

# Race and Geopolitics in the Work of Anténor Firmin

by

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## Abstract

The intellectual legacy of Anténor Firmin, Haiti's greatest thinker and statesman of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, rests primarily on his achievement in *The Equality of the Human Races* (1885), his masterly deconstruction of race and refutation of racial hierarchy, twin notions invented and given a scientific veneer by early Western anthropologists, as well as on his analysis of the ideological uses of race for purposes of conquest and domination of non-Western peoples. To the extent that the nineteenth century understood the nation as an ethnoracial entity, Firmin's argumentum for the equality of the races in this foundational work both implicitly and explicitly extends to the equality of nations, a concept he explores as well in various topical writings about Haitian history and politics. As the world order of Firmin's day was built on unequal relations among nations, with Western nations dominating the global arrangement, the Firminist notion of equality of races and nations is of great significance as regards modern geopolitics. This article analyzes Firmin's understanding of the role of race in relations among nations and examines the implications of his concept of absolute equality de jure and de facto among races and nations for the geopolitics of his day as well as for the present world order. Given that today's global arrangement revolves around national polities rather than races, Firmin's idea of equality among nations as a foundation of the global geopolitical order may well be his more enduring intellectual legacy, positioning him not only as a pioneering anthropologist and slayer of the false science of race, but also as a political scientist and philosopher for a contemporary world still marked by rapports of domination and subordination among nations.

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Newly arrived in the United States from Hong Kong, the protagonist of David Henry Hwang's seriocomic play *FOB* anxiously asks his mocking interlocutor, "Tell me, how do people think of Gwan Gung in America? Do they shout my name while rushing into battle, or is it too sacred to be used in such ostentatious display" (17)? Like Steve fretting about the fate of his eponymous culture hero, the Chinese god of war and literature, in a new land, we too have sometimes felt minor pangs of anxiety about the journey to the United States of that near mythic personage from the Haitian motherland, the great ideological warrior and *homme de lettres*, Anténor Firmin. Ever since the publication of the English translation of his masterwork *The Equality of the Human Races* (2000), we have wondered on occasion, how do people think of Firmin in America? Do they shout his name while rushing into social and political battle, or is it so sacred that it must be confined to the tranquil groves of academe? It would be a pity, we think, if the words and deeds of this Caribbean Gwan Gung, this man of thought and action who fought so tirelessly for the dignity of his compatriots, of African peoples, and of humanity, were to remain the private reserve of intellectuals and scholars. Indeed, Anténor Firmin's legacy to the world, exemplified in his rich life of public service and political commitment and encapsulated in a diverse body of writings encompassing anthropology, political theory, philosophy, economics, sociology, literary criticism, and history, is worth trumpeting beyond the walls of the academy.

Thanks to the release of the English version of *De l'égalité des races humaines* ten years ago, followed by the publication of the original 1885 French text in France (2004) and in Canada (2005), and the more recent edition of a Spanish translation of the book in Cuba (2011), Firmin is known today in the global intellectual oecumene primarily for his irrefutable demonstration of the equality of the human races in response to the racialism of late nineteenth-century anthropologists and other advocates of White European supremacy, particularly the Comte de Gobineau, author of *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-1855). The scientific rigor of Firmin's argumentum leaves his readers with the impression that *The Equality of the Human Races* disposed of the notion of a race hierarchy in such a convincing manner that the concept ought to have been thrown onto the ash heap of intellectual history then and there. The subject of the book therefore should have been obsolete today, irrelevant to our times, if it had all depended on Firmin's successful deconstruction of race and racism. That the arguments presented in the work still resonate with us is a sure indication of its continuing relevance to today's socio-political realities. As for Firmin's other important writings, such as *Diplomate et Diplomatie* (1898), *M. Roosevelt, Président des Etats-Unis et la République d'Haiti* (1905), *Lettres de Saint-Thomas* (1910), and *L'Effort dans le mal* (1911), they appear to be essentially topical works, interesting political texts often with a memoirist's perspective, but concerned with the issues of the times and of interest mostly to historians and biographers.

Yet, like *The Equality of the Human Races*, those works appeal today not only to Caribbeanists and scholars interested in the history of ideas, but to thoughtful readers concerned by current socio-political realities and their underpinning ideologies. Thus the state of the world today paradoxically imbues the century-old Firminist canon with great appositeness. Indeed, Firmin's passionate engagement with the issues facing Haiti and the world between the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth moves us in this second decade of the twenty-first century as it did his contemporaries. Our world, wracked like Firmin's by Darwinian conflicts among polities and marked by rapports of domination and submission among peoples and nations, sorely needs to revisit the essential idea that traverses the statesman-scholar's entire oeuvre: the absolute equality of all human collectivities beyond the contingencies of race and nationality as a foundation of a just and harmonious world order based on the peaceful coexistence of peoples in their racial and cultural diversity.

The roots of this overarching idea that informs Firmin's writings, from *The Equality of the Human Races* to *L'Effort dans le mal*, are to be found in a dual ontological awareness: his consciousness of his own identity as a Black man and of the existence of Haiti as a Black nation in a world whose hostility to him, to his congeners, and to his country ultimately rested on the notion of racial hierarchy, of the inequality of races and peoples (*Equality* lv; 316-317)<sup>1</sup>. Within Haiti itself, a Black republic whose first Constitution declared that all Haitians would be known as Blacks<sup>2</sup>, the famous *question de couleur* was a reminder to Firmin of the internalization of race ideology inherited from colonial times by his people (*Equality* lvi). In the West, the persistence of the ideology of White supremacy in Europe and the United States, was manifest in social and political practices as well as in the public discourse of political and intellectual figures who found in Haiti a handy illustration of Black inferiority. From his perspective as both a patriotic Haitian and a diplomat and minister of foreign affairs responsible for managing his country's relations with other nation-states, Firmin understood quite well the role played by racist ideology in the treatment of Haiti by Western nations. His formulation of the equality of races and peoples as the principle governing relations among peoples thus derives from his analysis of the underlying dynamics of Haiti's existence and position in the global geopolitical landscape.

About three-quarter of a century old, the first Black republic was still engaged in Firmin's time in the process of nation building. This was an enterprise fraught with many social and political impediments resulting from the very circumstances of the nation's birth in a revolution that was the first great spectacular victory of an African people over a European one, a revolution that challenged the colonialist and slave plantation system of the late eighteenth century. Quarantined by the United States until the end of the American Civil war, burdened by an impoverishing reparation debt to France, the young Haiti was adamantly holding on to its precarious independence, resolved to maintain its right to be a self-defining and self-determining Black nation, even as European powers freely intervened in its internal affairs and the northern American colossus then feeling its imperialist oats threatened its sovereignty.

For the entire nineteenth century the country was wracked by internal social and political dissensions, the roots of which go back to colonial times and to the revolutionary period. Relatively isolated by its singular history, language, and culture, Haiti geopolitically had to negotiate its self-definition and self-determination between the Dominican Republic neighbor she once ruled, a still largely colonized Caribbean, a Latin America to whose liberation she had contributed, the faraway former colonial master, France, the hegemon of the hemisphere, the United States, and the distant land of the ancestors, conquered and colonized Africa. Firmin's writings and his actions as minister of foreign affairs, notably his successful foiling the United States' plans to establish a naval base in Mole Saint-Nicolas (1891), evidence a keen understanding of the ways in which Haiti's singular historical experience and racial identity situate the country in the concert of nations.

Haiti existed in a global context that had been in the making for several centuries, ever since the violent irruption of Europe onto the rest of the world and the conquest of much of humanity by the White West. The global geopolitical landscape of the second half of the nineteenth century was one in which White European peoples and nations dominated, formally or indirectly, the Black, Brown, and Yellow peoples and nations of the world at the end of a historical process that had started in the late fifteenth century. The period of Firmin's activity as an intellectual and diplomat, from the 1870s to the first decade of the twentieth century, corresponds then to the second imperialist expansion of Western powers and the consolidation of their colonial domination of various non-Western peoples. On the strength of their superior technological, industrial, and military power, of their more effective social and political organization, and especially of that collective trait which Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Urbe calls "*la férocité blanche*"<sup>3</sup> in her book by that title (2001), the nations of the White West had emerged as the dominant segment of humanity, lording it over virtually all other human collectivities and polities. Thus, in the name of the Monroe Doctrine and the myth of Manifest Destiny, the United States had established its control over the western hemisphere, leaving as a grandfather clause the older European powers to rule their colonial territories in the Caribbean, as it annexed Puerto Rico at the end of the Spanish-American war and branched out to Asia to seize the Philippines, to forcefully open Japan to Western trade, and to gain extraterritorial rights in China. Africa was formally carved after centuries of exploitation and de facto colonialism at the Berlin Conference (1884). In Asia, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the United States were feverishly acquiring colonies and client states, stepping on civilizations older and once more advanced than their own. As these Western powers carried out this frenzied scramble for resources, labor, markets, and territories, their scholars, intellectuals, and colonial officials piously invoked "the White man's burden" and the "civilizing mission" to justify a geopolitical order constructed by the West through violent conquest of non-Western peoples. It was truly a world that could be described, to paraphrase the title of Chinweizu's history of the conquest of the world by Europe and its Diaspora, as "the West versus the rest of us" (1975).

Current scholarship generally privileges Anténor Firmin's pioneering contribution to anthropology, emphasizing his deconstruction of racialist ideology and corollary demonstration of the equality of all human races<sup>4</sup>. This is understandable, given that Firmin's central text, *The Equality of the Human Races*, primarily and explicitly addresses issues pertaining to anthropology and challenges the tenets of scientific racism. As Firmin asserts in his Preface, however, his concerns were not merely scientific. His work was intended not only to make the case for the equality of the human races as an abstract scientific tenet, but also to spotlight the moral and political implications of the notion of inequality and, inversely, of the principle of equality for peoples and nations defined racially. In this sense, *The Equality of the Human Races* and Firmin's topical writings on Haiti are ultimately concerned with geopolitics, inasmuch as they critique a certain arrangement of the global community and advocate a different structure of relations among peoples and nations as they exist on the planet within specific territorial boundaries.

Arising from his concern with the place of his own Black nation in the global landscape and its rapports with neighbor nations and more distant and powerful Western nations, the United States primarily but also France and other European countries, Firmin's vision of the global landscape reflects a two-layered conceptual understanding of geopolitics. On one essential and practical level, it incorporates a view of the world as consisting of peoples and nations whose rapports are mediated by competing geographically defined states. This is a view that anticipates key elements of Rudolf Kjellen's definition of geopolitics, which includes an understanding of the state as an organic entity who acts on behalf of a geographically demarcated polity in a cross-national dynamic informed by a Darwinist conception of international relations and concerns with territorial integrity or expansion (Teschke 2006). This is, *mutatis mutandi*, the view of Anténor Firmin the diplomat whose words and actions were all in the service of a nation-state existing within a specific geographical location and contending with other nation-states similarly defined geographically. In his efforts to maintain Haiti's national sovereignty, for example, Firmin was obviously dealing with clearly identified nation-states—the United States, France, Germany. In this respect, both *Diplomates et Diplomatie* and *M. Roosevelt, Président des Etats-Unis et la République d'Haiti* are informed by classically defined geopolitical concerns. Firmin's experiential grasp of geopolitics was further strengthened, however, by his scholarly knowledge of world history, the history of the ancient world in particular, so evident in *The Equality of the Human Races*, a knowledge which afforded him insights into the formation, rise, and decline of nations and empires as they interact and pursue military, political, economic, and cultural dominance, and which enabled him to discern age-old patterns in relations among peoples and nations.<sup>5</sup>

In Firmin's understanding, however, geopolitics encompasses more than the state as the formal actor in the arrangement of the world; for him, geopolitics involves the dynamic of power among collectivities, peoples and nations as they contend with one another to achieve self-definition and self-determination, and with the ideologies that underpin that dynamic. Firmin's works offer answers to such questions he considered essential: How do the culturally and racially diverse nations and peoples cohabit on the planet? How come they do so in the manner he observed? What is the place of his own people and nation, of Haitians, Africans, and Diasporic Africans in the contemporary geopolitical arrangement? Is the arrangement satisfactory? Does it make for a peaceful and harmonious world in which all peoples and nations are self-defined and self-determined and coexist in mutual respect and dignity? If not, what is the reason, and what is to be done?

Beyond the Kejellenian understanding of geopolitics and its emphasis on the agency of the state, Firmin envisages geopolitics as involving primarily the interaction of nations and races. In this respect, to the extent that in his view race and nation are synonymous, the argument can be made that Firmin's masterwork is actually a demonstration of the equality of nations in theory and a plea for actualization of this equality in the global geopolitical arrangement. Indeed, in Firmin's discourse there often occurs a conflation of nation and race which makes it possible to conclude that he conceived the nation as an ethnoracial entity. As the declared intention of *The Equality of the Human Races* is the deconstruction of the concept of race and of the hierarchization of races, Firmin necessarily uses the term in its primary sense of a category in a species, especially in the human species, the sense given to it both in the vernacular and by biologists and early anthropologists. For him, it is quite permissible to group humans in categories based on shared physiological traits, but by the same token he views it as highly irrational to extrapolate from such traits individual or collective intellectual, psychological, and moral qualities. Race remains therefore a social construct and a mere indicator of group identity, be that group a small tribe or a large nation.

In the chapter of *The Equality of the Human Races* entitled "European Solidarity" Firmin theorizes the role of race in the construction of collective identity, highlighting in particular its place in the ideological apparatus that frames relations among peoples and nations (379-391). He envisages the formation of collective identity as a gradual process whereby the individual's feeling of connectedness with others expands from immediate neighbors in a small community to more geographically distant others. The individual thus progressively develops a sense of identity that inserts him eventually in an entity as large as a nation. This consciousness of belonging in a nation, which Firmin calls patriotism, involves the individual's identification with the living sharing the same territory, with the long gone ancestors, and with the very land. Consciousness of race and consciousness of nation thus merge at the nexus of memory and the imagination:

Patriotism ultimately is defined as unequalled affection for our native land. But here we identify the land with those who have rejoiced and suffered with us, with those whose ancestors have rejoiced and suffered with ours, and with those who share with us common aspirations, identical customs, and a similar physiological profile and psychological temperament which are perceived as distinct from those of all other collectivities. And this is where the idea of race comes in, influencing the actions of a people to the same extent as patriotism does and often overlapping with and completing the latter. The influence of ethnic consciousness on the political actions of nations is undeniable; it plays a role even in their assessment of issues, affecting their very reasoning. Even when nothing is said about it, ethnic consciousness remains a strong, positive, and active force both in the unfolding of events and in the elaboration of theories” (*Equality* 380).

For Firmin, then, members of a nation belong to the same race and are conscious of their common racial identity. Although recognition of a shared culture and a shared territory is the *sine qua non* of membership in a nation, he suggests that consciousness of race, ethnic consciousness, is the foundation of collective agency in a people. Thus, the Firminist paradigm, conflating race and nation, may be appropriately summed up in Michael Ignatieff’s memorable expression, “blood and belonging” (*Blood and Belonging*, 1995).

The source of Firmin’s understanding of nation as an ethnoracial polity is manifold. In the first place, the interchangeable use of the words race and nation is embedded in the French language of the nineteenth century. The *Dictionnaire de la langue française d’Emile Littré 1872-1877* defines nation thus: “*Réunion d’hommes habitant un même territoire, soumis ou non à un même gouvernement, ayant depuis longtemps des intérêts assez communs pour qu’on les regarde comme appartenant à la même race*”<sup>6</sup>.” Already in the Preface to *The Equality of the Human Races* the term race appears as a synonym of nation in the phrase “the Haitian race” (lvi). Firmin’s conflation of race and nation is also rooted in his definition of his Haitian identity; for the author of *The Equality of the Human Races* as for his compatriots generally, Haitianity and Blackness are synonymous. This ethnoracial conception of the Haitian nation arises organically from the myth of collective origin which narrates Haiti as a national polity founded by African Negroes in violent antithetical opposition to White Europeans, an opposition expressed in dramatically hyperbolic terms by the writer of the Declaration of Independence, Boisrond-Tonnerre, who reportedly claimed that “*pour rédiger cet Acte, [...] il nous faut la peau d’un blanc pour parchemin, son crâne pour écritoire, son sang pour encre et une baïonnette pour plume.*”<sup>7</sup>” (*Histoire d’Haiti* 115).

These terms of the collective self-representation go back at least to the revolutionary period and the founding of the nation. Thus significantly, during the first phase of the war to forge a nation out of the African slaves of Saint-Domingue, Toussaint Louverture opened his famous 1801 letter to Napoleon Bonaparte to announce the de facto autonomy of the colony with the phrase: “*Le premier des Noirs au premier des Blancs*” (“Toussaint Louverture, le Jacobin noir”). There is thus an implicit equation of race and nation in Toussaint’s identification of both himself and the leader of the French by race in a struggle for the creation of an autonomous Black nation. This ethnoracial definition of the Haitian nation would later be formalized in the article of the Haitian Constitution of 1805 mentioned earlier, which states in unambiguous terms: “All Haitians will henceforth be known as Blacks.” Firmin’s conception of the nation as an ethnoracial entity was also the product of the *Zeitgeist*, for since the emergence of the modern nations in the age of revolutions and down to Firmin’s own time it was this particular view of the nation that had been theorized by Western intellectuals. Firmin’s writings in fact suggest a certain familiarity with the views of the theorists of the nation. Thus Fichte conceives the nation as a regrouping of people bound by language, culture, an awareness of common descent, and innumerable invisible bonds (*Addresses to the German Nation*, 1808). Firmin, too, sees the nation as an entity made up of people of common ancestry, sharing the same collective memory, and with a sense of belonging together on the same land. Ironically, Firmin’s view of the nation as an ethnoracial community also intersects with those of his two ideological adversaries, Ernest Renan (*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*) and De Gobineau (*Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines*). He diverges on a crucial point, however, from these two French ideologues: while both Renan and De Gobineau believed in a natural hierarchy of nations and races, Firmin passionately argued for the equality, in principle, de jure and de facto, of nations and races.

The semantic overlapping of race and nation in Firminist discourse makes possible a different interpretation of *The Equality of the Human Races* as, on the one hand, a demonstration of the equality of nations and, on the other hand, a passionate argument for a re-foundation of relations among nations on the basis of their equality. The book as well as other Firminist texts may be considered then a blueprint for a new geopolitical arrangement, the cause to which Firmin dedicated himself as a statesman and diplomat. In a very profound way, Firmin’s political and diplomatic endeavours were all guided by his passionate devotion to the idea of equality among peoples, nations, and races, and by a critical understanding of the unequal geopolitical order he wished to change, an understanding based on his knowledge of the contemporary geopolitical landscape and on his insights into the historical dynamics of its formation.

In surveying the contemporary geopolitical landscape as both a proud Haitian patriot and a no less proud Black man, Firmin observed the de facto division of the world into “savage nations and civilized nations” (*Equality* 285), that is, into socially, economically, technologically, and culturally strong polities and a much larger number of others who were less so-- today’s geopolitical division of the world into developed and underdeveloped countries.

Those less developed nations, in general non-White peoples including Africans, Haitians and other Diaspora Africans, occupied a subaltern position vis-à-vis the White Western peoples and nations. Firmin understood well the objective factors underlying the superior position of the West. Those Western nations, he argues in *The Equality of the Human Races*, have built a modern civilization on the earlier scientific and technological achievements of older civilizations, in particular those of Greece, Rome, and African Egypt, developing the superior modes of production that ensured their wealth and the coherent social and political organization that made effective action possible. That the White West could progress to such a degree of material development and position of power was due to the cohesion of their collectivities that derived from their people's consciousness of a common origin and shared historical experience, in brief, from their ethnic consciousness<sup>9</sup>. A strong sense of collective identity, according to Firmin, one based on "a heightened sense of connectedness" and historic identification with the land, eventually debouches on race consciousness, which "remains a strong, positive, and active force both in the unfolding of events and in the elaboration of theories" (*Equality* 380).

In Firmin's view, then, ethnoracial consciousness and a strong sense of collective identity make it possible to mobilize collectivities for ambitious projects and noble missions. Though, as discussed earlier, Firmin's understanding of the nation implicitly integrates the views of Fichte and of the thinkers of the era of the rise of the nation-state in general, and even partially the ideas of his ideological adversaries Renan and De Gobineau, Firmin clearly perceived the danger that lurks in this conflation of ethnicity/race and nation, for this combination of patriotism and ethnocentrism is likely to debouch on a sense of superiority over other collectivities. This, Firmin avers, is precisely what happens with White Western nations and peoples. Conscious of the height of their collective achievements and of the greater strength of their various societies in comparison to others, especially Black, Brown, and Yellow peoples and nations, Westerners have concluded that they are more advanced by virtue of their very whiteness and the others, especially the Black peoples and nations are more backward precisely by virtue of their race (*Equality*, 387). What the average Westerner in contact with the others in the colonies and other dominated non-Western societies inarticulately felt, a whole slew of philosophers, such as Renan, scholars such as the Comte de Gobineau, and anthropologists such as Clemence Royer, set out to demonstrate scientifically: the innate superiority of Caucasians and therefore their vocation to dominate. This is how Firmin describes this doctrine of White supremacy, the "arrogant faith in the superiority of Caucasian man" (*Equality* 384), an overarching ideology that unites in the name of racial affinities often competing cultural blocs—Latin, Germanic, Slavs—among the different Western nations and peoples, in the construction of the unjust and unequal global geopolitical order:

There is an almost mathematical certainty to all this, and as far as one can see this is how things will continue to be for a long time. One general fact of particular interest ensues from this order of things, though. Specifically, all White European nations naturally tend to unite in order to dominate the rest of the world and the other human races. They may argue about who is to dominate in Europe and which of the Slavic, Germanic, or Latin civilizations is to set the tone for the common evolution of the Caucasian race, but they unanimously recognize the right of Europe to impose its laws on other parts of the world (*Equality* 382).

The evidence of course is in the very state of the world under Firmin's eyes. His own country, struggling to advance against hurdles set by the ideology of White supremacy and its corollary Black inferiority, was relegated to the lower reaches of the global geopolitical order: "... ils pensent que notre état actuel est le résultat d'une espèce de fatalité physiologique indéfinissable, mais qu'on appelle infériorité de la race"<sup>10</sup> (M. Roosevelt vi-vii). And he was also convinced that, "*Quoi qu'on fasse, qu'on en parle tout haut ou qu'on veuille la voiler en des subtilités sournoises, la question de race domine fatalement le problème de la destinée d'Haiti. Tout le temps que les noirs continueront à être un objet de mépris par d'autres hommes, ou blancs ou jaunes, Haiti ne sera jamais pris au sérieux...*"<sup>11</sup> (M. Roosevelt vii-viii). As of Haiti, the Black nation, so of all non-White peoples and nations in the eyes of the proponents of the inequality of the races and the superiority of White Westerners, those Firmin call "the inventors of systems and creators of doctrine" (*Equality* 445).

It is precisely this hierarchization of the races and the erection of White supremacy as the organizing principle of the geopolitical order that Firmin deconstructs in *The Equality of the Human Races*, in *M. Roosevelt, Président des Etats-Unis, et la République d'Haiti*, and in *Lettres de Saint-Thomas*. In *The Equality of the Human Races* in particular, Firmin endeavors to show the fallacy inherent in the conception of race as indicator of the aptitudes of individuals and collectivities, and to warn about the grave danger to humanity posed by the use of race as ideology. In this work Firmin relentlessly challenges the theorists of race, chief of all the Comte de Gobineau and such early anthropologists as Topinard and Clemence Royer. He painstakingly demonstrates the unreliability of their measurement methods, premises and hypotheses as well as the illogic of their arguments. He concludes, based on evidence drawn from history, archeology, linguistics, and religion that all human collectivities, races, nations, and peoples are equal in intelligence, beauty, and morality. In Firmin's view, race as a set of physical characteristics is no more than an identifier and a signifier of collective belonging.

As such, it has no value of inferiority and superiority, no correlation with the stage of economic, socio-political, and technological development of a people or a nation at a particular point of history, and therefore with their amount of collective power and relative position to other peoples and nations. "In sum," Firmin declares, "there are savage nations and civilized nations. Naturally the former are inferior and the latter superior. Race has nothing to do with it; civilization has everything to do with it. Despite the state of deep degradation in which these savage races are believed to be, they have not lost their right to partake in humanity's common patrimony, that is, their right to progress" (*Equality* 285-286). And in any case, if there are nations of people of color, non-Western nations, Black nations striving frustratingly to advance, their lack of progress has to do not with any putative lack of aptitudes for progress, but always with "a hidden factor, political and social, which paralyzes it, slows its advance, and saps its potential for growth" (*Equality* 428).

Having no objective value except as a marker of identity and sign of belonging, race is ultimately a symbolic signifier, an ideology, and a dangerous one for the well-being of the world's peoples and nations. Hence the great sense of urgency and passion with which Firmin undertakes to deconstruct the uses and abuses of race to explain and justify the West's superior position in the geopolitical arrangement of peoples and nations. In Firmin's first salvo at the proponents of White superiority, he invokes the argument of historical contingency. "When one asserts that the Black race is inferior to all the others," he reasons, "one must prove that the fact is true now and was true in the past, that is, that not only is this the case today, but that things were never different in past history and that nothing happened in the past that could be in flagrant contradiction with the dogmatic views of the anthropologists or with the pretentiously self-assured conclusions of the scholars" (*Equality* 225). For Firmin, the anteriority of Black Egypt's civilization provides an eloquent refutation of the notion of innate White superiority.

Historically groundless as it is, the ideology of White supremacy has potent propaganda value, as the concept of race inequality and White superiority provides convenient justification of the actions and policies of Western nations vis-à-vis the rest of the world: "To legitimize European claims it was necessary to put forward some justifying reason. Europeans could not imagine any better justification than the notion of the inequality of the human races. According to this doctrine, the White race, unanimously recognized as superior, has the mission of dominating all the other races, for it is the only one capable of promoting and maintaining civilization" (*Equality* 382-383). And Firmin concludes: "Europeans usurp the concept of civilization and debase the most beautiful scientific ideas in order to support their greed and justify their reprehensible materialism" (*Equality* 383). White supremacist ideology, Firmin further explains, is at the core of the West's colonialist and imperialist impulses, providing a convenient ideological foundation for the constant "quest for larger territories and the dream of ever greater wealth" (*Equality* 383). Ultimately, "European aspirations and attending policies of invasions and usurpation" emanate from the "arrogant faith in the superiority of Caucasian man" (*Equality* 384).

White supremacist ideology, according to Firmin, is also a propaganda tool wielded with great efficiency to enlist the White masses in the West's imperialist ventures. Thus in Asia, Firmin points out, "Caucasians believe they have a mission to regenerate everything, not through trade, not through an exchange of ideas and techniques, which might benefit the peoples of the Far East, but by imposing their will as masters and conquerors. What could be a more effective tool than the theory of the inequality of the races for persuading European public opinion to support those faraway and risky undertakings? After all, is it not the destiny of White peoples to govern the entire world?" (*Equality* 386)?

Deeply satisfying and flattering to the collective psyche of White peoples, appealing to collective and individual narcissistic impulses, White supremacist ideology "is rooted in the worst form of egocentrism," for imbued with the sense of their indisputable superiority, "outside their own continent Europeans see only countries and people to exploit" (*Equality* 383). This deep-seated belief that the world revolves around one's being, one's interests and aspirations, this total disregard for the being, interests and aspirations of others with whom one shares the planet, cannot provide a sound foundation for the coexistence of peoples and nations, for the establishment of a just and harmonious geopolitical order, Firmin argues. In his view, the "logical consequences"<sup>12</sup> of Western egocentrism and White supremacist ideology are indeed dire for humanity.

The first "logical consequence" of White supremacist ideology for the global geopolitical order is permanent conflict, more often than not violent, between the West and the rest of humanity:

This is a fact of contemporary history. The international rivalries that have led nations to the battlefield in horrible wars of extermination are, for the most part, based on race. Certainly, conflicts do not always arise between clearly distinct races. It is mostly among the subraces of Europe that we observe these dreadful outbursts of the bellicose instinct, in which everyone can only think of the most deadly and expeditious way to render powerless and dominate an adversary, who has become an implacable enemy (*Equality* 380).

White supremacist ideology feeds on and feeds "the colonizing lust," inspiring thoughts and policies of genocide, the elimination of the inferior races so that their lands and resources can be taken over by the superior races, fantasies of lebensraum: "But what conclusions are reached by the anthropologists who support or accept the doctrine of superior and inferior races? Their conclusions are no more rational. According to most, all the other human races are condemned to disappear to leave room for the White race to develop" (*Equality* 439).

Another consequence of White supremacist ideology is the permanent instability of the global geopolitical system which it undergirds. The very injustice and violence inherent in it forms the seed of its instability. Subaltern non-Western, non-White peoples and nations will not submit to it; they will resist this rejection of their collective right to self-definition and self-determination, to their right to be and to be in the world. In this sense, Firmin points out, the Black Republic of Haiti is emblematic of all those subaltern people's refusal of their inferior status in the global geopolitical order: "*Aucun peuple, pas plus qu'aucun individu, ne peut vivre, progresser, monter avec une ardeur soutenue dans les voies de la civilisation s'il n'a point un but, un idéal qui l'attire, à travers toutes les péripéties de son existence. [...] Cet idéal, pour Haiti, c'est l'effort sublime d'un petit peuple en vue de la réhabilitation de toute une race d'hommes, effort si noble et si digne que chacun de ceux qui y participent pourrait, à juste titre, se considérer comme un apôtre*<sup>13</sup>" (M. Roosevelt ix). Even a small and downtrodden nation like Haiti will rise up to defend its right to self-definition and self-determination: "*Tous ceux qui ont ausculté une poitrine haitienne, en quête de savoir comment elle respire, quand la fibre du patriotisme est touchée, sous le rapport de notre autonomie nationale, ont eu la même impression de se trouver en face d'un brasier, qui s'allumerait soudain, pour tout sauver ou tout détruire, hommes et choses, dans une furie d'héroïsme*<sup>14</sup>" (M. Roosevelt 472). Frederick Douglass, Firmin's vis-à-vis during the United States attempt to obtain the right to build a naval base in Haiti, had a profound understanding of this expression of Haitian and Black nationalism, hence his warnings to the American government:

*Nous parlons [...] de nous arroger un protectorat sur Haiti. Nous ferions mieux de ne point le tenter. Le succès d'une telle entreprise est repoussé par toute l'histoire. Elle abandonnerait ses ports et ses rades, se réfugierait dans ses montagnes, brûlerait ses villes et verserait sur leurs cendres son sang tropical rouge et chaud, plutôt que de se soumettre à la dégradation d'aucun joug imposé, même amicalement. Quelles que puissent être les sources de sa honte et de ses malheurs, elle a une source d'une grande satisfaction: elle vit fièrement dans la gloire de sa liberté bravement gagnée. Son sang acheta son indépendance; et il n'a été accordé à aucun pied étranger hostile de fouler en paix son sol sacré*<sup>15</sup> (M. Roosevelt 473).

Thus the global geopolitical edifice constructed on a foundation of inequality among races and nations, bound to be constantly resisted by non-Western nations, is ultimately unsustainable. Such an international order based on White supremacist ideology is also inherently unstable because it is a product of the contingencies of a history which moves in cycles. Indeed in the long history of humanity, the rankings of nations and peoples in the global order constantly change as polities rise and fall, are born and disappear:

The world does not stand still. Nations and races interact on the stage of history, exit, and return in different roles. In the larger scheme of human destiny, none of these roles is insignificant. Equally imbued with dignity, each actor takes a turn at the main role. So things will continue to be until the day when actors on the stage can comfortably exchange roles and support and complement one another, effortlessly and without friction, in the larger enterprise which is to carry the intellectual torch that lights the moral and spiritual world as the sun does the physical and material world (*Equality* 445).

Because of its inherent violence and instability, a global order founded on and regulated by the ideology of White supremacy affronts the universal aspirations of all peoples and nations to self-definition, self-determination, and the respect of others. Says Firmin: “*Et, pourtant, un pays indépendant est, dans le cercle des nations, comme un homme dans le cercle de la société où il vit: l’un et l’autre ne peuvent évoluer ou grandir qu’en jouissant de la considération de ceux qui les entourent* <sup>16</sup>” (*M. Roosevelt* vii-viii). Such a global geopolitical order cannot be created on the Darwinian principles of race inequality and White supremacist ideology. A new paradigm is necessary for the construction of a just and harmonious concert of nations and peoples.

The Firminist paradigm articulated in *The Equality of the Human Races* and other writings is the antithesis of the prevailing White supremacist ideology: it is predicated upon the recognition of the absolute equality of all individuals, classes, peoples and nations in their racial diversity and the acceptance of its corollary, the rights of individuals to their integrity, dignity, and democratic freedom as well as the rights of peoples and nations to self-definition and self-determination:

Recognition of the equality of the races entails a definitive recognition of the equality of all social classes in every nation of the world. The moral principle underlying such a recognition thus acquires a universal import which reinforces and consolidates its authority. Wherever the struggle for democracy is being waged, wherever social inequality is still a cause of conflict, the doctrine of the equality of the races will be a salutary remedy. This will be the last blow struck against medieval ideas, the last step toward the abolition of privileges. Such is actually the direction in which all nations are evolving sociologically; such is the horizon which all enlightened and healthy minds are reaching for ; such is the ideal toward which the future is marching” (*Equality* 438).

One thing is certain, Firmin emphasizes, this just world of harmony among nations and peoples cannot exist without equality: “[...] *one cannot conceive of brotherhood without equality*” (*Equality* 448). And in a passage that situates his thought in both the Humanist and Enlightenment traditions, Firmin emphatically calls for translating the ideal of the equality of nations and races into reality :

Natural rights, the rights of nations, prohibit political and social usurpation only because the equality of all human beings is theoretically understood to be an absolute principle, one that obliges every individual to respect his fellow human beings as religiously as he respects himself because every human being is endowed with the same innate dignity. Equal rights are not a pure abstraction, with no connection to reality. [...] As we have seen elsewhere, the idea of equal rights is based on the aprioristic belief in the natural equality of all human beings (*Equality* 383).

White supremacy is an ideology, a world view, a semantic frame of reference by which one makes sense of the world and of one’s place in it. As such, it is a construct, one that has to be learned. Its removal from hearts and minds and its replacement with the Firminist paradigm of absolute equality requires education and the exercise of the imagination. As race consciousness is a stage in the formation individual and collective identity, Firmin urges that “the heightened sense of connectedness” that binds members of a nation and race together in empathy and solidarity must be extended to humanity as a whole, which is in fact the ultimate goal of civilization: “[...] the feeling of human solidarity increases the more a nation becomes civilized in its mores and way of thinking . Initially limited to an intimate circle, as it were, the sense of solidarity expands gradually until it encompasses humanity as a whole” (*Equality* 381).

Firmin is a diplomat and statesman, that is, a man interested not merely in theory but on the application of theory. Whatever idealism inheres in Firmin’s geopolitics, it is tempered by the realism of the man of action who clearly understands that in order to be operative equality must be supported by laws, institutions, and national strength and resolve. Firmin therefore seeks to articulate the effective mechanisms by which the new global geopolitical order, one based on equality that ensures self-definition, self-determination, harmony, mutual respect, and solidarity among peoples and nations, can be realized. To begin, he argues, there must be absolute adherence to the principle of the sovereignty of peoples and nations, that is, to the integrity of their collective being and their territory. It is this conviction at the heart of his nationalism and patriotism that explains Firmin’s action in the Mole Saint-Nicolas Affair, whereby he deployed all his diplomatic skills to stand up against a powerful nation, which he knew harbored notions of White supremacy, to protect the integrity of his nation and its territory.

This terse and elegant passage of the letter which Firmin sent, as minister of foreign affairs, to the U. S. government's emissaries Frederick Douglass and Admiral Gherardi eloquently conveys his conviction that national sovereignty must never be renounced under any circumstance: "*L'acceptation de votre demande avec une telle clause serait, aux yeux du Gouvernement d'Haïti, un outrage à la souveraineté nationale de la République et une violation flagrante de l'article 1er de notre Constitution; car, en renonçant au droit de disposer de son territoire, il en aurait consenti l'aliénation tacite*<sup>17</sup>" (M. Roosevelt 499).

Because of the objective disparity of power among nations and peoples as the result of their differences in material, social, and political development, Firmin also envisaged the creation of institutions that would actively militate for the construction of a new global geopolitical order by reinforcing the rights of all nations to their sovereignty, their rights to equality, regardless of their power and level of development. He thus conceived the organization of a Caribbean Confederation (Confédération Antillienne) that would bring together the peoples of the region, most of which were still colonies. This idea, only partially realized today in the Caribbean Community, he shared with such contemporaries as Jose Marti, the hero of Cuban independence, and Ramon Betances, the Puerto-Rican nationalist and independence advocate, both of whom were friends and comrades-in-arms. This dream of a Caribbean Confederation arose from his understanding that Haiti shared, as a result of both history and geography, a similar geopolitical situation with its regional neighbors, and had to cooperate with them in their striving for progress and their struggle against the supremacist ambitions of the United States and Europe: "[...] *nous ne pouvons pas oublier que nous sommes au milieu de la mer des Caraïbes et qu'il nous est impossible de rester indifférent aux aspirations et même aux rêves qui s'ébauchent autour de nous. En supposant que la Confédération des Antilles se transformera de longtemps en une réalité, ce n'est pas moins une éventualité possible. Nous est-il loisible de ne point nous préoccuper du rôle que nous aurions à y jouer en notre qualité d'ainée des nations indépendantes de l'archipel antillien?*<sup>18</sup>" (Lettres de Saint-Thomas v).

Ever the pragmatist statesman, Firmin understood that a new and just geopolitical order based on the equality of nations and peoples is also predicated on the strength of nations, peoples, and their polities. For this reason, he urged his compatriots to strive for the collective strength that guarantees self-definition and self-determination. At the same time, he looked forward to the creation of transnational institutions which, anticipating the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, would manage conflict, especially those that might be inspired by notions of race supremacy:

*La main dans la main, soyons prêts à nous adosser aux pans escarpés de nos montagnes protectrices, en nous touchant par le coude, unis pour la prospérité commune. C'est le seul moyen pour un peuple de se faire respecter, jusqu'à ce que la force cesse de primer le droit dans les contentions d'ici-bas et que toutes les prétensions nationales, justes ou arbitraires, sensés ou déraisonnables, des grands et des petits peuples, puissent également être soumises à un tribunal encore à naître, In the Parliament of men, the Federation of the world, rêve généreux de Tennyson, mais dont la réalisation n'aura rien de miraculeux<sup>19</sup> (M. Roosevelt 496).*

An optimist, Firmin had no doubt that this dream of planetary peace and justice will come true if all enlightened peoples and nations embrace the principle of equality as part of a universal moral and legal code mediated and enforced by global institutions and regional organizations.

One hundred and twenty-seven years after the publication of *The Equality of the Human Races*, Anténor Firmin's voice retains a remarkably transcendent relevance and urgency. The power of his ideas is rooted in the keenness of his insights into macro history and *longue durée* geopolitics. Studying the push-and-pull of nations and peoples throughout history in order to understand the place of his own people, nation, and race in the global order, Firmin evidences an ability to go to the heart of the phenomenon to uncover the very foundation of that order that placed some ethnoracial polities at the top and relegated others to the bottom. Today's reader cannot help but be in awe of the passionate honesty with which Firmin dealt with the issue of race and the role it played in the ordering of the world. He was an admirer of Europe and a self-declared Francophile who walked the boulevards of Paris, but he was also a self-conscious Black man and a Haitian patriot. He had no illusions therefore about the West and rightly condemned it for its invention of the most poisonous idea that has ever plagued humanity: race and race hierarchy. With his impressive erudition and his elegant yet forceful style of the *homme de lettres* that made his ideas accessible to both the scholar and the educated layman, Firmin speaks to our twenty-first century as he did to his time. The voice of the Caribbean Gwan Gung resonates still today because the battle he fought is still being waged between the same adversaries, between those who tacitly or loudly proclaim the natural superiority of some peoples and nations and their vocation to dominate, and those who, in the words of Eduardo Galeano, say no, no to a global order based on inequality, exploitation, and domination (*We Say No*). Firmin's remedy for the violence, injustice, and instability that plagued his world surely applies to the violence, injustice, and instability that plagues our own: that we embrace the salutary notion of the absolute equality, in theory and in practice, of all the peoples and nations in their dizzying racial diversity that coexist on this small planet.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Firmin's acute awareness of the role of racism in the West's negative perception of Haiti was generally shared by Haitian intellectuals of his generation, notably Louis-Joseph Janvier, author of a major text in defense of his country's reputation, *La république d'Haïti et ses visiteurs* (1882).

<sup>2</sup> Article 14 of the 1805 Constitution states: "*Toute acception de couleur parmi les enfants d'une seule et même famille, dont le chef de l'Etat est le père, devra nécessairement cesser, les Haïtiens ne seront désormais connus que sous la dénomination générique de noirs.*" [All differentiation on the basis of skin color among the children of the same family, of which the head of state is the father, must cease; Haitians will henceforth be known only as Blacks]. My translation. < [http://www.haiti-reference.com/histoire/constitutions/const\\_1805.php](http://www.haiti-reference.com/histoire/constitutions/const_1805.php)>

<sup>3</sup> "White people's cruelty and ruthlessness." My translation.

<sup>4</sup> Among two such typical readings of Firmin it is worth mentioning Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, "Anténor Firmin and Haiti's Contribution to Anthropology," in *Gradhiva* 1 (2005), 95-108; and Robert Bernasconi, "A Haitian in Paris: Anténor Firmin as a Philosopher Against Racism," in *Patterns of Prejudice* 42:4-5 (2008), 365-383.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular chapters 11, 16, 17, and 18 of *The Equality of the Human Races* for evidence of Firmin's understanding of the historical pattern of the rise and fall of nations and races.

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<sup>6</sup> “Community of people living in the same territory, whether or not under the same government, and sharing the same interests over such a long period of time that they may be considered as belonging in the same race.” My translation.

<sup>7</sup> “To write this Declaration of Independence we need the skin of a White man for parchment, his skull for inkwell, his blood for ink, and a bayonet for pen.” My translation.

<sup>8</sup> “From the first among the Blacks to the first among the Whites.” My translation.

<sup>9</sup> See the chapter “European Solidarity” in particular for Firmin’s analysis of the factors underlying Western superiority in modern times.

<sup>10</sup> “...They think that our current state is the result of some sort of physiological fatefulness that is undefinable but that is identified as racial inferiority.” My translation.

<sup>11</sup> “Whatever one does, whether one talks openly or utters veiled subtleties about it, the issue of race is inevitably at the heart of Haiti’s destiny. As long as Blacks continue to be the objects of scorn on the part of people, White or Yellow, Haiti shall never be taken seriously.” My translation.

<sup>12</sup> See the chapter of *The Equality of the Human Races* entitled “Theories and their Logical Consequences” (437-441).

<sup>13</sup> “No people, or individual for that matter, can live, progress, and move up the ladder of civilization if it does not have a goal, an ideal that shepherds it through all the peripeties of its existence. [...] For Haiti that ideal is that of a small nation striving with a sublime courage to rehabilitate an entire race. This is an enterprise so noble and so worthy that each person who participates in it may be considered an apostle”. My translation.

<sup>14</sup> All those who have peered into a Haitian’s heart to discover how it beats when its patriotism is stirred by the least threat to our national sovereignty have had the same impression of beholding a wild fire that would suddenly surge in a furious burst of heroism to either save or destroy all, people and things.” My translation.

<sup>15</sup> “We speak arrogantly [...] of turning Haiti into a protectorate. We had better not attempt it. Her entire history tells us that such an undertaking would fail. She would abandon her ports and

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her harbors, burn down her cities and spill her red hot tropical blood on the ashes rather than submit to the degradation of a yoke imposed on her by anyone, even in friendship. Whatever the causes of her humiliation and misfortunes, she has one source of great satisfaction: she lives proudly in the glory of her hard won liberty. She purchased her independence with her blood; no hostile foreigner has ever been allowed to tread her sacred soil with impunity.” My translation.

<sup>16</sup> “And yet, an independent country is in the community of nations as a man in society; it can neither exist nor grow without the consideration and respect of others.” My translation.

<sup>17</sup> “Accepting your demand as conveyed in such a clause would be, in the eyes of the Government of Haiti, an outrage to the national sovereignty of the Republic as well as a flagrant violation of Article 1 of our Constitution; for in renouncing the right to dispose freely of its territory, it would tacitly be agreeing to the latter’s alienation.” My translation. The clause to which Firmin objects here demanded privileged access to Haitian territory for the United States to the exclusion of all other nations. For a comprehensive and insightful account of Firmin’s actions and initiatives in promoting and protecting Haiti’s sovereignty see Georges J. Benjamin, *La diplomatie d’Anténor Firmin* (1960).

<sup>18</sup> “We cannot forget that we are in the middle of the Caribbean Sea and that we cannot remain indifferent to the aspirations and dreams aborning around us. The Caribbean Confederation may be a long time becoming a reality, but it remains a distinct possibility. Can we afford not to think about the role we will have to play as the oldest among the independent nations of the Caribbean archipelago?” My translation.

<sup>19</sup> “Hand in hand, let us be ready to put our backs against the steep slopes of our mountains and united let us work together for the collective prosperity. This is the only way a people can earn respect, until the day when force will no longer trump right in conflicts on this planet and all national claims, justified or arbitrary, sensible or irrational, of great and small peoples may be deferred to some tribunal yet to be created. ‘*In the Parliament of men, the Federation of the world* [in English in the original text].’ Tennyson’s generous dream, the realization of which will be anything but miraculous.” My translation.