

Positivism and Progress in Firmin's *Equality of the Human Races*

by

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Abstract

With *The Equality of Human Races*, Haitian intellectual Anténor Firmin offered the world its first sustained, philosophical, book-length response to scientific European racism. With the publication of the English translation in 2000, we in the Anglophone world finally have the opportunity to reclaim Firmin and his work as a part of Black intellectual history. What is perhaps most striking for the modern day reader is Firmin's critical project. Firmin proceeds systematically through the key "scientific arguments" in favor of racial inequality, casting doubt on the methodologies, countering what passes for evidence, and revealing the underlying assumptions, prejudices and ideologies behind them. Along with this critical project, however, Firmin puts forward an original thesis about the origin, development, advancement, and ultimate equality of the human races.

In this essay, I discuss Firmin's notion of *progress*, the idea at the heart of that positive thesis, situating him relative to several key figures of his time. On the one hand, progress is the key to the difference between Arthur de Gobineau's *Inequality of Human Races* and Firmin's *Equality of Human Races*—the latter viewing it as an absolute certainty, the former as an idealistic illusion. On the other hand, progress is what unites Firmin with such key nineteenth century figures as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, who clearly serve as models for the type and scope of Firmin's positivist project. Progress is also that for which Firmin must provide a new, anti-racist theory in order to successfully counter the social Darwinist arguments of scholars like Clémence Royer (while positioning himself as proponent of Darwin's theories).

Introduction

As fundamental as progress is for Firmin, it remains more an assumption of his text than a proven result, more a motivating ideal than a scientific fact, putting Firmin's faith in progress into tension with his own exhortation that science must free itself from all prejudices. Because Firmin's science was shaped by what can only be described as a positivist philosophy or a philosophy of progress, Firmin's book belongs not only to the history of the *study* of race but to the history of the *philosophy* of race as well.

With *The Equality of Human Races*, Haitian intellectual Anténor Firmin offered the world its first sustained, philosophical, book-length response to scientific European racism. Unfortunately, the volume, first published in Paris in 1885, quickly disappeared and was out of print even in Haiti until 1968. With the publication of the English translation in 2000 (following an additional reprint of the original French in Haiti in 1985), we in the Anglophone world finally have the opportunity to reclaim Firmin and his work as a part of Black intellectual history.¹ Composed in a single year, if Firmin's own preface is to be believed, *De l'Égalité des Races Humaines* is the work of a man possessed, not by joy or enthusiasm for his subject, but by a desperate need to speak out against the pervasive racism of the field he believed held the key to the intellectual progress of humanity—anthropology.

What is perhaps most immediately striking for the modern day reader of the work is Firmin's critical project. Firmin proceeds systematically through the key "scientific arguments" in favor of racial inequality, casting doubt on the methodologies, countering what passes for evidence, and revealing the underlying assumptions, prejudices and ideologies that drive the people behind it all. Along with this critical project, however, comes a positive one. In his effort to create a new "Positivist Anthropology" (a term included in the full title of the work), Firmin puts forward an original thesis about the origin, development, advancement, and ultimate equality of the human races. In "recovering" this work for the intellectual history of the struggle against racism, it seems equally as important to understand this positive thesis and what drives it as it is to appreciate his debunking of various racial scientific myths against which, in spite of their insidious persistence, we already have ample evidence. In this essay, I discuss Firmin's notion of progress, the idea at the heart of that positive thesis. In so doing, I situate him relative to several key figures including Arthur de Gobineau (against whom he *appears* to be arguing), Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer (whose faith in progress he shares), Charles Darwin (whose theory Firmin interprets as supporting his own), and Clémence Royer (whose own framing of Darwin was likely a powerful influence on Firmin's interpretation).

Since the publication of the English translation in 2000, needed attention has been given to Firmin as a "pioneering anthropologist" of the nineteenth century² and as an early theoretician of the Pan-Africanist movement.³ Robert Bernasconi, however, argues that Firmin's positivism constitutes not simply a method, but a philosophy.⁴ Here, then, I hope to shed light on Firmin's *philosophical* commitments, situating him also as a pioneering nineteenth-century philosopher of race.

Argument and Counter Arguments

The extent to which Firmin actually engages with and successfully argues against Gobineau's thesis in *The Inequality of the Human Races* is an open question and not one that I intend to pursue here. Certain passages suggest that Firmin is simply using Gobineau's work as a place from which to launch criticisms more suited to other opponents.⁵ Yet Firmin no doubt took deep exception to Gobineau's use of Haiti as an example of the unsuitability of the Black race for civilization,⁶ and both the title and content of Firmin's own work clearly seek to counteract that basic claim.⁷ More important to the aim of this essay, however, is the offense Firmin seems to take at the very pessimism of Gobineau's thesis, its racial component notwithstanding.

Gobineau argued that man's time on earth would span a total of twelve to fourteen thousand years and could be divided into two periods: "the first, which has passed, will have seen and possessed the youth, vigour and intellectual greatness of humanity; the other, which has already begun, will see its waning and inevitable decline" (IRH 1166).⁸ In other words, the human race (through race mixing) had reached a peak and (also through race mixing) had begun a long, slow decline into mediocrity. This conclusion was, for Gobineau, a scientific fact and not one to be moralized. Society simply existed and carried with it no morality (RI 163; IRH 1150). Furthermore, on Gobineau's account, nothing in the present state of our civilization demonstrated the capacity for infinite progress. "Man has been able to learn some things, but has forgotten many others" and "in his wretchedness, has never succeeded in inventing a way of providing the whole race with clothes or in putting them beyond the reach of hunger and thirst," he writes. In short, the idea of continual, perpetual progress was a foolish illusion (IHR 161-3; IRH 294-6).

Near the end of his book, Firmin insists that if (as in Gobineau) the conclusions that follow from a given theory are

obviously in contradiction with every idea of progress and justice, or even with common sense; if they can be considered possible only by our overthrowing all the ideas generally considered the most correct, the most favorable to stability and harmony among people and things, and the most consistent with humanity's highest aspirations; we would then have [all the more] reason to discard as false the theory on which they are based.⁹

In this passage, we see that Firmin views progress not only as an observable scientific fact, but as a principle against which the interpretation of scientific observation can be tested and (at least to a degree) rejected. If a particular theory does not support our idea of progress, it is likely not our faith in progress that is misguided but the theory itself. This basic conviction, we shall see, will underlie the entire positive portion of Firmin's work, even as the critical portion repeatedly accuses racist scientists of getting out of their theories only the prejudices they have already put into them.

While it is the aim of this essay to draw out and call attention to this tension between science and ideology, we must not make the mistake of thinking Firmin exceptionally illogical or hypocritical in this regard. Rather, we must examine the intellectual context in which he was writing, one aspect of which was positivism.¹⁰ Firmin makes repeated (frequently favorable) references to Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer—the former being the founder of positivism and the latter, though rejecting the label,¹¹ falling into the positivist camp in at least one important sense. Both Spencer and the positivists “asserted two things which are today, properly, understood to be incompatible: that sociology should yield ethical principles and that it should be rigorously scientific.”¹²

In brief, the positivist doctrine was characterized by a confidence in the progress of humanity through science and a belief in the power and benefits of scientific rationality. According to Auguste Comte, scientific knowledge was destined, in the course of history, to replace both early theological beliefs and subsequent metaphysical explanations, in accordance with the inexorable law of human progress (the law of three phases).¹³ In becoming “positive,” one renounced the question of “why?” (in other words, the search for first causes) and limited oneself to the question of “how”—that is the formulation of laws of nature (expressed in mathematical language) using observation and experience to discover the constants that unite various phenomena and explain the reality of facts.¹⁴ Positivism was a system of empiricism that rejected *a priori* knowledge and was founded instead on mechanical determinism (though as we have already seen it clearly rested on an *a priori* assumption of human progress). For Comte, progress in the world was forced by the development of the human mind and the increasing application of thought, reasoning and logic to the understanding of that world.¹⁵

The positivist system was essentially totalizing. Comte believed that positivism brought everything together, uncovering a natural order that controlled human life, the understanding of which would help to bring our morality (our intellect, feelings and actions) into line. We would see that everything we do is controlled by this order whether we recognize it or not. Studying the phenomenon of society would help people to discover this order—like all other events, society too was subject to natural relations of sequence and similitude. The great end of life according to positivism was the struggle to become more perfect, which implies previous imperfection and a certain scope for human action in correcting it. For Comte, all other fields of study were but a preparation for the final science of humanity.¹⁶

As to Herbert Spencer, his project can be seen as an effort to “biologize the enlightenment’s faith in progress” (JP xx). In the essay “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” Spencer explicitly sought to clarify the notion of progress.¹⁷ All visible expressions of progress, he argued, were simply manifestations of an internal modification that was the reality of progress. He sought to show that one single law could explain all forms of progress—organic, inorganic, social, etc. This law was the necessity of change from the homogenous to the heterogeneous.

In terms of human biology, Spencer argued that humankind, as a whole, had been growing more heterogeneous in virtue of the multiplication of races and the differentiation of these races from each other.¹⁸ Socially speaking, he argued that civilized races had developed out of barbarous races by progressing toward greater heterogeneity in their social life, forming more complex systems of custom, religion and government, and increasingly specialized divisions of labor.

Arguably, Spencer's ideas of evolution focused more on the concept of adaptation—which could be fitted to match his notion of progress through heterogeneity—than on natural selection (JP xx-xxii).¹⁹ He argued that things like famine, population pressure and war produced dispersions of populations and that these dispersions produced new modifications and types.²⁰ Not all these changes would be advances, however; some would be degradations (PLC 53). He also argued that societies that had already become more heterogeneous gained more benefits (further heterogeneity) from technological advancements than did less heterogeneous ones. This was because progress, for Spencer, was driven by the natural fact that each single cause always produced multiple effects, and thus existent heterogeneity offered more elements to be affected thereby yielding a greater number of effects, which then produced further heterogeneity. Thus, on Spencer's account, while progress was not an accident but a beneficent necessity, it was not a necessity that would act equally on all societies but would rather accrue to some more than others.²¹

It is on this last point that Firmin will clearly disagree with Spencer and those of Spencer's conclusions that prefigure social Darwinism.²² Nevertheless, there is much that Firmin respects in Spencer's work and it is important to see how closely the nature and scope of Firmin's project resemble those of Comte and Spencer.²³ When Firmin describes his work as a "positivist anthropology," he is not merely committed to using science and reason to correct mistakes in the study of humanity made through prejudice and poor methodology; he is also committed to a belief in the progress of humanity and to providing an explanation that will account for both the past of that progress and its continuation, all the while countering any theories that have denied the Black race a share or place in that progress.

Unity of Species: The Capacity for Human Progress

The references to progress in the introduction to *The Equality of the Human Races* are full of poetic imagery:

Is it not the ineluctable destiny of all human societies to go forward, to persevere on the road to perfection once the first step has been taken? Once all paralyzing constraints have been removed and the moral energies, which are the very soul of progress, have been liberated, this gradual and harmonious movement will occur spontaneously as a result of the natural elasticity proper to all social organisms.... All natural and organic laws combine to proclaim this truth. (EHR lvii-iii; ERH xxxviii)²⁴

Firmin also describes how “at the hour marked by destiny, the sun of progress and regeneration rose over their national horizon, its radiance inextinguishable” (EHR lvii; ERH xxxvii). He speaks of law, justice and freedom as forming “the crowning structure of the moral edifice which modern civilization has been laboriously and gloriously building on the accumulated ruins of the ideas of the Middle Ages” (EHR lviii; ERH xxxviii). He hopes that the Black race will “grow prosperous and scale the rungs of progress to the greatest heights” (EHR lix; ERH xxxix).

Thus, from the very beginning, it is clear that this strong, romantic image of progress underlies and is the driving force behind the work. In slightly less poetic terms, progress, for Firmin, is a single, universal movement whose inexorable force may be impeded from time to time in the course of history but will always ultimately prevail.

Unlike other theorists, however, he does not want to measure this progress according to humanity as a heterogeneous whole, in the sense that certain races are allowed to stand for progress while others are deemed necessarily inferior. Instead, he focuses on the unity of the species and sees the capacity for progress as belonging to humanity in *each* of its parts and as being fulfilled over time within *each* of the races. He writes:

To embrace the concept of the unity of the species involves, through the exercise of a great keenness of mind, rejecting all the false ideas that the existence of diverse races might inspire and seeing, instead, only the essential characteristics that make of all [men] a community of beings capable of understanding one another and of joining their individual destinies into a common destiny. That destiny is civilization, that is, the highest level of physical, moral, and intellectual achievement of the species. (EHR 83; ERH 75)²⁵

In asserting the unity of the human species, Firmin is not supporting the doctrine of monogenesis—the idea that all human beings descended from a single pair. At the same time, however, he rejects any polygenist defense of racial inequality—for example, the argument that because they did not descend from the same pair, the various human races need not be considered a single species and thus equal. He argues that while different races evolved from lower forms into the human species in different locations, they did so under similar environmental conditions which account for their specific unity. It is the fact of being a single species that is the basis of racial equality. To be of one species is to share in a common destiny, toward which all races necessarily move, though not at the same rate or according to the same timeline. Thus Firmin’s use of the following metaphor in discussing the Black race and its current level of development: “When one is late, one cannot afford to dawdle *en route*” (EHR lvii; ERH xxxvii).

The particularity and revolutionary appeal of Firmin's theory of progress within the human races and humanity as a whole is perhaps most clearly seen in his argument about beauty in the seventh chapter of his work. Here he argues that beauty is not a subjective concept, but something that can be perceived and measured objectively based on "certain elements of harmony or discordance" that "trigger in our soul sympathy or revulsion, in such a way that the esthetic experience is spontaneous and bypasses our conscious mind" thus seeming "to orient all personal impressions toward a common ideal through the determinism of our nervous system" (EHR 182; ERH 163). For support, he turns, among others, to Herbert Spencer who, according to Firmin, "identifies as the defining element of the beautiful the greatest differentiation of the parts of a thing joined to simplicity and unity of design" (EHR 183; ERH 164).²⁶

Having characterized human beauty as objective, Firmin decides to discuss the beauty of different human faces since it is the face, he argues, that exhibits the most diversity on the body and thus has the most potential for measurable beauty. "The beauty of the human face," he writes, "has to do with the regularity of its features, which are enhanced by the purity and variety of its lines, and more particularly, by its animation and liveliness. Thus defined, beauty admittedly may be found much more often in the White race than in the Black African race and especially in the Yellow Mongolian race" (EHR 184; ERH 165). Thus, Firmin argues that the White race is objectively more beautiful than other races, but this, for him, is not the end of the story.

For Firmin, beauty is both a form and a measure of progress and, like other forms of progress, is largely determined by climatic conditions. Physical evolution parallels social evolution and the "beauty of a race, in most cases, [develops in direct correlation to] its level of civilization" (EHR 187; ERH 168).²⁷ He then provides a series of examples which he believes demonstrate that members of the Black race become more beautiful as they become more intellectually and morally developed. Haiti naturally serves as Firmin's favorite illustration and he writes that: "Handsome Black men are a common sight in Haiti. Among soldiers, peasant farmers, and city people... one frequently encounters individuals who differ from White men only by their skin color and their hair" (EHR 197; ERH 178). Once again revealing the poetic character of his vision, Firmin concludes that: "It will not be long before the correlation between intellectual [and moral] development and physical beauty becomes one of the most elegant basic laws of anthropological biology" (EHR 193; ERH 174).²⁸

We see in Firmin's treatment of beauty his belief that all races progress in the same direction and by the same measure, though not at the same speed. We see that all forms of progress are connected and that intellectual/moral progress is a powerful force that even possesses the ability to influence physical characteristics. We see that the Black race is behind, according to Firmin, but that he does not believe it will remain so. The reality of equality lies in the *potential* of all races for beauty (or any other form of progress) and not in their *current* manifestations thereof.

We also see here Firmin's effort to shift the discussion away from traditional markers of racial difference (that seem persistent and unchangeable) toward markers that he can place on a continuum, along which movement is not only possible but (on his account) inevitable. "The conclusion," Firmin argues in an earlier chapter,

is that the skin color of the different human races is, *sublatis sublandis*, in direct correlation with the climate and living environments, whereas the shape of the face is, generally, a function of the degree of civilization currently attained by a particular race or achieved earlier by ancestors, who would have passed their distinctive facial traits to their descendents through heredity. (EHR 115; ERH 102)

Persistent racial characteristics such hair type and skin color do not provide the objective measure of beauty and the Black race is therefore not excluded from the possibility of attaining it. The organization of facial features, which Firmin believes can and does evolve over time, is the true measure of beauty (and, indeed, civilization) and the Black race becomes more and more beautiful every day as parts of it emerge from the restrictive environmental and social conditions which have impeded their progress. The only sense in which skin color matters to beauty is one that Firmin introduces at the very end of the seventh chapter, where he says that "the European's color enhances the beauty of a face better than the Ethiopian's does"—roughly, we might imagine, the way that a particular matte and frame might enhance a painting. But even here, a perfectly white background, though better than a perfectly black one, will not be the best. In Firmin's opinion, "the most beautiful complexion is that of the hybrid of a Black and a White, that of the mulatto. I should say, rather, the mulatress" (EHR 199; ERH 181).

In order to account for the varying rates of progress in the various races, Firmin invokes certain principles of evolutionary theory, arguing that "all the human races without exception, having emerged from an inferior state, evolve or must evolve toward superior forms of being, in a perpetual process of *becoming* which is the normal condition of every organism in nature, especially superior organisms" (EHR 277; ERH 250-1). Given his conviction that all human races have the same *capacities*, Firmin claims that it is the presence or absence of certain conditions and stimulations that determine whether or not a given race progresses in a given location during a given time period. Had there been, historically, equality of circumstances, there would be equality of the races, Firmin argues. Even today, "the Black race itself never fails to blossom every time it finds itself in the same circumstances that have favored the development of other human races" (EHR 213; ERH 192). To support this claim, Firmin turns to Darwin.

Interpreting Darwin

Firmin opens the eleventh chapter of his work with great praise for Darwin and great enthusiasm for his theory. He goes on to explain his own theory of the evolution of the human species, which he clearly believes to be strongly in keeping with Darwin's work. Firmin accepts Darwin's argument that higher species forms emerge from lower ones. As mentioned earlier, he sees the emergence of the human species as having occurred at a time when a global unity of geological and climatic conditions could have fostered that same emergence in a number of different places at once. According to Firmin:

Everything suggests that after this initial transformation, the rare specimens of human beings, alike everywhere and inferior to modern man in every way, continued to evolve slowly, under conditions that were more or less favorable to their development as a species, in the course of which development they split into distinct races, an absolutely secondary phenomenon. (EHR 270; ERH 244)

The splitting of these two phenomena—the evolution of humanity into a species and the evolution of that species into distinct races—allows Firmin, as we have seen, to insist on the equality of human potential *among* races and to dismiss as permanent but trivial most visible race markers while allowing for the possibility of continued development in areas such as intellect and morality. This continued advancement in the “less developed” races will be brought about through the same sorts of forces that originally prompted it in the “more developed” races as the former gain access to those forces. In Firmin's words, “all the human races, to the extent that they evolve away from conditions that [condemn them] to degeneration or impede their progressive development, can and must reach the same stage as any of these races that [have been able to evolve, to improve themselves and] attain a superior position in the family of nations” (EHR 274, translated adjusted; ERH 248).

Thus the equal opportunity for progress is not something available merely at the beginning of the species life that disappears if a particular race does not seize it at the opportune moment. Rather, the forces of progress seem to lie in wait within the race, seizing on any positive change of location or circumstance to bring forth the natural improvements that lay dormant during the time spent by that race in the previous environment. For Firmin, this potential is embedded in our very biology—“a limb, or any organ for that matter, contains all the elements necessary for its transformation. Hidden in its very fabric, these elements await only the stimulation of the blood to be activated” (EHR 282; ERH 255). Firmin ultimately believes in “the incalculable perfectibility of the human species, which is the most valid distinction between human beings and animals” (EHR 278; ERH 251). Here, race and time mean nothing while civilization means everything.

Even races that, through their circumstances, have become degraded “have not lost their right to partake in humanity’s common patrimony, that is, their right [to a rebuilding and] to progress. It is never too late for them to commence the marvelous march upward to travel the same road that led the civilized nations to their current level of achievement” (EHR 286, translation adjusted; ERH 259).

At first blush, Firmin’s interpretation of Darwin seems misguided—an almost willful misreading occasioned by Firmin’s own positivist ideology. Firmin tries to claim that “though he formulated the scientific laws which may help shed light on the subject of the division of humanity into races, Darwin never did discuss it directly and at length” (EHR 270; ERH 244), explicitly dismissing Darwin’s discussion of sexual selection in *The Descent of Man* as irrelevant to the subject, perhaps precisely because it is through sexual selection that Darwin’s theory ultimately arrives at a notion of a progress that is not equally available to all members of a species.²⁹ Even if we accept Firmin’s choice to limit his use of Darwin to the theories of *The Origin of Species*, it seems that Firmin gets that work wrong, focusing as he does on the forces of climate and environment, which Darwin repeatedly insists must be seen as subordinate to the much more significant influences of natural and sexual selection.³⁰ If his project forces him to ignore one of Darwin’s books and misinterpret the other, why, one may ask, does Firmin bother to employ Darwin at all?

Clémence Royer’s Influences

There are several possible answers to the above question. First, Firmin in this respect is again a product of his time. As he explains at the beginning of his chapter on Darwinism:

Such scholars and scientists as Haeckel, Huxley, Carl Vogt, Lanessan, Jacoby, Herbert Spencer, Clémence Royer, and a whole contingent of others who belong to today’s intellectual avant-garde, further developed Darwin and Wallace’s theory, taking it into all sorts of directions and adapting the two naturalists’ method to the demonstration of all sorts of truths. An idea supported by so many remarkable champions can never be ignored. These adherents’ approval, whether conditional or absolute, vouchsafes its accuracy and scientific effectiveness. (EHR 269-70; ERH 243)

In a very real sense, then, Firmin could not write a book in which he claims to use the power of science to dispel prejudice and reveal truth and *not* discuss Darwin’s work. To do so would have been to brand his project as irrelevant even before he had begun—a fact which Clémence Royer seeks to establish in her preface to the first edition of the French translation of *The Origin of Species*, reprinted in the fourth edition from which Firmin would have been working.³¹

Like Firmin, Royer believes in progress and in the power of science to uncover truths about the world and humanity that religion only obscures. Royer argues in the very first paragraph of the preface that: “We must even admit that the progress of truth gives us as much to forget as to learn, and that we learn to deny and to doubt as often as to affirm” (POE xxvii).³² As with the positivists, Royer takes the key indication of intellectual progress to be the elaboration of a doctrine that unifies a theory of the nature, origin and purpose of things with a theory of morality, conduct and politics—a doctrine that can be tested and proven through experience. Similarly, she believes that the world and the people in it move almost helplessly in this forward direction, as though through common instinct. With her preface, Royer places Darwin’s work firmly at the center of this movement and essentially accuses those who would try to argue with or ignore Darwin of being backward looking—enemies of progress.

Yet Royer does not stop with a simple exhortation of the importance of Darwin’s theory to the intellectual future of humankind. Near the end of her protracted preface, she begins to extrapolate from Darwin’s findings in the direction of what we now call social Darwinism. On Royer’s view, Darwin, in his effort to be purely empirical, errs too far on the side of caution by not following the consequences of his theory to the end—that is, their application to present human social relations. She sees it as her moral duty to do this work for him, beginning with the end of the preface and continuing in notes appended to the main text. She argues that according to Darwin’s theory, a species progresses generally, but not universally or (in each part of the species) necessarily (POE lxi). In other words, only certain branches of the human race represent progress or the possibility for progress, while others degenerate and are sometimes lost. What the struggle for existence and the subsequent survival of the fittest offers us, says Royer, is a law which appears “brutal, stingy, fatal,” but is “on the contrary the providential law *par excellence*, the law of economy and abundance, the necessary guarantee of well-being and progress for all of organic creation.” According to Royer, “the law of natural selection, applied to humanity, reveals, to our surprise and sorrow, how misguided our political and civil law, and even our religious morality, has been up to now.” She refers here to “that imprudent and blind charity in which our Christian era has always sought the ideal of social virtue and which democracy has wanted to transform into a sort of obligatory brotherhood, although its most immediate consequence is the aggravation and multiplication in humanity of the very evils to which it claimed to be offering a remedy” (POE lxv).³³ Royer argues that Darwin’s theory challenges “those philosophical, moral or religious doctrines, those political systems and utopias whose tendency, perhaps generous but assuredly false, would be to bring forth an equality between men that is impossible, harmful and against nature” and asserts that “nothing is more evident than the inequalities of the different human races” (POE lxix).³⁴ Thus she concludes that superior races are produced successively and as such are destined to supplant inferior races as their progression continues, not to mix with those races and risk reabsorbing those qualities that would lower them to the average level of the species.

In examining the introduction to Darwin's theory that Firmin would have received via Royer, we find a likely explanation for his decision to incorporate Darwin's ideas into his own theory of progress. Not only would any contemporary theory of progress be incomplete without the incorporation of Darwin's ideas, but other scholars were already at work adapting Darwin to their own ends—ends which were anathema to Firmin's thinking and needed to be challenged. Thus we can read a note of sarcasm, or at least healthy skepticism, into Firmin's above description of Darwin's so-called champions as "remarkable." Clearly, Firmin's use of Darwin's theory as elaborated in the previous section stands as a direct rebuttal of Royer's.

Yet perhaps we can do more for Firmin than to simply excuse his use of Darwin as a justifiable and well-meaning misinterpretation. Recall that, he, like Royer, positions himself as providing more of an extrapolation from Darwin's *The Origin of Species* than an interpretation thereof. In Firmin's view, Darwin (at least in the book Firmin seems to regard as most important) has given us an account of the *origin* of species, but has not truly attempted to account for the division of that species into races or for the further development of the species after those races had been formed. It is for this subsequent development in particular that Firmin, *contre Royer*, wishes to account. What he offers, then, seems less a gross misreading of Darwin than an unauthorized extension of his theory. Perhaps no less authorized, however, than Royer's.³⁵ After all, in keeping with their positivist leanings, each seems to be importing a sort of morality or scientific theodicy into the system.

Advanced Ideas: A Product of Time

Ultimately, what we see in Firmin's use of Darwin is what we saw in his definition of beauty and what constitutes the positive thesis of the work—an attempt to show that progress is a universal concept that belongs to the human species as a whole and will be completely fulfilled within and among each and every race in that species, if not at the same rate. In chapter fourteen, Firmin attempts to bolster this argument with the idea of necessary evolutionary stages. In order to demonstrate that there is indeed a "path of progress," he argues that all European peoples have suffered under slavery in the past (just as Blacks have more recently) and that certain activities purported to demonstrate the inferiority of "savage" Blacks in Africa (e.g. fetishism and cannibalism) were practiced by members of the White race during corresponding phases of their own human development. "Wherever we look and try to find in the Black race defects and vices that are not shared by the White race," Firmin argues, "we face the indisputable fact that the children of the Ethiopian have never done anything which the children of the proud Caucasian, all the branches of the family included, have not done" (EHR 347; ERH 312). Firmin hopes that anthropology, by "admitting that the more advanced nations have historically gone through the same phases before reaching a more civilized stage," can offer "hope to those nations still on the lower rungs of civilization, for they are given to see the path of progress that they must follow" (EHR 354; ERH 318-9).

As we see clearly on the next page, however, the notion of evolutionary stages requires Firmin to “admit,” as he did earlier in the case of beauty, that “the White race now stands on a grandiose pedestal, ahead of all the other human races” (EHR 355; ERH 319). Such admissions highlight the way in which any science of progress, even when it claims to be objective, must necessarily inject subjective values at its very foundation. To define the path of progress and to track the movement of various races along it, one must first look around the world at various groups and then rank them, assigning each to either a higher or lower stage. Even if, like Firmin, one is unwilling to admit a distinction between inferior and superior *races*, one must admit and codify a distinction between inferior and superior *civilizations*. To argue that the Black race will “catch up” to the White race is to agree that the White race is “ahead.” Thus, while Firmin staunchly denies Gobineau’s claim that certain human tribes are *incapable* of civilization, he accepts in a way the observational premise on which the argument is based—that non-White peoples are largely lacking in civilization at the present moment. Firmin does not appear inclined to challenge the definition of civilization on the grounds that it seems to apply primarily to Whites at his historical time. (Though he does argue that in the time of Ancient Egypt, the definition of civilization applied primarily to a particular group in the Black race.)

Yet, in this very section of the work where Firmin’s analysis seems most limited, he also manages to offer several challenges to his own limiting thesis. For one thing, Firmin recognizes that races and their civilizations do not develop in isolation and thus that progress will not *simply* be a matter of innate capabilities flourishing in interaction with certain favorable environmental conditions and climates. Progress will also be sparked in inferior civilizations through their interactions with superior ones, the way interaction with Egypt helped to advance Greek civilization, for example. Firmin then shows us how the force of such interactions may occasion in a particular group at a particular time a skipping of some particular evolutionary stage. This can work in a couple of different ways.

First, Firmin offers the example of religious belief. The “fetishistic cult existed among all the human races,” he argues, “for they all evolved their first moral and religious ideas under the influence of the fears which all savages experience before the blind, invisible, and mysterious forces of nature” (EHR 340; ERH 304). From this point, the White race progressed into a monotheistic (yet still largely superstitious) Christianity, which they are now in the process of abandoning in favor of science and reason. This process of abandoning Christianity, however, has been a slow and painful one on Firmin’s view, to the great impediment of scientific progress. “[W]hile Negroes may be stuck at the fetishistic stage,” says Firmin, “they nevertheless show a quite lively turn of mind” and may, in fact, be at a sort of advantage. “Never having experienced the sort of religious fanaticism and dogmatism now choking the Caucasian race, Blacks are ready to evolve toward rational and positivist conceptions which are consistent with the workings of the universe and with its attendant moral order” (EHR 341-2; ERH 305-6). Here Christianity is portrayed as a stage not necessary for all races, which could indicate either that some stages are able to be skipped, or that Christianity represents a sort of detour from the path of progress.

Second, Firmin points to the contemporary moral crimes of the supposedly “advanced” White race. “When it comes to the relations between Europeans and people of other races, Blacks in particular, there is nothing more horrific, more barbaric,” he writes. “The entire history of the slave trade is so bloody, so full of crimes that one is tempted to believe that slave owners were simply prey to some cruel form of madness” (EHR 348; ERH 313). Similarly, Firmin argues that European colonial practices are “not very consistent with the moral temper of the century or with the principles of the rights of nations. Because it actually negates these, Europeans had no choice but to resort to casuistry and the arbitrary interpretation of the facts to justify their actions” (EHR 383; ERH 345). Having made these arguments, Firmin certainly does not argue that the nations of the Black race will necessarily come to be colonizing or slave-holding nations in the course of their progress. On the contrary, he finds that their experiences of subjugation have made the Black race ideally suited to foster a particular sort of moral progress in the *rest* of mankind. “Its main contribution to progress,” says Firmin, “will be to promote justice more forcefully and, at the same time, much more tactfully, than the blasé and heartless races that have arisen in Europe or emerged on the plains of the Middle Empire and in the land of the Tartars.... for the more one has suffered, the more one is prepared to understand and exercise justice” (EHR 446; ERH 400).³⁶ It is this that, for Firmin, makes Haiti a model nation not only for others of the Black race, but for the world.

We witness here a remarkable shift from Firmin’s earlier contention that the Black race is less beautiful than the White in correlation to its lesser degree of moral and intellectual development. Here the Black race takes on a certain moral purity that at least verges on superiority. Similarly, Firmin argues that: “Of all the human races, the Black race is the only one to have ever given the example of a multitude of men suffering under the most cruel servitude and yet conserving in their souls the energy necessary to break their chains and turn them into vengeful weapons in defence of freedom and human rights” (EHR 337; ERH 302). In this sense, slavery serves not to prove the weakness and inferiority of the Black race, but rather as a sign of its superior strength and endurance.

Thus, in spite of the tenets of Firmin’s positivist anthropological theory, these strong statements suggest that while the Black race will indeed progress, it will not (and indeed should not) follow directly in the White race’s footsteps. They suggest that there are not only different timelines for progress, but that there are different routes, and that scientific and moral progress (as in the case of the White race) do *not* always go hand in hand. Through the strength of this critical perspective, Firmin’s text seems to exceed itself.

Any time we study an historical text, it is crucial to consider its historical context. The scope of Firmin’s text being so great, I do not pretend that this essay offers anything close to a comprehensive list of its influences. I do, however, hope that I have begun to show how and why *progress* emerged as such an important theme for Firmin. On the one hand, progress is the key to the difference between Gobineau’s *Inequality of Human Races* and Firmin’s *Equality of Human Races*—the latter viewing it as an absolute certainty, the former as an idealistic illusion.

On the other hand, progress is what unites Firmin with such key nineteenth century figures as Comte and Spencer, who clearly serve as models for the type and scope of Firmin's positivist project. Progress is also that for which Firmin must provide a new, anti-racist theory in order to successfully counter the social Darwinist arguments of scholars like Clémence Royer.

Yet, as fundamental as progress is for Firmin, it remains more an assumption of his text than a proven result, more a motivating ideal than a scientific fact. Thus, Firmin's faith in progress comes into tension with his own exhortation that science must free itself from all prejudices. Though Fluehr-Lobban insists that Firmin's ideas were well in advance of their time (CFL xlii), we find that they are in fact very much the product of it. Indeed, to say that one can be in advance of one's time requires belief in a timeline of progress. Clearly, the idea of such a timeline, while it tends to appear foolish when interrogated in nineteenth century works, remains deeply seated in our popular rhetoric and consciousness.

To place Firmin in this historical and intellectual context—with figures such as Comte and Spencer whose theories are no longer taken seriously—should not, however, be to dismiss him as deserving of a unique and lasting place in intellectual history. Though Firmin strongly identifies himself with positivism and the three men share many of the same methodological aims and assumptions (such as their faith in progress), Firmin no more stands in Comte's shadow, than Comte stands in Spencer's or Spencer in Comte's. Each held distinct views and put forth distinct theories, and Firmin's concern for and attempt to explain racial equality sets him apart not only from Spencer and Comte, but from much of the other work of his time. Nor should a rejection of Firmin's *positive* theses about the evolution and advancement of races as scientifically (or even intellectually) unsound entail a denial of the acute critical faculties he demonstrates throughout *The Equality of Human Races*. For this critical work alone, Firmin merits a place in the history of the study of race. In fact, as Bernasconi points out, what we gain by acknowledging Firmin *as* a product of his time (while simultaneously recognizing that he had all the moral and intellectual resources necessarily to argue against prevailing views of racial inequality) is precisely the right to criticize those nineteenth-century thinkers who did *not* turn a critical gaze on their own racist assumptions.

Moreover, stopping to take into consideration the positive *along with* the critical in Firmin's work offers us at least two things: First, it helps us to better understand the motivations behind his work and the form that that work took. Second, it allows us to see this self-proclaimed *anthropologist* as importantly philosophical. Because Firmin's science was shaped by what can only be described as a positivist philosophy or a philosophy of progress, Firmin's book belongs not only to the history of the *study* of race but to the history of the *philosophy* of race as well.

Notes

¹ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, "Introduction" in *The Equality of Human Races*, translated by Asselin Charles (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. xiv. Henceforth cited as *CFL*.

² See Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, "Anténor Firmin, Nineteenth-Century Pioneering Anthropologist," *History of Anthropology Annual* 3 (2007), pp. 167-183.

³ Gerarde Magloire-Danton, "Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars: Revolution, Memory, Humanism," *Small Axe* 18 (September 2005), pp. 150-170. Magloire-Danton explains: "Firmin's perspective and methods encompass the three main elements of Pan-Africanist thought identified by Imanuel Geiss, which makes Firmin an early theoretician of the movement: the rejection of the postulate of race inequality, reference to the history of ancient Africa as proof that Africans were capable of civilization, and examples of illustrious individuals of African descent in diverse fields" (p. 156).

⁴ See Robert Bernasconi, "A Haitian in Paris: Anténor Firmin as philosopher against racism," *Patterns of Prejudice* 42 (2008), pp. 365-383. Henceforth cited as *RB*.

⁵ Fluehr-Lobban tries to situate Firmin's work as a direct scientific rebuttal of Gobineau, whom she claims "was the first to assert the superiority of Aryan people and among the many to reinforce ideas of black inferiority" (*CFL* xii). Given the details of Gobineau's theory, however, it would seem that the majority of Firmin's scientific rebuttals are in fact directed against other 19th century targets, while his dispute with Gobineau is more ideological in nature, as I explain below. Fluehr-Lobban does give some sense of this later in her introduction (*CFL* xxxi-xxxiv). See also, Bernasconi, who argues that Gobineau was not as influential at the time of Firmin's writing as he would later become (*RB* 372-373).

⁶ The importance and influence of Firmin's Haitian heritage on his political and intellectual commitments cannot be overstated. As Fluehr-Lobban reminds us, Firmin received his formal education entirely in Haiti and was "a product of the third generation of post-independence Haitians who took justified pride in the heroic achievement of the world's first Black Republic of Haiti in 1804, only 28 years after the first anti-colonial movement with the declaration of American independence" ("Anténor Firmin: Haitian Pioneer of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 102 (2000), p. 450). Haiti serves as a favored example of the equal potential of all races throughout Firmin's book.

⁷ Arthur de Gobineau, “Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines” in *Œuvres*, edited by Jean Gaulmier and Jean Boissel (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 184-7; trans. Adrian Collins, *The Inequality of Human Races* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1999), pp. 48-50. Henceforth cited as *IRH* and *IHR* respectively. (The Collins translation deals only with Book I of Gobineau’s six-book *Essai*.) Gobineau claims that European institutions found in Haiti are incompatible with the African manners of the Haitians. For this reason, he claims, the history of democratic Haiti is “merely a long series of massacres; massacres of mulattoes by negroes, or of negroes by mulattoes, according as the one or the other held the reins of power. The constitution, however enlightened it may pretend to be, has no influence whatever” (*IHR* 49; *IRH* 186).

⁸ Arthur de Gobineau, “Racial Inequality” in *Gobineau: Selected Political Writings*, edited by Michael D. Biddis (London: Cape, 1970), p. 175. Henceforth cited as *RI*. (Unlike the translation cited above, this one includes the Conclusion of Gobineau’s *Essai* found at the end of the sixth book.)

⁹ Anténor Firmin, *De l’égalité des races humaines* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), p. 393; trans. Asselin Charles, *Equality of the Human Races* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 437-8. Henceforth cited as *ERH* and *EHR* respectively. Here the French text reads “une raison de plus,” which Charles translates as “every reason,” but I believe is more accurately and moderately rendered as “all the more reason” or indeed “one more reason.”

¹⁰ Twelve years after the publication of *De l’égalité des races humaines*, Firmin was still defending the book’s positivist methodology against that of those he called the “Social Scientists” (as exemplified for him by Anglophile author Edmond Demolins) in a letter to the editor of the Port-au-Prince newspaper *Le Matin* (A. Firmin, Letter of 2 December 1907 to M. Clément Magloire in “La Mentalité Haïtienne” in *Lettres de Saint-Thomas: Études sociologiques, historiques et littéraires*, Deuxième Édition (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Fardin, 1986), pp. 389-426). Picking up on the words of a review of Demolins’ *Social Classification*, Firmin writes:

J’ai pris la liberté de souligner les mots simplistes à l’excès; car c’est la caractéristique de toutes les théories aprioriques des écrivains de la Science sociale. C’est aussi en quoi nous différons profondément, eux s’attardant à une mentalité de métaphysiciens, tandis que, philosophiquement et scientifiquement, j’observe la discipline positiviste que j’ai ostensiblement indiquée, en inscrivant pour sous-titre de mon ouvrage De l’Égalité des Races humaines, les mots “Anthropologie positive.” (412)

Or in English (my translation):

I took the liberty of emphasizing the words *simplistic to excess* because they are characteristic all the aprioristic theories of the Social Science writers. It is also in this that they and I differ profoundly, with them remaining behind in the mentality of metaphysicians, while I, philosophically and scientifically, adhere to the positivist discipline, which I clearly indicated by inscribing, as the subtitle of my work *The Equality of the Human Races*, the words “Positivist Anthropology.”

¹¹ Spencer’s reasons for rejecting the positivist label seem to have more to do with proving that he is not a disciple of Comte and asserting the originality of his system in opposition to Comte’s than with actual disagreements with Comte over the major tenets of positivism described below. While he admits to holding several “cardinal doctrines” in common with Comte (i.e. all knowledge is from experience; all knowledge is phenomenal or relative; the search for metaphysical first causes is scientifically irrelevant; and, invariable natural laws control all types of phenomena), he denies that Comte is the originator of those doctrines, arguing that they are his and Comte’s joint inheritance from their predecessors. Herbert Spencer, “Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte” in *Works of Herbert Spencer: Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, Vol. II (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1915), pp. 118-144. Originally published in April 1864 as an appendix to “The Classification of the Sciences.”

¹² D.Y. Peel, “Introduction” in *Herbert Spencer: On Social Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. xxiii. Henceforth cited as *JP*.

¹³ As Andreski describes, the role positivism was not simply to disprove religion but to take its place: “His prescription was to institute a new religion and a new Church which would provide the same services as the old in promoting social stability and consensus, but which, instead of preaching dogmas formed in the day of fetishistic thinking and therefore untenable in the light of knowledge supplied by science, would inculcate beliefs and attitudes proven by science and therefore, according to Comte, not open to doubt.” This perspective meant that science need not be purely objective, but could prescribe morality. Comte “was not worried about the difficulties of jumping from ‘is’ to ‘ought.’” Stanislav Andreski, “Introduction” in *The Essential Comte* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 13.

¹⁴ For more on this point, see Bridges’ “The Philosophy of Comte.” John Henry Bridges, *Illustrations of Positivism: A Selection of Articles from the “Positivist Review” in Science, Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, edited by H. Gordon Jones (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974), pp. 192-8. Henceforth cited as *JHB*.

¹⁵ For a full description in Comte's own words of the aim, intellectual character and importance of positivism or the positive philosophy, see the first chapters of either *The Positive Philosophy* or *A General View of Positivism*. Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, translated by Harriet Martineau (New York: AMS Press, 1974), pp. 25-38; Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, translated by J.H. Bridges (New York: Speller and Sons, 1957), pp. 8-63.

¹⁶ For the similarities between Comte and Spencer on this point, see Bridges' "Mr. Spencer's Theory of Beneficence" (JHB 127-8).

¹⁷ Herbert Spencer, "Progress: Its Law and Cause" in *Works of Herbert Spencer: Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, Vol. I (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1915), pp. 8-62. First published in *The Westminster Review* for April, 1857. Henceforth cited as *PLC*. Hudson cites the writing of this essay as pivotal in helping Spencer to "systematize and coordinate the various ideas that were then fermenting in his mind" and notes that shortly afterwards the concept of evolution presented itself to Spencer as "the basis of a system of thought under which was to be generalized the complete history of the knowable universe, and by virtue of which all branches of scientific knowledge were to be unified by affiliation upon the primal laws underlying them all," leading Spencer to his Synthetic Philosophy. William Henry Hudson, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Herbert Spencer* (New York: Haskell House, 1974), pp. 63-4. Henceforth cited as *WHH*.

¹⁸ Various races did not, however, experience biological progress through increased heterogeneity at the same rate. In fact, for Spencer, differing levels of development between more and less "civilized" races illustrated his thesis. For example, he wrote: "While often possessing well-developed body and arms, the Australian has very small legs: thus reminding us of the chimpanzee and the gorilla, which present no great contrasts in size between the hind and fore limbs. But in the European, the greater length and massiveness of the legs have become marked—the fore and hind limbs are more heterogeneous." Civilized man was also thought to have greater heterogeneity in his backbone, his skull, his nervous system and his facial features (PLC 17-18).

¹⁹ For more on Peel's understanding of Spencer's theory of evolution as it connects and compares to other evolutionary theories of the time, especially Darwin's, see: J.D.Y. Peel, "Evolution" in *Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist* (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 131-165. Henceforth cited as *ES*.

²⁰ As Hudson describes it, "unlike Darwin and Wallace, Mr. Spencer approached the question of general evolution not from the organic but from the super-organic point of view—by the way of ethical and sociological investigations." Adaptation was seen as occurring primarily between men and the conditions of social life, each adjusting toward a more perfect state of equilibrium within a larger process of universal development (WHH 44).

²¹ For another detailed discussion of Spencer's theory of social evolution—including the operations of adaptation and natural selection (which Wiltshire, in contrast to Peel, emphasizes), Spencer's notion of the equality of men as competitive ("the equality of their claims to make the best of themselves within the limits mutually produced" – p. 198), his teleological assumption of benevolence in natural processes, and other problems with the theory—see: David Wiltshire, "Spencer's Theory of Evolution" in *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 192-224.

²² Spencer actually coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" in his 1852 essay, "A Theory of Population, deduced from the General Law of Animal Fertility" (ES 137).

²³ As Gertrud Lenzer points out, the importance of continuing to study and understand Comte and Spencer lies not in any enduring scientific value of their theories (whose details have long since been abandoned), but rather in the enduring yet unacknowledged influence of the more general positivist spirit on our contemporary modes of thought. Gertrud Lenzer, "Introduction: Auguste Comte and Modern Positivism" in *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), pp. xxii-xxiv.

²⁴ The translation here has been adjusted to more closely resemble the French: "N'est-ce pas la fin inéluctable de toute société humaine de marcher, de persévérer dans la voie du perfectionnement, une fois le branle donné? Il suffit donc de dégager les forces morales, qui sont l'âme du progrès, de toute compression paralysante, pour que le mouvement graduel et harmonique s'effectue spontanément, en raison même de l'élasticité propre à tout organisme social.... Toutes les lois naturelles et sociologiques s'unissent pour proclamer cette vérité" (ERH xxxviii).

²⁵ Here I render the French "hommes" as "men" against Charles' translation as "human beings" so as not to obscure Firmin's sexism, which comes across quite clearly in parts of the work not treated in this essay.

²⁶ While Firmin's citation of his references can be maddeningly vague, Charles seems to err here in the English translation by attributing this definition of beauty from Spencer to "Progress: Its Law and Cause" when, in the French, Firmin attributes it to Spencer's *Essais sur le progrès* rather than *Le progrès, loi et cause du progrès*. The latter refers to the French translation of "Progress: Its Law and Cause," whereas the former most likely refers to the first volume of a collection of Spencer's essays, *Essais de morale, de science et d'esthétique*, translated into French by M.A. Burdeau, the first edition of which was published in Paris in 1877 by Librairie Germer Baillière et Cie. While that volume would indeed have contained a translation of "Progress: Its Law and Cause," it would also have included translations of "The Origin of Animal Worship," "The Use of Anthropomorphism," "Manners and Fashion," "The Morals of Trade," "Use and Beauty," "Personal Beauty," "Gracefulness," "The Physiology of Laughter," "The Sources of Architectural Types," "The Philosophy of Style," and "The Origin and Function of Music."

However, the definition of beauty attributed to Spencer by Firmin here does not actually appear in *any* of the aforementioned essays. On the other hand, Firmin's claim that physical beauty correlates with intellectual and moral development very much echoes Spencer's argument in the "Personal Beauty" essay, though that same essay also decries certain forms of race-mixing and suggests the permanent inferiority of certain races, points which Firmin clearly rejects and which his work explicitly seeks to refute. See: Herbert Spencer, "Personal Beauty" in *Works of Herbert Spencer: Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, Vol. II (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1915), pp. 387-399.

²⁷ Here I modify the translation of "se développe en raison directe de son degré de civilisation" from "is commensurate with its level of civilization" to "develops in direct correlation to" in order to better capture the sense of causality in Firmin's account.

²⁸ Here Charles simply neglected to include the words "and moral" in his translation, which are nevertheless crucial to our understanding of Firmin as a positivist.

²⁹ Sexual selection is the process through which racial difference becomes amplified and solidified when local beauty standards give certain physical traits greater desirability thus allowing people with those traits to produce more offspring and thus pass those traits on to subsequent generations. Though difference races are, for Darwin, of common descent, once humanity separates into races through adaptation and, most importantly, sexual selection, not all races remain equally adaptable. "We thus see that many of the wilder races of man are apt to suffer much in health when subjected to changed conditions or habits of life, and not exclusively from being transported to a new climate," he writes, for example. "Mere alterations in habits, which do not appear injurious in themselves, seem to have this same effect.... It has often been said, as Macnamara remarks, that man can resist with impunity the greatest diversities of climate and other changes; but this is true only of the civilized races. Man in his wild condition seems to be in this respect almost as susceptible as his nearest allies, the anthropoid apes, which have never yet survived long, when removed from their native country" (218). Thus, on Darwin's account, uncivilized races may be very adaptive to and well suited for their native climates and current culture, but that they should civilize in the same direction as the more "advanced" races seems unlikely and even ill-advised. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

³⁰ A tendency which, as pointed out above, Peel argues is shared by Spencer.

³¹ Clémence Royer, "Préface de la première édition" in *L'origine des espèces*, Third Edition (Paris: Victor Masson et Fils, 1870), pp. xxvii-lxxi. Henceforth cited as *POE*. All translations of Royer's preface are my own.

³² The French here reads: "Il faut même avouer que le progrès de la vérité nous donne autant à oublier qu'à apprendre, et nous apprend à nier et à douter aussi souvent qu'à affirmer."

³³ The French reads: “Il ressort du livre de M. Darwin que cette loi, qui paraissait brutale, parcimonieuse, fatale, et qui semblait accuser la nature d’avarice, de méchanceté ou d’impuissance, est au contraire la loi providentielle par excellence, la loi d’économie et d’abondance, la garantie nécessaire du bien-être et du progrès pour toute la création organique.

“Mais aussi la loi de sélection naturelle, appliquée à l’humanité, fait voir avec surprise, avec douleur, combien jusqu’ici ont été fausses nos lois politiques et civiles, de même que notre morale religieuse.... Je veux parler de cette charité imprudente et aveugle où notre ère chrétienne a toujours cherché l’idéal de la vertu sociale et que la démocratie voudrait transformer en une sorte de fraternité obligatoire, bien que sa conséquence la plus directe soit d’aggraver et de multiplier dans la race humaine les maux auxquels elle prétend porter remède.”

³⁴ The French reads: “Enfin, la théorie de M. Darwin, en nous donnant quelques notions un peu plus claires sur notre véritable origine, ne fait-elle pas par cela même justice de tant de doctrines philosophiques, morales ou religieuses, de systèmes et d’utopies politiques dont la tendance, généreuse peut-être, mais assurément fausse, serait de réaliser une égalité impossible, nuisible et contre nature entre tous les hommes? Rien n’est plus évident que les inégalités des diverses races humaines...”

³⁵ Indeed, Bernasconi reveals that Darwin complained about Royer’s translations of his work and the prefaces and notes that she added. Darwin even arranged for a new translation to appear in 1873. (See RB 374-375)

³⁶ This, of course, calls to mind Du Bois’ insistence in “The Conservation of Races” that the Negro race had a special contribution to make to civilization that could not be made by any other race.

Positivism, in Western philosophy, generally, any system that confines itself to the data of experience and excludes a priori or metaphysical speculations. More narrowly, the term designates the thought of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte's positivism was posited on the assertion of a so-called law of the three phases (or stages) of intellectual development. There is a parallel, as Comte saw it, between the evolution of thought patterns in the entire history of humankind, on the one hand, and in the history of an individual's development from infancy to adulthood, on the other. With *The Equality of Human Races*, Haitian intellectual Antenor Firmin offered the world its first sustained, philosophical, book-length response to scientific European racism. Unfortunately, the volume, first published in Paris in 1885, quickly disappeared and was out of print even in Haiti until 1968. The extent to which Firmin actually engages with and successfully argues against Gobineau's thesis in *The Inequality of the Human Races* is an open question and not one that I intend to pursue here. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. Moreover, it has been shown that empowering women spurs productivity and economic growth. Women and girls represent half of the world's population and, therefore, also half of its potential. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. Moreover, it has been shown that empowering women spurs productivity and economic growth. Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women, warns UN Women.