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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/urmis/2292>

DOI: 10.4000/urmis.2292

ISSN: 1773-021X

Publisher

Urmis

Electronic reference

Jean Benoist, "Looking Back on Proposals on the Biological Aspects of Race.

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Interview by Jean-Luc Bonniol", *Cahiers de l'Urmis* [Online], 20 | June 2021, Online since 29 June 2021, connection on 30 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/urmis/2292> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/urmis.2292>

This text was automatically generated on 30 July 2021.

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Looking Back on Proposals on the Biological Aspects of Race.

UNESCO, Moscow, 1964.

Interview by Jean-Luc Bonniol

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- 1 In 1949, following the racial horrors arising from Nazi ideology, UNESCO launched an ambitious programme on the 'Race Question' entrusted to Alfred Métraux. Its purpose was clearly didactic: four statements were drafted, the first two published in 1950 (with the contribution of Claude Lévi-Strauss on the French side) and in 1951. Then, in 1964, Moscow hosted a meeting intended to prepare the third UNESCO Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice, to be entirely dedicated to the biological aspects of the issue of race. In 1967, it was followed by the fourth Statement, drawn up in Paris with the participation of Professor Georges Balandier, which focused mainly on the social and cultural aspects of the matter, with their political implications in decolonisation. Physician and anthropologist Jean Benoist, then with the University of Montreal, participated in the Moscow meeting and agreed to answer Jean-Luc Bonniol's questions on the subject.

Jean Benoist, you are a physician, with both MD and DSc degrees; you graduated from the Institut Pasteur and the Institute of Ethnology in Paris. You began your career in 1956 as Laboratory Director at the Institut Pasteur in Martinique, before teaching in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Montreal in the early 1960s.

How did your early career lead to your being invited to join the Experts' Group gathered by UNESCO in Moscow in 1964 to draft a Statement on the Biological Aspects of Race?

It may indeed be useful to start this interview by specifying the main orientations of my training, since it shows where I stand and the limitations of my competence, to avoid falling into the trap of many of those who talk about what they know too little of by extrapolating their opinions. So, I will strive to be as accurate, realistic and honest as possible.

For me, medicine is the balancing point between Man's biological nature and the individual as an entity with its own experience, marked by its privacy, culture and society. As far back as I look, it is with this perspective that I wanted to study medicine. Studying biology and further training at the Institut Pasteur opened up two essential fields for me —genetics and the environment— thanks to outstanding teachers, like André Lwoff and François Jacob.

Preparing a thesis in Martinique with its highly complex society brought me into contact with other researchers: Robert Gessain (a physician and ethnologist, extremely open to all the latest trends) and Jean Hiernaux (a physician whose thesis on 'biological' anthropology revealed the cultural foundations of the development of biological differences between two populations, Hutu and Tutsi: in particular, he 'deconstructed' the idea of races being intrinsically different, as incompatible entities actually situated at the extremes of a gradient within which some more pronounced discontinuities provided an erroneous view of independent entities). There was also Albert Jacquard (a graduate of the famed École Polytechnique, who was then working on the mathematical theory of human population genetics). That's for the more biological dimension, while the ethnological side of my thesis brought me in close contact with André Leroi-Gourhan and Roger Bastide. This thesis, which I defended early in 1964, examined *métissage* (mixed marriage) in Martinique through a descriptive approach to the population while also seeking to describe it from a genetic standpoint (with very limited tools). I took into account the fact that a population is also a society that regulates marriage, penalising some couples and encouraging others, thereby channelling gene flow... This made it necessary to analyse interracial marriage through social dynamics.

At that time, UNESCO had launched a vast programme for the purpose of countering racist discourse and its dire consequences, which remained on everyone's mind and was threatening to resurface. UNESCO had invited several authors to prepare papers on this topic and organised international meetings for the purpose of having experts draft Statements on Race. The first meeting held in 1950 and attended mainly by social scientists had raised doubts. Many anthropologists saw it as an expression of wishful thinking with more or less groundless assertions, rather than a convincing demonstration of the absence of biological grounds for hierarchizing human groups, or any justification for the belief that miscegenation would cause degeneration of the human species.

UNESCO decided to hold a meeting of biologists and anthropobiologists specifically focused on the latest biological advances on the subject of race. Its organisation was entrusted to Jean Hiernaux, who invited me to participate. Highly motivated to fight racism as it had developed during World War II and as he had witnessed it in the Belgian Congo, Jean Hiernaux had accepted UNESCO's invitation to organise this meeting where biologists open to the realities of modern genetics would address the issue of race by gathering evidence to prepare what was to be an irreproachable statement in the face of criticism of the shortcomings of previous declarations. Knowing my work, he invited me to participate.

Your singularity, as a French anthropologist, was to have remained loyal to your initial holistic anthropological vocation, concerned with viewing humans as much in their biological dimension as in their social and cultural dimension.

It is not a matter of 'loyalty'. My initial training in anthropology was somewhat 'improvised', as was common in France at the time: while offering an introduction, it did not provide genuine training for professionals in the discipline. I acquired my own training in North America, through contacts with teachers and graduates of Columbia University. It must be remembered that anthropology, as it is taught in the United States, parts of Canada and many other countries, includes a programme of studies over several years of the biological, social, cultural, linguistic and archaeological dimensions of human societies.

So, how do you position your reflection in the context of this anthropological discipline, and how did it consider the issue of Race?

In France, anthropology has long been understood as a 'natural history of Man', first and foremost a biological history, to which could be added a few considerations on environment or social behaviour, capable of acting as mechanisms of selection. The purpose was to inventory and explain the differences between human groups: differences that, finding their expression in both physical characteristics and 'customs and traditions,' contributed to their diversity in time and space in Man's natural history. In seeking scientific answers to the questions raised by such diversity, anthropology began with a popular concept that brought all this together, as with zootechnics: the concept of 'Race'. To be able to trace Man's natural history, it was necessary to describe human races, detect their relationships and the distance between them. A race, identified by physical traits to which behavioural traits could be added here and there, was perceived as a consistent whole that could be fragmented, crossbred or combined with others, if at the price of potentially detrimental alteration of its identity and purity.

The paradigm long persisted just under the surface of anthropological research. Physical differences also attested to past history, during which races interbred thereby creating various sub-types whose components needed to be identified as fragments received from previous pure races (e.g., individuals who were part-'Alpine', part-'Mediterranean'). Behind this biological paradigm lay scholarly claims and popular discourse: consequences of racial diversity and blending, hierarchy among races characterised by physical and civilisational traits to which different values were granted and the perilous nature of miscegenation looming over multiracial populations.

It must be remembered that, in France, the term 'anthropology' long designated only physical anthropology. In this context, there could be interest in traditions and folklore, as well as artefacts, while sociology had taken charge of the rest of social life. Anthropology was part of the Sciences, while sociology, and ethnology in its beginnings, belonged to Arts and Letters; this was reflected in the hiring of researchers, the modulation of thinking, the formulation of their goals and the references in their analyses.

But it was genetics, especially the discovery of the hereditary transmission of blood groups, that carried relative differences in frequency in correlation with geographic gradients, which inspired biologists to pursue research on human genetics in the listing of differences. Population genetics would lead the way in attempting to

explain differences within an evolutionist matrix. I happened to be starting my career at that time and rapidly found my place in North America with a teaching position at the University de Montreal, so I met the main proponents of this movement, in both the United States and Great Britain.

If UNESCO repeatedly sought to go back to the drawing board, it is obviously because weaknesses or shortcomings appeared in the texts already available to the public. Could you explain the scientific challenges linked to the third 'Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice'?

Highlighting biology satisfied the need to examine what had been the basis of scientific racism as stated by Nazi theorists, among many others, to build a 'racial policy' presented as eugenics. It was claimed to eliminate the incurable flaws characterising the very nature of certain races and that had to be kept out of the way of the German people at all cost. Interracial marriage (*métissage*) was deemed contaminating, the very proximity of such races being viewed as dangerous. The outcome of such reasoning gradually led to enforcing increasingly stringent measures, up to the 'final solution'.

The work of national schools supporting this concept with anthropological evidence fit in with a long tradition which, in France, harked back to Paul Broca: skeletons were compared along an evolutionary scale on which various human groups were placed according to evolutionary stage. Then, value judgments were added on social conduct and cultures which, for the same purpose, led to evaluation in comparison with those viewed as having reached the pinnacle of the human species: 'White' people of European descent, distinguished by both their visible physical traits and their level of civilisation. All this was rooted in population biology.

Inviting expert physical anthropologists from many different countries was presented as what has since been dubbed a 'consensus conference': comparing research and theoretical conclusions, finding the common denominator for consensus around discrepancies in the face of the reality of a typological approach to human diversity, the absence of racial 'flaws' and total dissociation between physical traits and social and cultural behaviour.

At the Moscow meeting, what were the main subjects for debate, and how was the notion of race defined in relation to the UNESCO Statement of 1951?

The texts and declarations drafted under the aegis of UNESCO, in rather concise form, only indirectly broached what had been one of the key arguments justifying racism as practised by the Nazis after having been theorised by essayists and anthropobiologists. UNESCO then decided to define more specifically and endorse the most recent biological evidence based on the scientific theory of population genetics, and convened to that end a meeting featuring only scientists having studied the biological dimensions of human diversity, for the purpose of better substantiating the intellectual objections to the biological foundations of racism. It appeared that the Statements of 1950 and 1951 presented conclusions without actually demonstrating their validity. This could jeopardise their impact in the eyes of proponents of biological racialism, whose conclusions, it should not be forgotten, seemed far more convincing than complex genetic demonstrations to the public at large (isn't this still true even today?). This is what makes it so forceful. Discourse based on appearance and what is instantly observable expresses an easy-to-understand vernacular sociology that transforms the observation of contrasts

between the major human groups into obvious certainties by interpreting any correlation as the demonstration of causality.

Nor should it be forgotten that, prior to the introduction of population genetics, researchers were in line with this manner of thinking, as expressed in their publications: linking differences between individuals to 'types' corresponding to races, while making distinctions between those that are 'pure', very close to a given type, or 'mixed', meaning that they combine different types. They did not challenge the racial typology of popular intuition; it was made 'scientific' by being systematised, quantified and determined by measurements, couched in academic language (even taking into account behaviour, facial expression, etc.). Science had legitimised such thinking, in which what was related in observation appeared to be enshrined in the essence governing the whole, *i.e.*, Race. The fact that differences implied intrinsic inequalities also affected political attitudes towards such populations, even endorsing State-approved eugenic racism.

Thus, the answer to this question was complex in that it had to take into account several dimensions, one in the framework of the history of Science and Nature in general, another concerning the political reinterpretation of different scientific positions, and the third relating to the internal dynamics of French and European anthropology from, roughly, the 1930s up to the years following the end of World War II.

Could you say more about this last point, which directly concerns the history of French anthropology?

Biological anthropology evolved for some time by grounding itself in an undisputed paradigm: though unitary, the human species is diversified into several major groups characterised by their anatomical morphology and various behavioural traits.¹ Research set for itself the goal of describing this diversity and establishing a classification of the 'main races', further divided into sub-races, etc. Some were also concerned with distinguishing between types of behaviour fundamentally inscribed in these races and related to their environment —climatic, historical, etc. This movement prevailed in the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris, founded by Paul Broca at the Musée de l'Homme, and in teaching.

In France, a minority trend offered a more dynamic concept. It can be schematically illustrated by Henri Neuville's book, *L'espèce, la race et le métissage en anthropologie* (Paris, Masson, 1933). It was in fact research on 'racially mixed' populations that provided the most convincing arguments to those who saw the standard typological concept of race as simplistic, and opened the way to a complete renewal of the 'Race Question' thanks to population genetics. Proponents of this movement, working on populations (as defined by demographers), soon realised that every human population (as defined by geneticists) is also a society and that, in a society, individuals interact with each other according to types of relations that structure social rules. Thus, relations between the sexes and the matrimonial structures necessarily governing all genetic transmission were seen as a modality of social management of an essential biological fact —reproduction— with direct incidence on the genetic structure of all human populations. The task of anthropology was then to confront the ideal theoretical model of population genetics (panmixia, *i.e.*, strictly random mating with a population of infinite size) and analyse how deviations in this panmictic model (with mutations, interracial marriage, selection and genetic drift)

actually lead to variability in the distribution of genes and to statistical ‘racialization’, which had nothing to do with prior typological visions.

Is there political significance to the choice of Moscow as the venue for this Expert group?

I don’t think there was anything of this sort, and this is attested all the more that virtually the participants were all scientists engaged in genetic studies, focusing on population genetics at a time when Soviet doctrine was strongly influenced by the rejection of such positions under Lysenko’s influence. We sensed nothing of the sort. As UNESCO delegates, we had many local contacts; we were not staying in a hotel reserved for foreign tourists; we were very warmly received at the Academy of Sciences. It seems to me that the Russian scientists we met perceived us as affording an opportunity for intellectual ventilation.

What is striking when rereading the different Statements on Race (up to 1964) are the unquestionable advances in thinking: in 1950, what was highlighted was the fact that perception of human variability is shaped by preconceived schemes; in 1964, emphasis was on the importance of social structuring of marital reproduction in biological population dynamics. But, it was also the persistence of racial categorisation: the Statement of 1950 made reference to three main divisions: mongoloid, negroid and caucasoid; in 1951, there was mention of grand-races (in French, in German: Hauptrassen); and in 1964, there was a return to the three major stocks... A few years later, however, the very principle of this classification was challenged, leading the simplifying premise that prospered with the general public: ‘there is no such thing as races.’ What was your reaction to this paradigm shift, from the 1950s to the end of the century?

There was a shift from anthropology as a form of palaeontology characterised by the description of anatomical features to a search for traits undeniably recognised as hereditary and the study of their distribution between populations. The great shift came with the use of blood groups, which would lead the Life Sciences to give precedence to concepts and data from molecular biology over those based on morphological traits for descriptive and classificatory purposes, a trend that went far beyond the human species alone.

In 1954, Mourant opened the way by publishing a corpus of data on a considerable number of blood groups collected in most countries in the world.² He established gradients of diversity, identified concentrations, thereby making it possible to begin evaluating genetic distance between populations. From then on, the standard concept of race began to wane, shifting from ‘essence’ to ‘existence’: information *a priori* from Nature, something to be understood, the resultant of a succession of events to be decrypted, events unfolding within populations, *i.e.*, entities more or less surrounded by geographical or social barriers slowing the circulation of genes. The approach further developed with the growth of genetic knowledge. The discovery of the HLA system brought more complex genetic markers, thereby providing more information. It was possible to define distance between populations and geographical gradients. The study of isolates helped reveal microevolutionary mechanisms, the starting point for better understanding ‘racialization’ as the effect of evolutionary factors common to all species and their diversification: mutation, selection, genetic drift (including the founder effect due to fluctuations in sampling during migrations) and gene flow, the genetic expression of interracial marriage (*métissage*).³

This helps understand how the great majority of geneticists and anthropobiologists then adopted this new appreciation of human biological diversity on the basis of new data on population genetics, a moment often thought to have been triggered by the famous Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin’s article demonstrating that there is far greater variability between

individuals than between populations on the basis of mathematical models (not real populations);⁴ thereby laying the groundwork for the continuum in which this variability is inscribed, a position popularised in France by Albert Jacquard... Yet this position began to be contested in the early 2000s by English-language authors indicating that race is a good proxy for identifiable entities within human diversity. Furthermore, the inclusion of DNA was a gamechanger that could, in some cases, suggest a kind of return of biological race... How do you feel about this?

Molecular genetics and sequencing the human genome made it possible to study human diversity with unprecedented accuracy and on a scale unthinkable before then. Genetic sequencing opened the way to examining the distribution not only of genes, but of the bases that make up DNA, and comparing the substitutions, by insertion, deletion or duplication, that affect its structure, so doing by observing large numbers of individuals, then comparing many different populations. Thus, the '1,000 genomes' project studied 2,504 individuals in 26 populations and 84.6 million sites of these bases. This revealed that variability was far greater in African populations than in any other populations, which is consistent with the fact that Man originated in Africa, while human dispersion by migrations was accompanied by founder effects and, consequently, a drop in variability in populations having descended from these migrations. We should also note that mapping gene frequency in Africa offers good coincidence with linguistic mapping, confirming, if need be, that human biological entities —populations— are also societies. What had been called 'Race' appeared then as the biological specificity of these entities. It cannot be eluded, but must be interpreted in a way that is compatible with the reality of its genetic foundations. Another large-scale programme, *Hap Map*, used genotyping to examine one million polymorphisms in many populations through over three million individuals, revealing that there is little difference between human populations, with only 12% total genetic differentiation, while 88% can be explained by variations within populations, which is the corollary of our species have recently emerged.

But there remains a grey area that we are just beginning to explore: the extent to which Culture shapes biological traits, and how.

On the matter of human diversity and its biological underpinnings as well as all the discourse and interpretations that have led to relating biology to ideologies that reject others and exalt self-identity, what is your position today, after so many years of studying this field?

If the biological approach to human diversity shows how the primate species Man spread over immense territories and developed variations, this leaves us with an unanswered question, a thought that has persisted through history and haunted all continents. How better to express it than in the general terms of Louis Chevalier⁵: *Nothing is commoner in popular psychology at all places and in all periods than this attention to physical characteristics, which are taken at sight to signify moral characteristics.* This facet of the questioning must be broached without bias or taboo, but very rigorously, particularly since our knowledge leaves many open questions when you seek answers on the basis of scientific data alone rather than contradictory notions taken from differing ideologies, each of which perceives itself as the expression of moral values.

Traditional thinking, in the relations it establishes between Nature and Culture, interprets all that is biological as resulting from heredity and also attributes cultural transmission to what is biological —meaning heredity. Nonetheless, the distinction between these two orders remains fundamental and inescapable! It appears to me that the biological dimension, often invoked as one of the tools for legitimising

insurmountable differences, is grounded in a very superficial, and even artificial, vision of human biology. That's why it seems useless to me as a biologist to engage in a discussion where biology is diverted into an argument in support of pre-existing opinions. Even the way of thinking of non-biologist researchers who rely on a blend of ideology and ignorance to expound on Race is close to what can be qualified as 'popular' representations. We cannot —we must not— bring in a system of values in the evaluation of the results of biological research. Nonetheless, intellectuals introduce moral values into the scientific debate. The issue of race is raised on the basis of these values, which classify all conclusions as good or evil, with the conviction that what is good corresponds to the truth, while evil, in this moral system, is a reflection of scientific error...

My own position is very far from this line of thought, and much closer to considering that research on the realities of Nature must be distanced from value judgments. Pasteur was clear: *When I enter my laboratory, I leave God at the door*. Claude Bernard advised *considering to be true only what can be absolutely demonstrated to be so*, and Darwin interpreted his findings in total freedom, ignoring all pressure and all the presuppositions of philosophy, religion or the science of his day. We cannot dialogue with Nature to submit our opinions; we must only question it and listen. Scientific progress does not lie with answers, but with the fact that we can ask increasing precise questions, which come closer and closer to reality. We must be able to remain silent in our inner self to listen to Nature, question it and accept it, without rejecting the need for ethical judgment, but knowing that its source is outside Nature, which cannot participate in it. Yet many of our contemporaries are ready to reject Nature's answers if they are not in keeping with what they interpret as moral values.

Is there still any interest in dialogue with biologists? This is probably what explains the failure of UNESCO's efforts. Indeed, this is not where the debate lies; it is elsewhere. Remarks on the biological substrate of 'Race' invoke biology, on the basis of ordinary intuition, but without taking into account biological science, which is generally poorly known. What is forgotten is the incommensurability between rationality, its demands, humility —an instrument of knowledge— and values that play a completely different role, which is necessary for the social order and the protection of individuals. But values are not instruments of knowledge and, when they interfere with these instruments, they distort them. Indeed, an ethos is not built with reference to the reality of Nature or the world's past, but on the basis of an ideal, a project. It is creation, not deduction, and produced by Man, not by Nature.

What about these conditions, since scientific knowledge and ordinary thinking occupy two different registers in the fight against racism?

I have asked myself for a long time⁶ if this struggle for which we have sought weapons in biology was not at odds with social reality. True, scientific study on the foundations of human biological diversity has produced truly inescapable conclusions. But what impact have they had on the most widespread thinking, and even on certain 'scientific' assertions? Opinions on racial inequality take root elsewhere, in elementary observations and assertive statements. Can well-reasoned arguments serve as an effective antidote?

I would like to quote two brief texts that I find particularly significant and that bolster my conclusions. Let's begin with the anthropologist Wiktor Stoczkowski who, after having examined the issue of racism and exclusion, concluded: *In my opinion, this*

cause is doomed to fail as long as we overlook the genuine conceptual underpinnings of exclusion theory. And we will overlook them as long as we continue ignoring what I would describe as ordinary thinking...⁷ From another angle, in *L'assignation. Les Noirs n'existent pas*,⁸ essayist Tania de Montaigne writes that, when it comes to race: *We must believe, not think. This is why, even if Science has proven that there is no chromosomal difference between a person of one colour or another person of another colour, any more than there is between people of different religions, Race holds out.*

This representation of Race, which holds out so well, was condemned using the theory of evolution and developments in population genetics. True, this research debunked the notion of a natural 'essence' forming a finite entity that could be called 'Race'. But, can it have the slightest influence on standard anti-Semitic discourse, extremist Ku Klux Klan members or even ordinary perception? Ignoring those who harbour such thinking means doing so from another universe that seems to contradict their daily lives. It is not by opposing the Way of Science with a train of thought that has no ties with it, that we can hope to exert any influence whatsoever, since no argument based on reason can eradicate a conviction rooted either in passion, or in 'common sense'.

NOTES

1. Historian Carole Reynaud-Paligot clearly shows the positions of French 'biological' anthropology in the first third of the 20th century in her book, *La République raciale*, Paris, PUF, 2006.
2. Arthur Mourant, *The Distribution of the Human Blood Groups*, Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford, 1954.
3. First summary in French of these advances, *La diversité biologique humaine*, Jean Hiernaux (ed.), Paris, Masson and Montreal, Presses de l'Université, 1981.
4. Richard Lewontin, "The apportionment of human diversity," *Evol Biol.* 1972, 6: p. 381-398.
5. Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Plon, 1958, p. 577 [English translation: *Working Classes and Dangerous Classes: In Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Howard Fertig, 1973].
6. Jean Benoist, "Races et racisme: à propos de quelques entrecats de la science et de l'idéologie", in Pascal Blanchard, Stéphane Blanchoin, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch et Hubert Gerbeau (dir.), *L'autre et nous. Scènes et types*, Paris, Syros, 1995, pp. 21-26.
7. Wiktor Stoczkowski, "La pensée de l'exclusion et la pensée de la différence. Quelle cause pour quel effet?" *L'Homme*, 39/150, p. 41-57.
8. Tania de Montaigne, *L'assignation. Les Noirs n'existent pas*, Paris, Grasset, 2018, p. 32.

ABSTRACTS

Jean Benoist participated in 1964 in the third conference on the racial question, organized by UNESCO in Moscow, more specifically devoted to the biological aspects of the question. He recalls what were at stake at this conference, during which a consensus was able to emerge concerning the inadequacy of a typological approach to human diversity, the absence of racial 'flaws' and the total dissociation between physical traits and social and cultural behaviour. He recalls his itinerary and the maturation of his thought on the subject, by evoking how it was at this time treated by French anthropology, then specifying its position in relation to recent biological advances on the topic and to the persistence of popular representations of race.

Jean Benoist a participé en 1964 à la troisième conférence sur la question raciale, organisée par l'Unesco à Moscou en 1964, plus spécifiquement consacrée aux aspects biologiques de la question. Il rappelle quels étaient les enjeux de cette conférence, durant laquelle a pu se dégager un consensus concernant l'inadéquation par rapport au réel d'une approche typologique de la diversité humaine, sur l'absence de « tares » raciales, ainsi que sur la dissociation totale entre traits physiques et comportements sociaux et culturels. Il retrace son itinéraire et la maturation de sa pensée sur le sujet, en évoquant comment celui-ci était alors traité par l'anthropologie française, puis précisant sa position par rapport aux avancées biologiques récentes dans le domaine et face à la perdurance des représentations populaires de la race.