

Colonial Subjects of Health and Difference: Races, Populations, Diversities

Monday June 11th – Wednesday 13, 2012

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science / Free University, Berlin

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Keynote speaker: Professor Warwick Anderson, University of Sydney

Human diversity in colonial contexts represented a fascinating topic of research for scientists and posed challenging administrative issues for colonial bureaucrats. For officials, managing the challenges of colonial administration was often dependent on acquiring data on their subject populations, while, conversely, the scientific pursuit of that data was firmly embedded in colonial rule. For those whose lives became colonial subjects during this time, colonial rule meant, at the very least, being exposed to new kinds of illnesses, expertise and exploitation. It also often meant being counted and categorized in the name of welfare and reform.

The core concern of this workshop is to identify connections between the study of ‘races’, ‘populations’ or ‘human variation’ and the colonial practices associated with health and governance of diverse human groups in the early 20th century. Thus, this workshop topic lies at the intersection of the history of science and the history and anthropology of colonial projects.

With respect to the history of science, we are interested in the multiple uses of the scientific category ‘race’ in research that both explicitly and implicitly employed concepts of human variation or diversity. Many historical accounts of race science or scientific racism have been framed as histories of scientists’ explicit interest in ‘race’, and have focused on studies that constructed classifications or typologies through anthropometric or serological measurements. Yet race also surfaced as a significant component of other kinds of colonial research pertaining to human groups, such as demography, medicine and biology. While these researchers did not directly conduct anthropometric or serological research, race was often embedded in their work; they noted differences between so called races (or populations, tribes, ethnic groups etc.) and used such comparisons in their research design and/or conclusions. These scientists often used multiple social and biological variables and categories of identity (e.g. sex, class, race) in their efforts to understand and improve the population socially and hygienically. In this workshop, we aim to explore the troubling presence of actors’ concepts of race in a range of different kinds of colonial research on human diversity.

With respect to the history and anthropology of colonialism, we are interested in how debates on health, population and human variation connected to the eminently practical concerns of colonial governance. Here too, we are interested in the troubling, if not always explicit, presence of ‘race’. We know, for example, that colonial administrators shared with demographers an interest in the biology of population growth and decline, and so helped shape research on birth rates, growth rates, sex ratios, or age of women at menarche and menopause. Moreover, when colonial medical officers took part in labour recruitment, quarantine policies, and conscription of different populations, they made judgements about the abilities and health of diverse populations. They compared the morbidity/mortality rates of diseases such as tuberculosis or malaria in different populations, and even studied the parasites they found in faeces of different groups. Colonial administrators themselves used and contributed to knowledge about diverse populations and drew

on classifications or notions of racial differences.

In addition to the contributions of colonial officials, we are interested in how these processes were shaped by the scientific labour of missionaries, settlers and indigenous people. Such interactions and the scientists' own field experiences were also potentially transformative for debates on human variation in metropolitan countries. Furthermore, we aim to explore how the presence of local interests and social forms combined with, resisted or disengaged from scientific knowledge production and colonial medical governance.

We welcome papers that address how the colonial governance of diverse human groups was connected to scientific inquiry and representations that had the health of human 'races' or 'populations' as their research subjects. We also encourage papers on broader questions of where actor's categories of "race" stood in relation to the understanding of the health of diverse populations and colonial attempts at social reform.

By looking at race within these broader frameworks of human diversity, we do not intend to dilute the harmful effects of race sciences. Rather, we want to draw specific attention to the research designs, methods and results that reveal the pervasive nature of racial thinking in research on human diversity, and the colonial interventions with which it was entangled.

This is a project of the Historicizing Knowledge about Human Biological Diversity independent research group. The Max Planck Institute for the History of Science will cover travel costs to Berlin and four nights accommodation.

Interested scholars should send a 300 word abstract and short CV by November 15, 2011 to officelipphardt@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de. Please write Colonial Workshop in the subject header. We will notify participants in January 2012.

If you have content related questions please contact awidmer@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de.