



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Tudor, M. (2024). Sebastián Gil-Riaño, 2023. The Remnants of Race Science: UNESCO and Economic Development in the Global South. *Diplomatica: A Journal of Diplomacy and Society*, 6(1), pp. 159-162. doi: 10.1163/25891774-bja10119

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/32336/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1163/25891774-bja10119>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Sebastián Gil-Riaño. 2023. *The Remnants of Race Science: UNESCO and Economic Development in the Global South*. New York: Columbia University Press. Pp. 392. Hardback £117.00, ISBN 9780231194341.

Sebastián Gil-Riaño's new monograph, *The Remnants of Race Science*, is a powerful work of scholarship. It examines how UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) officials' internal debates and shifting ideas of race - its definitions, sociological impacts, and ramifications for world peace - informed the organisation's intellectual strategy *and* interventions during the mid twentieth century. Gil-Riaño's analysis moves beyond the racist/antiracist binary that habitually pervades scholarship on this topic. Instead, he uncovers the politics of international officials' scientific methods and experiments, tracking the evolution of the organisation's epistemological approach to race through a number of staff and their fieldwork in different areas of Latin America and the Pacific. UNESCO experts (many of whom were born, raised, and educated in regions in the global south) instead sought to popularise the idea of race as an elastic or changeable process, challenging the fixed, biological categories of race science that had dominated the field in the nineteenth century. Drawing attention to the diverse ways in which UNESCO scientists interpreted the region's uniquely 'mixed' population due to its history of slavery, indigenous genocide, and European imperialism, Gil-Riaño demonstrates the fundamental role played by Latin American scientists and contexts in provoking a transformation in mainstream race science away from permanent biological categories. This general shift in scientific thinking away from fixed biological differences thus perfectly matched the prevailing liberal internationalist ideology of the mid-twentieth century.

The Remnants of Race Science is part of a recent wave of historiography on the politics of international expertise and is a sorely needed reflection on the racialised practices and logic of international organisations. Scientific experts and academics are frequently sidelined in scholarship, concealed by a technocratic deference or apolitical – or *depolitical* – guise. As Gil-Riano states, 'racism was framed as illogical and irrational and thereby concealed as an operating force in scientific inquiry and humanitarian practice.' (p./ 6). Thus, Gil-Riaño's assessment of the flawed empirics and prejudices baked-into UNESCO officials' statements and experiments is a welcome addition to newer scholarship that focuses on pulling apart the political decision-making and knowledge production processes that so often go unacknowledged within scientific or expert internationalist circles.

The book is separated into three parts, seven empirical chapters in total, to address different levels or activities of the organisation and its staff. In the first part, 'Confronting Racism in the Southern Hemisphere, 1890-1951', Gil-Riaño traces a wide range of scientists and technocrats as they observed, tested, and physically measured thousands of people in South America, creating subjects for a regime of paternalistic experimentation that was rooted in colonial presumptions of inferiority or 'backwardness' in indigenous or Black racialised communities. Gil-Riaño focuses on Alfred Métraux, director of the organisation's race campaign in the 1950, and examines the academic origins of the director's belief a new form of race science for the 20th century. As part of the UNESCO Statement on Race in 1950, he sought to reframe the racial hierarchy of 'civilised' and 'savage' into standards of economic development for the liberal internationalist community. For Métraux, so-called 'backwards' populations could be guided towards a supposedly superior European standard of development. As Gil-Riaño argues, UNESCO's leadership 'conceptualized non-Western societies as thwarted by cultural environments ... [creating] a racialized division between people born into damaged environments (and thus in need of fixing) and those from lands of opportunity, whose duty it is to civilize.' (p. 2).

But *The Remnants of Race Science* is more than a history of intellectual thought and scientific theories on race. In the second part, 'Race in the Tropics and Highlands and the Quest for Economic Development, 1945-1962', the book examines the projects created or financed by UNESCO and their relationships with national ideas of race and development. Seeking to reorient centuries of biological ideas of race and fixed hierarchies of difference, UNESCO experts often transferred to the organisation

from academic positions. However, the officials' activities went beyond elite circles of scientific inquiry. Supposedly scientific or empirical methods such as phrenology or ethnographic observation only further entrenched these developmental ideas of racial difference: '...scientific arguments about human equipotential helped transform the one overtly racial civilizing mission ideologies of European imperialism into the seemingly 'nonracial' discourse of "international development"' (p. 7). No longer the result of permanent categories, UNESCO staff felt they could meaningfully intervene and establish projects, such as the Hylean Amazon Project or the Puno-Tambopata Project, and expect – ultimately – a measurable improvement in these societies. By modelling levels of 'progress' upon the European context, fostering an ahistoric understanding of the inequalities of the industrial revolution and positing it as the gold standard for human achievement, UNESCO scientists fixated on promoting standards that effectively promoted a white supremacist vision of human advancement. By funding projects for cultural eugenics, UNESCO officials sought to increase a global south nation's value within the capitalist international paradigm and to encourage them to 'catch up' with their ex-colonial rulers. International development was an elastic process and therefore supposedly accessible for all; UNESCO scientists just needed to undertake enough experiments to design 'portable sociological models of "racial harmony"' for each 'undeveloped' nation (p. 24).

The final part, 'Engineering Racial Harmony and Decolonization, 1952-1961', examines how UNESCO's efforts related to nation-building campaigns and movements for racial equality during decolonisation. The economic development of 'backwards' communities in the global south was projected as fundamental for the betterment of the *whole* human species; it was a truly international mission. UNESCO officials perceived unequal race relations to be the core catalyst for domestic tensions and the eruption of international war; for them, empirical analysis into racial difference across global south societies presented a critical opportunity to forestall all future aggression and war. Thus, these projects intentionally sought to translate academic empirical 'findings' about racial difference into practical experiments on the national *and* international scale. The logics of civilisational hierarchies, colonial classifications, and racial difference remained at the core of capitalist ideas of modernity and standards of 'development'.

Overall, Gil-Riaño's skilful analysis uncovers the intellectual lineages of racial prejudices and white supremacy at the core of UNESCO's epistemological evolution. He has undertaken extensive research to bridge the transformation from the hegemony of fixed racial categories in 19th century to the Cold War development discourse that became dominant in the mid- to late-20th century. For scholars and students interested in moving beyond the hagiographic narratives of international organisations, *The Remnants of Race Science* is a must-read and a call for more historical examinations of UN specialised agencies.

Margot Tudor
Department of International Politics, City – University of London