The First Universal Races Congress

Of the two thousand international meetings that have taken place in the last seventy-five years there have been few that have so touched the imagination as the Universal Races Congress of this summer.

Such a meeting may be viewed in many lights: as a meeting of widely-separated men, as a reunion of East and West, as a glance across the color line or as a sort of World Grievance Committee. Perhaps it was in part something of each of these. There was, however, one thing that this congress could do of inestimable importance. Outside the discussion of racial problems, it could make clear the present state of scientific knowledge concerning the meaning of the term "race."

This the congress did and this was its most important work. There were practically no reports of new anthropological knowledge. There were, however, several reviews and restatements in popular terms of the present dicta of the science in the matter of human races, exsert with a clearness, force and authority that deserve especial mention.

The scientific men who contributed papers to the congress, and who were with few exceptions in person to take part in the discussions, were, many of them, of the first rank: Von Luschan and Von Ranke, of Germany; Sergi, of Italy; Myers, Lyde and Hadden, of England, and Boas, of America, are all well known; among the other speakers were the Indian scholar, Seal; Lacerda, of Brazil, Fino of France, and Reinsch, of America. All those mentioned, save Boas, were present in person.

To realize the full meaning of the statements made by these men one must not forget the racial philosophy upon which America has long been nurtured. The central idea of that philosophy has been that there are vast and, for all practical purposes, unbridgeable differences between the races of men, the whites representing the higher nobler stock, the blacks the lower meaner race. Between the lowest races (who are certainly undeveloped and probably incapable of any considerable development) and the highest, range the brown and yellow peoples with various intermediate capacities.

The proofs of these assumptions have been repeatedly pointed out; the high civilization of the whites, the lack of culture among the blacks, the apparent incapacity for self-rule in many non-Europeans, and the stagnation of Asia. The reasons for this condition were variously stated: some assumed separate development for each race, while others spoke as tho the various races represented different stages in the same general development, with thousands of years between, the Negro remaining nearest the ape, the whites furthest from the common ancestor.

Had these assumptions remained merely academic opinions it would not be necessary to recall them, but they have become the scientific sanction for widespread and decisive political action — like the disfranchisement of American Negroes, the subjection of India and the partition of Africa. Under the aegis of this philosophy strong arguments have justified human slavery and peonage, conquest, enforced ignorance, the dishonoring of women and the exploitation of children. It was divine to enslave Negroes; Mexican peonage is the only remedy for laziness; powerful nations must rule the mass of men who are not fit and cannot be fitted to rule themselves; colored women must not be expected to be treated like white, and if commerce is arranged so as to make the dark world toil for the luxury and ease of the white, this is but the law of nature.

As I sat in the great hall of the University of London, I wondered how many of those audiences of five, six and seven hundred who daily braved the sweltering heat of a midsummer meeting realized how epoch-making many of the words quietly spoken there were, and how far they went toward undermining long and comfortably cherished beliefs.

The anthropologists were not rash in statement. They spoke with full realization of the prevalent attitude of Europeans toward other races. Some, like Von Luschan, took pains to emphasize separate racial development for the sake of the "hassenkampf," but he began with the sweeping assertion that "mankind is one."

Fair and dark races, long and short-headed, intelligent and primitive, all come from one stock. Favorable circumstances and surroundings, especially a good environment ... caused one group to advance more quickly than another.

Moreover both he and Von Ranke, Sergi and others ridiculed the possibility of a "science" of race, or, indeed, of the possibility or desirability of drawing complete racial lines: "The question of the number of human races," said Von Luschan, "has quite lost its raison d'être, and has become a subject of
philosophical speculation, rather than of scientific research. It is of no more importance to know how many races there are than to know how many angels dance on the point of a needle!"

Especial insistence was made against regarding races as unchangeable accomplished facts; they were, in the words of Boas and Seal, “growing developing entities” and “the old idea of the absolute stability of racial types must evidently be given up; and with it the belief in the hereditary superiority of certain types over others.”

This brought the discussion to the crucial point, for granted that human beings form a family thru which it is difficult to draw absolute lines, yet does not the present advancement of the various groups of men correspond on the whole with their physical characteristics? No proposition was more emphatically denied than this. In physique, said Seal, quoting Weinbach, “each race has its share of the characteristics of inferiority,” and it is impossible to arrange the main groups of men in an ascending scale of physical development. Lyde, of Oxford, added that even color, which is today made the greatest of racial barriers, is with little doubt “entirely a matter of climatic control.”

Nevertheless there are tremendous differences in the present condition of the various groups of men—whence do they arise and how permanent are they? Practically every anthropologist present laid the chief stress on environment in explaining these differences; not simply physical environment but the even more important social environment in which the individual is educated. Von Luschan traced dark-skinned primitive man from Southern Asia to the Negro and Negroid toward the Northwest, the Indo-European toward the North and the Mongol toward the Northeast. “We have thus the three chief varieties of mankind,” he said, “all branching off the same primitive stock, diverging from each other for thousands of years, but all three forming a complete unity, intermarrying in all directions without the slightest decrease of fertility.” Sir Harry Johnston emphasized this early interpenetration of primitive races and found traces of Negro blood from Asia to Ireland. Others like Reinsch showed that the differences that arose among the scattered branches of men were due at first to physical environment, and pointed out the way in which the contrasting geography of Greece and Africa, and Europe and Asia had influenced the history of their inhabitants.

Had not this long difference of environment left traces in the characters of races so ingrained as to be today practically ineradicable? Myers, of Oxford, asserted, in answer to this, that the mental characteristics of the majority of Europe were today essentially the same as those of the primitive peoples of the earth; that such differences as exist are due to present social and physical environment and that therefore “the progressive development of all primitive people must be conceded if the environment can be appropriately changed.”

From the papers submitted to the congress and from his own studies, Gustav Spiller, the secretary, stated that a fair interpretation of the scientific evidence would support these propositions:

1. It is not legitimate to argue from differences in physical characteristics to difference in mental characteristics.
2. Physical and mental characteristics of races are not permanent, nor are they modifiable only thru long ages. On the contrary they are capable of being profoundly modified in a few generations by changes in education, public sentiment and environment generally.
3. The status of a race at any particular time offers no index as to its innate or inherited capacities.

As to race mixture all the anthropologists said that there were no “pure” races and that modern peoples were all more or less mixt. Nevertheless while many of these mixtures were obviously beneficial, it was not clear whether all racial mixtures would be. Certainly it was unscientific to assert that mulattoes and Eurasians were degenerate in the absence of all scientific data. Lacerda, of Brazil, showed the high proportion of mulattoes in the population of Brazil and the leading role they had played in emancipating the slaves, in establishing the republic and in the literary and political life of the day. Sir Charles Bruce and Sir Sidney Olivier made somewhat similar statements concerning the West Indies.

It would be too much to say that all anthropologists today would subscribe to the main conclusions of those who attended the Races Congress or that the doctrine of inevitable race superiority is dead. On the other hand there is good reason to affirm with Pinot, in the *brochure* which he gave to the congress:

The conception of races as of so many watertight compartments into which human beings can be crammed as if they were so many breeds of horses or cattle, has had its day. The word race will doubtless long survive, even tho' it may have lost all meaning. From time immemorial men have taken far more pains to damn their souls than would have sufficed to save them. Hence they will be certain to preserve this most scientific term which incites to hatred and unjustifiable contempt for our fellow men, instead of replacing it by some word implying the brotherhood of man.

The congress itself recorded its judgment on the matter of race differences by

Urging the vital importance at this juncture of history of disowning race prejudice, as tending to inflict on humanity inestimable harm, and as based on generalizations unworthy of an enlightened and progressive age.