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### ***CRE and RBSC Sponsor Symposium on Universal Races Congress of 1911***

On Friday, April 24, the Center for Race and Ethnicity and the Rutgers British Studies Center hosted a day-long symposium titled the “The Universal Races Congress of 1911: Utopian Internationalism at the Dawn of a Bloody Century.” Convened by Mia Bay (History, CRE) and Seth Koven (History, RBSC), this event was the culmination of a yearlong interdisciplinary working group dedicated to exploring the history and significance of the First Universal Races Congress of 1911 (URC). At this event, representatives from around the world met at the Imperial Institute of the University of London with the common goal of combating racism, distilling “universal” truths about race, and promoting mutual understanding between “East and West.”

#### **COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BETWEEN CENTERS**

The URC working group is a collaborative project sponsored by the Center for Race and Ethnicity and the Rutgers British Studies Center. Its participants began meeting at the Center for Race and Ethnicity in September 2014 and have included faculty, postdoctoral fellows and graduate students in Anthropology, English, History, Human Ecology, Italian, and Jewish Studies. Their meetings, and recent conference, are designed to draw on the group’s interdisciplinary expertise and insights to reach a nuanced, multilayered understanding of the utopian internationalism that brought the Congress’ participants together--while also exploring the national, racial and religious tensions that were evident in many of their exchanges. The Congress left behind a rich historical archive of papers and proceedings, which has been the major subject of the working group’s study and discussion. The conference was the fruit of these deliberations, and featured papers and presentations by working group members, as well as talks and keynote presentations by visiting scholars.

Our distinguished visitors included Arnulf Becker (Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University), who delivered the morning keynote, entitled “Races Coming Closer Through International Law? Schücking at the Universal Races Congress.” An expert on international and the author of a recent book entitled *Mestizo International Law: A Global Intellectual History, 1850–1950* (2012), Becker began with a



*Arnulf Becker, Brown University*

definition of international law—a subject which features prominently in the Congress’ proceedings. Becker began by addressing the question of why the Congress attracted so many experts in international law. International law, he explained, is not just a set of “rules that govern interstate relations,” it is also an ideological project and a discourse of power. The Congress’s goals attracted international lawyers because they saw the law as a means of reordering the world and resolving racial conflicts, although, as the Congress’ proceedings reveal, they did not regard the legal systems of different cultures as equally valuable or useful tools for this project. Indeed, Becker noted that one Congress participant, Walther Schücking, a professor of international law and World Court judge who argued that only “Aryan states can create rights and laws,” offered a relatively *progressive* view of race, as compared to most of contemporaries in the same field.

However, race was not a central preoccupation of international lawyers—in part perhaps because it was a conceptually confused and controversial category that was difficult to define with any precision, and impossible to incorporate into rules relating to interstate relations. After 1911, Becker maintains, race featured scantily in international law as a project and by 1923, race was absent as an explicit, prescriptive legal argument. For example, although some country delegates, including the French, sought to exclude Ethiopia from the League of Nations, based on racial hierarchy,

this objection did not hold and the country was ultimately admitted.

Becker went on to suggest that nationalist approaches to race would have more significant impact on international law than the Universal Race Congress’ aspirations for racial friendship and amity. Pan-Africanism, which was not yet fully developed at the Congress would have a central role in the development of international law in the twentieth century, particularly in debates over the charter of the League of Nations. Unlike Du Bois, whose presentation at the Congress, like much of his early work, called for civil rights for blacks as individuals, Garvey and other Pan-Africanists contended that the “African race has a right to self-determination,” a formulation that helped push the issue to the realm of international law.

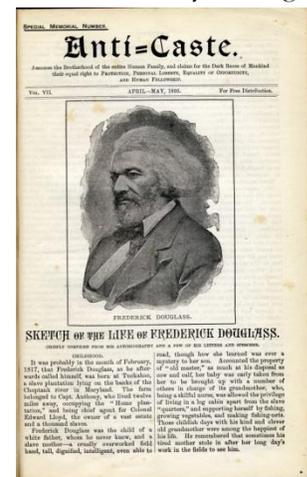
**THE GEOPOLITICS OF REPRESENTING RACE**

Becker’s keynote was followed by a panel on “The Geopolitics of Representing Race.” Stéphane Robolin (English, Rutgers—New Brunswick) opened the session, offering a discussion of South Africa’s representation at the URC. Seventeen South Africans attended the conference. They included activists such as John Tengo Jabavu, a black journalist who was intent on challenging his country’s increasingly discriminatory racial politics.

Unsuccessful in gaining a sympathetic hearing at home, Robolin explained, Jabavu and other South African activists decided to “jump scale” by appealing to an international audience. Jabavu spoke “his language in hopes of being heard,” in London—the heart of the British Empire. In doing so, he promoted racial uplift through education, making an international appeal to “raise consciousness and funds” to educate South Africa’s equivalent of a “talented tenth.” He was successful at raising support for this cause: the South African delegation succeeded in establishing the University of Fort Hare in 1916.

Tanya Agathocleous (English, Hunter College, CUNY), who had been a member of the year-long seminar, and

her colleague Janet Neary (English, Hunter College, CUNY) presented a joint paper on “caste” in African American and Indian



*Periodical Anti-Caste (image courtesy of quakerstrongrooms.org)*

periodicals in the years leading up to the Conference. They argued that activists in both Britain and America made use of the term “caste” to draw connections between the failure of imperial governance in British India and erosion of democratic ideals in the United States. British Quaker, Catherine Impey, featured reports on racial oppression in

both places in her late nineteenth-century magazine, *Anti-Caste*, while W.E.B. DuBois, often used the term caste as a rhetorical device to address the “civic disabilities” faced by black Americans.

Like Agathocleous and Neary, Kyle McAuley, (PhD Candidate, English, Rutgers—New Brunswick) focused on how literature and politics came together at the Congress. His presentation explored how references to literary history deployed by the participants embedded anti-colonial and nationalist politics into the proceedings. Congress participants representing colonized spaces often took the international, cooperative spirit of the conference as an occasion to advocate for greater national autonomy, he contended, offering a careful reading of the paper presented by Mohammed Sourour Bey, the Congress’ designated representative from Egypt, as his primary example. In Bey’s presentation to this Congress on racial transnationalism, McAuley claimed, the Egyptian representative advocated for dismantling the previous century’s dominant transnational regimes—that is, European empires—on the basis of those regimes’ own cultural histories. Bey’s appeal to a John Milton pamphlet, the *Areopagitica* (1644), channeled Milton’s argument for greater freedom of the press in the wake of the English Civil War, and redirected its political energies toward resisting colonial oppression. McAuley read Bey’s rhetorical and literary approaches as a “tactical move” that allowed Bey to shift part of the

Congress’ focus “from racial emancipation to ethnic nationalism.”

Kate Sorrels (History, University of Cincinnati) shifted our attention to Central Europe. Her talk centered on Felix von Luschan and Alfred Fried, who both believed in a social evolutionary paradigm of anti-racism, although they came at it from importantly different angles. Both figures thought that the concept of race was unscientific and that fixed racial hierarchies were myths. However, they drew starkly different conclusions from this position. Luschan, a physician and anthropologist, believed that the struggle for survival took the form of wars between races and that such wars therefore advanced human progress. Fried, a journalist and peace activist, believed that the struggle for survival took the form of intellectual combat, that platforms for such intellectual sparing needed to be created in the form of international organizations, and that therefore physical conflict between races held back human progress. For Luschan, a critique of racial essentialism could actually justify European overseas conquest, while for Fried conquest was unjustified. Nevertheless, Fried’s critique of racial essentialism did not offer support for independence movements among people of color under colonial rule. Because Fried maintained a belief in

civilizational if not racial hierarchies, he argued that European states should not give up their colonies, but consider a system of joint, European stewardship.

## THE RUSSIAN MOMENT

Marina Mogilner (History, University of Illinois, Chicago) delivered a second keynote address on “The Russian Universal Races Congress Moment.” How, she asked, did Russia engage with the Universal Races Congress? Many of the perspectives circulating at the URC echoed ideas and debates already familiar to liberal race scientists affiliated with the Anthropological division of the Moscow Society of Lovers of Natural Sciences, Anthropology and Ethnography. These intellectuals, like many URC delegates, had begun to revise colonial political and power-knowledge hierarchies and conceptualized race hybridity. As a contiguous heterogeneous polity with blurred boundaries between the metropole and peripheries, the Russian empire defined the peoples within its borders through overlapping taxonomies that included confession, legal estate, language, region, economic status, loyalty to the regime – but never explicitly nationality or race, the categories used by modernist intellectuals. Although race scientists of the Moscow school recognized racial differences, they refused to identify them with nationality and civilizational



qualities; they claimed that the heterogeneous population of the empire could be differentiated only into mixed racial types. In their view, the Russian empire offered a model of racial non-exclusivity that promised a structural advantage on a path toward a post-national humanity.

## **SOUTHERN QUESTIONS, RACE CROSSINGS**

Mogilner's talk was followed by a panel on the global South, entitled "Southern Questions, Race Crossings at the Universal Races Congress." Whereas earlier speakers were preoccupied with the tensions between East and West, this panel focused on the South--broadly conceived.

Seth Koven (History, NB) stressed the Congress' vision of global brotherhood and racial and religious peace was troubled by Southern questions that its participants rarely named but could not escape. To start with, London's Imperial Institute in South Kensington, where the Congress met, was not neutral ground. As many of the Congress' participants were aware, the Institute had been founded on the premise that British liberal imperialism would foster global friendship; but the site had been the scene of an unprecedented act of anticolonial violence only two years earlier. At the 1909 meeting of the Indian National Association, Madan Lal Dhingra, a revolutionary supporter of Indian independence had assassinated colonial official Sir William Hutt Curzon Wylie, by firing a series of gunshots straight into his face and declaring Wylie and Britain responsible for

killing 80 million Indians. Wylie's brutal murder, Koven suggested, haunted the Universal Races Congress, forcing many to wonder whether global amity could be restored under the aegis of the British claims to imperial benevolence.



*London's Imperial Institute (image courtesy of [www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org))*

Meanwhile, Egyptian delegate Dusé Muhammad Ali, head of publicity and entertainment for the URC, posed the same question by offering an Afrocentric performance of Othello that undercut the anti-black racial politics of the Egyptian delegation. Finally, Koven turned to an impromptu speech by Tamil Christian delegate Rev. M.D. Israel, who identified himself as "South Indian" and spoke as and for the "so-called low and depressed classes" who could not be whitened by Aryan racial theories then popular among British colonial thinkers and many elite Indian nationalists. While neither Wylie's murder nor Ali's performance appear in the Congress's recorded proceedings, Koven argued, they should nonetheless be understood as

paratextual events that form a crucial backdrop to the conversations that took place at the Congress. These three examples suggested that global friendship and Southern troubles were irreconcilable leitmotifs for the URC.

Rhiannon Noel Welch's (Italian Department, RU) presentation titled, "Race and (Re)productivity: Italy's Southern Questions," situated Italian anthropologist Sergi in the context of Italy's long-held inferiority complex with regards to imperial Western Europe and its consequent articulation of political, economic, cultural and racial duality between its northern and southern regions. Welch argued that the southern question is not only constructed based on Italian relationship to its wealthy northern neighbors, primarily Britain, Austria, and France but also evokes Italy's imbricated histories of immigration and colonial conquest.

In Welch's view Sergi believed that the war lost by Italy's colonial defeats in 1887 and 1896 upset the 'general organic economy of the nation.' Sergi relegated war to a primitive and savage era, "which had become a socially pathological phenomenon, consuming the nation's 'most vital resources,' and bringing about a 'sterilization of national vigor.'" Interestingly, like many proponents of so called demographics or agricultural settlers of early Italian colonialism, *labor* was Sergi's antidote to degeneration. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sergi revisited the Southern question by advocating the migration of northern Italians to the South with the purpose of educating southerners and stimulating there a culture of work. Labor for Sergi

distinguished civilized men from primitive men. Welch concluded by wondering how to read the Congress' rhetoric of friendship; peace talk might well displace practices of political power from the battlefield to the government of bodies.

Mia Bay (History, Rutgers—New Brunswick) asked how we might make historical sense of the hope and excitement by the Universal Races Congress among African Americans and suggested that answers might be found in the history of African American critiques of mainstream racial thought. Excitement was widespread, she said, because the Congress promised to disprove Western racial science at a time scientific work on the inherent inferiority of African Americans lent intellectual justification to acts of racist violence. The Congress met during the nadir of African American history, when violence, lynchings, discrimination, and disenfranchisement were at an all time high, so its African American participants were eager to see such work debunked. They included highly educated blacks such as W.E.B. DuBois, whose early work attacked scientific racism by documenting the social roots of black poverty. African Americans hoped that the convergence of the Congress, DuBois' research, and the pioneering anthropological insights of Franz Boas would help to change race relations in the United States.

Grace Howard (Political Science, NB) concluded the afternoon panel by considering the theme of reproduction

through an intersectional lens. Tracing early nineteenth century ideas, Howard argued that Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman* (1851) might be the first text to examine the plight of women through the lens of race, class and gender. Intersectional thinking, she maintained, could therefore be said to have emerged at least six decades before the Universal Races Congress. Howard went on to refract the work of two Congress participants, Earl Finch and Frances Hoggan, through an intersectional lens. Finch's paper on miscegenation argued that the offspring of two races were superior and that racial mixing would provide a necessary way to prevent racial extinction. And while Finch elided gender and sexual politics, ignoring the social dimension of reproduction in racial mixing, Hoggan began with an intersectional plea to acknowledge the lack of care for women of color who are sexually victimized by white men. Still, her central concern was the harm that the colonial regime did to white colonial women, suggesting that colonial destruction of native social systems created a restless, brutal, black population. Uniting these two seemingly disparate theorists, Howard concluded her presentation by asking the audience to think about what shape these arguments would take if Hoggan and Finch had not been blind to the intersection of race and sex.



Alice Conklin (History, Ohio State University) presented the last of the conference's keynotes, "In the

Light of Science and the Modern Conscience: Contested Anthropology at the 1911 URC." Conklin asserted that the use of science served European interests. Science, defined as rational and modern, helped sustain racial hierarchy. Some race scientists claimed that civilized peoples avoided violence, although even as early as 1911 such claims were hard to defend, given Europe's own history of violence. Moreover, by 1911 the epistemological dominance of scientific racism was beginning to break down, as physical anthropologists quarreled over what "race" was from a biological point of view. Scholars such as DuBois and Franz Boas contributed to this epistemological shift. Conklin notes that at the URC, there was only marginal space left for non-whites to talk back to power, shifting the conversation from biology to politics.

Conklin also explored the relative absence of French voices at the URC, particularly in contrast to the large representation from Great Britain and its colonies. In particular, only one French professor from a colonial university (Algiers), one representative of the colonial lobby, and one French physical anthropologist appeared on the longer

list of French supporters of the Congress. Conklin suggested that France's poor representation may have reflected a general lack of race consciousness in France, stating that there was no strong French intellectual tradition for studying race relations during this time period. Perhaps the French method of colonization, combined with the revolutionary French motto—liberté, égalité, fraternité—had instilled a kind of shallow colorblindness which made interrogations of race and discrimination difficult.

Mia Bay and Seth Koven concluded the conference by holding a brief discussion on future directions for the working group. In reviewing the day's proceedings, the organizers could not help but note that project's collective work had begun to cohere into a rich set of papers, making an edited volume a logical next step. There was unanimous support for such a volume among the conference presenters and participants, who agreed to reconvene next year to workshop potential papers. Several common threads were identified, and an invitation was extended to those who did not present at the conference, but were interested in contributing to the project going forward. The workshop will be held in early 2016.

**The Center for Race and Ethnicity**

**Mailing Address:**

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
191 College Avenue, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

**Telephone:** 848/932-2181

**Fax:** 732/932-2198

**Email:** [raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu)

**Website:** [raceethnicity.rutgers.edu](http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu)

**Director:** Mia Bay (History)

**Acting Director (2014-15):** Ann Fabian (History)

**Associate Director:** Naa Oyo A. Kwate (Human Ecology/Africana Studies)

**Senior Program Coordinator:** Mia Kissil

**Graduate Assistants/Editors:** Grace Howard (Political Science); Julia Katz (History); Donovan Ramon (English); Hakim Zainiddinov (Sociology)