Affecting International Understanding: A Survey of Research* (Paris: UNESCO, 1950).

¹³ ECOSOC, 6th Session, April 1948, Resolution 116 (VI) B, UN Archives, New York and letter from Henri Laugier (Department of Social Affairs, UN) to Julian Huxley (Director General, UNESCO) 20.4.1948, 323.1 (Statement on Race), UNESCO Archives, Paris.

¹⁴ Marcos Chor Maio, “UNESCO and the Study of Race Relations in Brazil”, *Latin American Research Review*, 2001, 36:188-136, on p. 121.

¹⁵ UN Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, “The Main Types and Causes of Discrimination (memorandum submitted by the Secretary-General), released 7.6.1949”, p. 22, E/CN.4/SUB.2/40/REV.1, UN Archives, New York.

¹⁶ *Records of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization, Fourth Session, Resolutions* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949), p. 22, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

¹⁷ “Activities of UNESCO” [29.10.1949], 323.1 (Statement on Race), UNESCO Archives, Paris; “Committee of Experts for the Study of Racial Prejudice”, SG 76/5/05, Branch Registries 1948-1959, S-0441-0401, UN Archives, New York.

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