

Racialising civilisation:

Phrenology, scientific naturalism and the colonist's dilemma

Introduction

Civilization however has more extensive powers, and we have examples of the greatest variation in the human complexion produced by it. ... It appears that in races which are experiencing the effect of civilization, a temperate climate increases the tendency to the light varieties. ... Wherever we see any progress towards civilization, there we also find deviation towards a lighter colour and a different form.

James Cowles Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Man*, 1813

What wild, Utopian theories have been advanced – what misstatements, respecting civilization! ... What fanciful theories of human progress, of human civilization! ... Human history cannot be a mere chapter of accidents. The fate of nations cannot always be regulated by chance. ... Race is everything: literature, science, art, in a word, civilization depend on it.

Robert Knox, *The Races of Man*, 1850

From universal civilisation to racialised civilisation?

In 1813, James Prichard, founder of the Ethnological Society of London, wrote triumphantly about the prospect of civilizing mission. A student of Dugald Stewart, he inherited his mentor's faith in the universal civilisability of human. Beyond this "incontrovertible maxim",¹ Prichard further claimed that civilisation had an impact even on human complexion. In a mere forty years' time, there was a complete reversal in causality. Hailed as the spiritual father of British Anthropology, Knox was scathing of the Enlightenment doctrine. "Race is everything: civilization depend on it". Such was the new consensus for the second half of the 19th century, a racialised civilisation.

How did this profound transformation happen? How did we go from a thesis of "universal civilisation" to that of "racialised civilisation"? As Keene observed in his seminal survey of international thought, "civilisation" as one of the central concepts played a vital role in defining and stratifying communities in modern international society.² Its significance for understanding 19th-century international order was rightly manifested in the vast scholarly attention. Ever since Gong's exposition on the 19th-century "Standards of Civilisation", the discourse of "civilisation" has been a well-trodden terrain in historical IR.³ But curiously, scholars have yet to account for one of the most significant transformations in the 19th century, that is, the racialisation of civilisation. This thesis sets out to address this empirical lacuna.

¹ Stewart, 1854, [1815], p. 69.

² Keene, 2005, p. 10.

³ Gong, 1984; Keene, 2002; Bowden, 2009; Suzuki, 2009; Buzan, 2014; Yao, 2018; O'Hagan, 2020.

Raison d'être

To be sure, the history of the idea of race was a well-trodden field. But in tracing the racialisation of “civilisation” specifically, I also offer a distinctly IR contribution to the field. Reified as a “biological concept”, the history of “race” found its institutional home first and foremost in history of science. Stepan’s monograph, *The Idea of Race in Science*,⁴ sets a towering example.⁵ But for all its details, her account was distinctly methodologically nationalist, concentrating almost exclusively on the contexts and changes in Britain.⁶ Stocking’s otherwise excellent contribution from the disciplinary history of anthropology commits an equally nationalist bias.⁷ It is only until very recently that historians of science are starting to take seriously the *constitutive* role played by transnational contexts and receptions in the making of “race”.⁸ And while Poskett’s global history of racial science should be credited for his minute attention to the transatlantic connections materially, this has come at a cost of downplaying equally significant *global political contexts* at stake.

Historical IR, therefore, has its fair share to offer in the history of “race”. As my thesis seeks to demonstrate, scientific racism as the dominant 19th-century racist ideologies, was in important ways constructed around the civilisation *problématique* in the settler colonies.⁹ By the end of 1830s, the enduring failure of supposedly universal civilising mission became an intellectual dilemma that needs reconciling. In constructing a racialised discourse of civilisation, therefore, thinkers in the first half of the 19th century not only provided one persuasive answer to this urgent dilemma, but also, importantly, helped lay the very foundation for scientific racism. In other words, what existing studies failed to address, and what historical IR can contribute to, is how early 19th-century racist ideologies emerged in important ways as a conscious reflection on the dominant “world-making practices” of “civilisation”, particularly, the possibility of civilising non-Europeans in the settler colonies.¹⁰

Bringing history of science closer to political thought, I also contribute to the de-centring of international thought beyond canonical figures in political theory.¹¹ While calls for a decentred approach had been on for some time, there seems to be an implicit limit. Colonial officials, journalists, sci-fi writers, black women activists were all fine, but no natural scientists!¹² However, as it will become clear, one major reason for the consistent neglect of the racialisation of international order before the late 19th century was precisely because IR historians had been uncomfortable looking beyond “human sciences”. Contrary to Herbert Butterfield’s proposal of a turn towards scientists to understand international history, we ended up projecting a presentist disciplinary boundary back onto the thinkers before the 20th century, imposing, as it were, a disciplinary segregation.¹³ Thus, we hear of Combe the phrenologist, Morton the physician, Quetelet the astronomer, Knox the anatomist. But we never treat them as international thinkers *sui generis*. This is despite the fact that they were among the prime

⁴ Stepan, 1982.

⁵ Blanckaert, 1990; Anderson, 2007; Beasley, 2010; Reynaud-Paligot, 2014; Jenkins, 2020.

⁶ For history of “race” before Stepan equally based on methodological nationalism, see for example, Stanton, 1960; Haller, 1971; Horsman, 1975.

⁷ Stocking, 1991.

⁸ Poskett, 2019.

⁹ On the neglect of settler colonies in imperial history in recent decades, see Bell, 2016, p. 32.

¹⁰ On “world-making” as a practice, see Bell, 2013, p. 257.

¹¹ Rosenboim, 2020; Keene, 2017; Wight, 1960.

¹² Thakur & Vale, 2020; Bell, 2020; Bell, 2019; Umoren, 2018.

¹³ Butterfield, 1950, p. 49.

innovators racialising civilisation before Darwin. Combe's *Constitution of Man* (1828) was a case in point. Selling 350,000 copies with around 50 editions published in England and America during 1850-1899 alone, it was estimated to be the fourth most popular book throughout the 19th century.¹⁴ Above all, it was in this phrenological treatise that we find one of the earliest precedents for a racially-determined discourse of civilisation based on a (phrenological) doctrine of scientific naturalism. To write a history of 19th-century international thought without taking seriously widely-circulated works by "scientists", therefore, would be to leave its full landscape incomplete, if not severely impoverished.

Main argument

In this article, I set out to address the empirical lacuna of the racialisation of civilisation in the first half of the 19th century. Developing a contextual reading on the prominent scientist-qua-international thinker, George Combe, I argue that the racialisation of civilisation in the first half of the 19th century was in significant ways intimately connected with the phrenological movement. Epistemologically, the emergence of a distinctly racialised discourse of international thought was closely entangled with the rise of scientific naturalism in place of the Enlightenment assumption of human exceptionalism. Politically, this was in various ways constructed in close tandem with the various political debates on the civilisation *problématique*, particularly in the settler colonies.

Combe and the transnational publication of *Constitution*

In 1845, reflecting on his global fame, George Combe gave himself a phrenological diagnosis. Attributing his achievement to his powerful faculty of "Benevolence, Self-esteem and Love of Approbation" by birth,¹⁵ the founder of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society made the following corroboration:

When yet a child I was animated by the strongest ambition to do some great and good service to my fellowmen, which should render me an object of their love and respect. I conjured up schemes in my imagination for the gratification of the desire until I wept in contemplating them. These were the mere dreams of childhood, but I owe to Phrenology, presented to me by mere accident, a field in which it has been possible for me to pursue this object.¹⁶

Combe indeed had phrenology to thank for his trans-Atlantic reputation. Yet ironically, his first encounter with phrenology was loaded with disbelief, even mockery. In 1815, Combe came across an article on the *Edinburgh Review* denouncing the work of its founder, Johann Spurzheim as "a piece of thorough quackery from beginning to end".¹⁷ The reviewer, John Gordon, was a former student of Dugald Stewart and John Barclay, a successful anatomist at the University of Edinburgh.¹⁸ Close to publishing his first work on the anatomy of brain, Gordon took phrenology as an extremely dangerous competitor. He was particularly irritated by Spurzheim's denunciation of other works "of the brain [as] only a succession of error".¹⁹ With his anger unmistakable, his critique was, as Matthew Kaufman argued, largely of "a

¹⁴ Secord, 2003, p. 92.

¹⁵ Gibbon, 1878, Vol. 2, p. 376.

¹⁶ Gibbon, 1878, Vol. 2, p. 376.

¹⁷ Gordon, 1815, p. 227.

¹⁸ Lucie, 2007, p. 128.

¹⁹ Spurzheim, 1815, p. 4.

personal nature and borders on defamatory”.²⁰ Nevertheless, Combe, having previously studied anatomy and physiology under the same Barclay followed the lead of the ‘literary gospel of Edinburgh’ and was convinced by Gordon’s mocking irony and playful ridicule. When Spurzheim returned from Dublin to defend his case in Edinburgh, Combe simply refused to attend the lectures.²¹

Fortunately for Combe, he was invited in 1816 to observe a private brain dissection by Spurzheim in his friend’s house. Combe was hugely impressed by Spurzheim’s dissecting skills, “inexpressibly superior to that of [his] late teacher, Dr Barclay”.²² Deciding to learn more, Combe attended Spurzheim’s second series of lectures. By the end, He was entranced, so much so that he ordered from London two large puncheons of casts illustrative of different organs. Upon receiving his collections, Combe’s friends “came in troops to see them”.²³ He became, at long last, the centre of attention.

In the next decade, Combe became the leading spokesman of phrenology. He published his phrenological contribution in 1817, titled “Explanation of the Physiognomical System of Drs Gall and Spurzheim” in the *Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*.²⁴ His visit to Spurzheim in Paris led to another essay later collected into a single volume in 1819.²⁵ By 1820, with the help of his little brother Andrew Combe now returning from his medical study in Paris, Combe founded the Edinburgh Phrenological Society (EPS). This was the first phrenological body created, with thirty more to follow in the next two decades, even in peripheral places such as Calcutta and Bengali.²⁶

But Combe had something more ambitious in mind. Even in his early years, he had written in his diary about the aspiration to “write some useful book on human nature”.²⁷ His encounter with phrenology would finally provide the crucial warrant. Rather than stressing the anatomy of brain like Gall and Spurzheim, Combe saw phrenology as first and foremost a “moral science” with which to advise human affairs. Already in his first address to the EPS in 1823, Combe had proudly proclaimed for phrenology the role of a “mighty engine of expiscation [for] analysis in morals, ethics and political economy”.²⁸ In three years, he wrote to Spurzheim about his intention “to convert [his] essay on Responsibility”, written for private circulation within the EPS, “into a treatise to expound the natural law”.²⁹ Spurzheim, by then, had finished his French manuscript, *Philosophical catechism of the natural laws of man*.³⁰ Conscious of a significant overlap on the subject, Combe worked fast to revise his manuscript, while persuading Spurzheim to withhold publication.³¹ Intentional or not, he ultimately succeeded in stealing his mentor’s fire. In June 1828, Combe managed to publish his own *magnum opus*, *Constitution of Man*, just one month before Spurzheim’s *Catechism*.

Constitution, however, did not become a best-seller overnight. First published in 1828, the

²⁰ Kaufman, 1999, p. 162.

²¹ Gibbon, 1878, Vol. 1, p. 94.

²² Gibbon, 1878, Vol. 1, p. 95.

²³ Gibbon, 1878, Vol. 1, p. 95.

²⁴ Combe, 1817.

²⁵ Giddon, 1878, Vol. 1, p. 111-113; See also, Combe, 1818; Combe, 1819,

²⁶ Poskett, 2017, p. 432.

²⁷ Giddon, 1878, Vol. 1, p. 72.

²⁸ Combe, 1823, p. 140.

²⁹ Combe to Spurzheim, May 29, 1826, MS 7383.

³⁰ Combe, 1828, p. vii.

³¹ Spurzheim to Combe, March 19, 1827, MS 7220.

book, as lamented by Combe, was left “almost entirely unnoticed”, even deliberately marginalised.³² Combe’s preaching on his doctrine of natural law was then regarded as radically subversive of Christian faith by the evangelicals. Consequently, the first edition sold only about “100 to 120 copies” a year.³³

Things took a drastic turn in 1836 with the experiment by the Edinburgh publishers William and Robert Chambers. Combean phrenologists themselves, the brothers decided to try out a new printing technique of what later became known as the “People’s editions”. Printed on cheap paper using newly-invented steam presses, narrow margined and with double columns, *Constitution* sold at an unprecedented price of 1s 6d.³⁴ The result was an absolute success. Over 43,000 copies were sold within a year, and by the end of 1850, 85,000.

Nor did it die down soon afterwards. The book remained a best-seller throughout the century, with more than 50 editions published in England and America alone.³⁵ Translated into at least six languages, including Japanese and Bengali, it is calculated that by the early 20th century, the book sold for more than 350,000 copies, approximately 7 times more than Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*.³⁶ Some estimations ranked *Constitution* as the fourth most popular book during the long 19th century, surpassed only by the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*.³⁷ Nor was it just a book for the “public”. As will be shown, phrenology became the intellectual pillar of many prominent social thinkers in his time, including Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. In many places, *Constitution* also became a guiding principle behind prison reform, the abolition and feminist movements.³⁸ Indeed, so influential was Combe that by 1839, the New York politician James Wadsworth credited his *Constitution* for giving “a new Religion to the World”, that of “Combeism”.³⁹

The success of *Constitution* was the product of many contingent contexts. James Secord, for example, stressed the technological innovation of steam presses, which made the sheer number of volumes feasible in the first place.⁴⁰ Van Wyhe, on the other hand, credited the extension of literary by the 1830s.⁴¹ These permissible contexts notwithstanding, they do not guarantee a best-seller. In the end, perhaps there is some insight gained from the *Edinburgh Review*. Writing in 1842, summarising the success of phrenological movement, the anonymous reviewer observed that “mixing up what [Combe] calls the ‘doctrine of natural laws’ with phrenology, is a main cause of the admiration which that science procured”.⁴² But clearly, this was a peculiar brand of “natural laws”, which, as Combe suggested in his letter to Spurzheim, stressed “necessity”, rather than “man having liberty [to transcend nature]”.⁴³ Put differently, this was a doctrine of natural laws based on biology, “the innate faculties of Man”, in explicit contrast to human exceptionalism in the enlightenment civilisationist model. It is to this phrenological doctrine of natural laws that the narrative turn.

³² Gibbon, 1878, vol. 1, p. 253.

³³ Gibbon, 1878, vol. 1, p. 253.

³⁴ Secord, 2003, p. 69.

³⁵ Van Whye, 2004, p. 217-228.

³⁶ Secord, 2003, p. 526.

³⁷ Johnson, 1858, p. 93.

³⁸ Poskett, 2019.

³⁹ Mackay, 1877, p. 255.

⁴⁰ Secord, 2014, p. 194.

⁴¹ Van Wyhe, 2004, p. 134

⁴² Smith, 1842, p. 406

⁴³ Combe to Spurzheim, May 29, 1826, MS 7383.

The doctrine of scientific naturalism in phrenology

As a concluding thought in the *Constitution of Man*, Combe put forth the “official phrenologists’ creed” as “the establishment of the nature of man on a scientific basis”.⁴⁴ Faulting previous attempts for failing to “assign to human nature any definite or intelligible constitution”, Combe offered phrenology as “the clearest, most complete and best supported system of Human Nature”.⁴⁵ He therefore saw in phrenology “a demonstration of morality as a science”, giving rise to true knowledge of the organisation and functions of the brain, which in turn permitted actual scientific laws of human nature.⁴⁶

To be sure, there had been ample discussion on natural laws among Enlightenment stadial theorists. But in Combe’s view, these natural philosophers, “Locke, Hume, Stewart” included, remained confined to a “speculative realm”, as opposed to founding natural laws on the basis of “an inductive science”.⁴⁷ Refusing to study human nature with “reference to the body and its organisation”, these works remained metaphysical, “as if the mind were degraded by contemplating it in connexion with matter”.⁴⁸ In a disturbingly familiar tone to mainstream social scientists, Combe further asserted that until human nature “assume the stableness and precision of sciences, education, political economy and legislation, must continue superficial in their principles and application”.⁴⁹ Denouncing the enlightenment philosophy of man to be “a perfect waste”, Combe offered his unique prescription, a doctrine of natural laws founded on phrenology, serving to introduce “a portion of the certainty and precision which attend physical investigations” to the study of natural laws.⁵⁰

So, what does Combe mean by a doctrine of natural laws founded on phrenology? Combe expounded a tripartite of natural laws: physical, organic, and moral. The three dimensions were established in accordance with the three classes of phrenological “faculties” in charge of “propensities, sentiments and intellect”.⁵¹ Embracing “all the phenomena of mere matter”, the physical laws referred to more conventional notions of natural laws, such as a chemical law, the law of gravitation or other consistencies in Newtonian physics. The organic laws referred to the laws of “production, health, growth, decay and death”, applicable to all living organisms. Finally, and most importantly the moral laws referred to the law-like patterns of intelligent behaviours determined by the precise constitution of phrenological faculties. Thus, for example, a sentiment spawned from a healthy organ of “Benevolence cannot feel gratified with murder”, “nor a healthy Conscientiousness with fraud”.

Uniquely, Combe believed that these natural laws derived from phrenology were not simply descriptive, but also explicitly prescriptive. His point was that “the natural laws, when obeyed will conduce to the happiness of the moral and intelligent beings who are called on to observe them”, and that “evil consequences or punishments, resulting from infringement of them, will

⁴⁴ Combe, 1836a, p. 96.

⁴⁵ Combe, 1836a, p. vii, 6.

⁴⁶ Combe, 1836a, p. 57.

⁴⁷ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 1, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Combe, 1830, p. 37.

⁴⁹ Combe, 1830, p. 39.

⁵⁰ Combe, 1830, p. 40.

⁵¹ Combe, 1836a, p. 15.

be calculated to enforce stricter obediences”.⁵² Fifty years later, insisting on the universal civilisationist model, Mill singled out Combe as the main culprit behind the popular confusion between descriptive physical laws and prescriptive moral laws, to the detriment that “we are now continually reading injunctions to obey the physical laws of universe, as being obligatory in some sense and manner as the moral”.⁵³ But the problem of scientific naturalism went much deeper. Giladi noted that “scientific naturalism is guilty of a cognitive variety of imperialism”. In ruling the moral as subordinate to the natural-scientific mode of inquiry, “meanings, norms and intentionality are subject to regulative discourse”, and “disciplined with a view to being punished should they fail to sufficiently conform to the regulative discourse”.⁵⁴ Relegating social and moral patterns contingently constructed and sustained by unequal power relations as part of Nature’s law, inequalities and injustices became naturalised, normalised and therefore legitimized.

With regard to the racialisation of civilisation, there is one further point worth noting in Combe-ian natural laws, the logical priority of organic laws over moral laws. While Combe insisted that different classes of natural laws operate independently, his formulation of moral laws as derived from phrenological faculties effectively rendered moral laws the product of organic laws. This constituted one earliest precedent for what Weber termed “moralizing naturalism” in later Darwinian discourse, the moralisation of social behaviours based on human natural/biological constitution.⁵⁵

This then led to a discussion on the law of (acquired) hereditary descent. According to Combe, since “the brain is a portion of our organised system... subject to the organic laws”, “its form, size, and qualities”, in short, its phrenological features “corresponding with the mental characters are transmitted by hereditary descent”.⁵⁶ In a typical move against human exceptionalism, Combe went on to cite examples of pointer dogs inheriting “parent’s faculties” to become more “disciplined into staunchness”.⁵⁷ Historians have generally treated this aspect of Combeian phrenology as simply part of a wider Lamarckian tradition.⁵⁸ But as Jenkins demonstrated, there simply did not exist any proof, either in Combe’s correspondences, his works or reviews on his works, of the intellectual debt owed to Lamarckian transformism. Instead, Combe attributed his views on heredity strictly to his mentor, Spurzheim.⁵⁹ In his *A view of the Elementary Principles of Education*, published in 1821, Spurzheim noted that “children participate in their parents’ tendencies to particular manifestations of the mind”.⁶⁰ He then anticipated later eugenic policies to employ “the laws of hereditary descent” to improve the whole nations in “talent and moral feelings”.⁶¹ Moreover, Spurzheim was a firm critic of Lamarck. Unlike Lamarckian transformism stressing “the production of a *new* organ”, Spurzheim believed that transmission of mental traits stemmed solely from changes within *existing* (phrenological) faculties.⁶²

⁵² Combe, 1836a, p. 15.

⁵³ Mill, 2009/1874, p. 72.

⁵⁴ Giladi, 2020, pp. 272, 273.

⁵⁵ Weber, 1974, p. 280.

⁵⁶ Combe, 1836a, p. 43.

⁵⁷ Combe, 1836a, p. 45.

⁵⁸ Van Wyhe, 2004, p. 121.

⁵⁹ Jenkins, 2015, p. 460.

⁶⁰ Spurzheim, 1833, p. 37.

⁶¹ Spurzheim, 1833, p. 46.

⁶² Gall & Spurzheim, 1811, p. 100.

At the risk of slightly derailing from the current narrative, this is an important point to note. For too long, Lamarckian transformism have been regarded as the only theory of acquired heredity behind the 19th-century racial discourse. Phrenology, on the other hand, was all too quickly discarded as the “outcasts of science”.⁶³ But as will be elaborated later, returning Combe-ian phrenology to international thought could lead to a significant reconsideration of many prominent international thinkers, subsumed into a more or less a-historical social Lamarckian tradition, not least, Herbert Spencer, whose first adult literary efforts, after all, were on phrenology.⁶⁴

By attributing moral laws to the organic law of hereditary descent, Combe in effect subject human to nature’s command. Human observed laws derived from their biological constitution, rather than some metaphysical postulation. It bears noting also that when John Gordon, student of Dugal Stewart wrote his condemnation of phrenology, one key discontent is related to the phrenological move of lumping human with animal classification.⁶⁵ Combe himself also believed that certain moral laws were applicable to lower animals, including dogs, horses and elephants.⁶⁶ In this respect, phrenology stood in stark contrast with the old civilisationist model insisting on the uniqueness of human as inherently and universally nature-transcending. Later in his career, Combe would acknowledge his intellectual debt to Malthus, whose immutable law of population might be regarded as one earliest precedent of explicitly biologizing and naturalising the moral world.⁶⁷ The surge of a phrenologically-based scientific naturalism means many things, not least, a direct challenge to human exceptionalism in the old civilisationist model.

Biologizing civilisation: phrenological uncivilisability

In 1984, writing on Combe’s conflation between descriptive physical laws and prescriptive moral laws, Cooter believed that “it was largely from [*Constitution*] that this use of natural law spread throughout the English-speaking world”.⁶⁸ Given the sheer popularity of *Constitution* transnationally and Mill’s accusation directly charged at Combe, Cooter’s diagnosis seemed not so far off the track. But curiously, he left entirely unaddressed the implications on the old civilisationist model. As argued, phrenologically-based natural laws posed a considerable challenge to human exceptionalism behind the universal civilisation thesis. Reducing human as but part of nature, thus equally under nature’s command, the universal aspiration to civilisation, defined as nature-transcending, also went under challenge. This constituted a necessary precondition for the racialisation of civilisation.

Cooter was not the only historian to ignore the racialising implications of phrenologically-based scientific naturalism. Van Wyhe similarly stressed the role of phrenology in bringing 19th-century scientific naturalism into mass circulation.⁶⁹ But in countering the conventional wisdom that typically traces scientific naturalism as an intellectual offspring of “Darwinian

⁶³ In IR this is an equally prevalent practice, see Hobson, 2012, his discussion on Spencer.

⁶⁴ Spencer, 1904, p. 261. Spencer became aware of phrenology at the age of eleven, attending Spurzheim’s lectures during his visit to Derby where Spencer lived.

⁶⁵ Gordon, 1815, p. 227.

⁶⁶ Combe, 1836a, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Combe, 1857, p. xii.

⁶⁸ Cooter, 1984, p. 122.

⁶⁹ Van Wyhe, 2004.

revolution”, he also omitted any mention of race or indeed, colonialism. It is only until recently that historians of phrenology have gradually picked up on the questions of “race”.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the role of phrenology in the shifting discourse of “civilisation” was left conspicuously unexplored.

The omission is even more striking given the close textual relevance between Combe’s articulation of natural laws and his racialisation of civilisation. Beyond a logical precondition for racialising “civilisation”, Combe’s prioritisation of (organic) natural laws over the formation of mental qualities was closely followed by his indictment of the uncivilisability of some human based on their phrenological constitution.

Discussing the law of hereditary descent, Combe’s first and foremost example was the phrenologically-determined uncivilisability of the non-whites. Going through the vast collections of “savage” skulls in the EPS, Combe asserted that “the native American savages, and native New Hollanders, cannot, with their present brains, adopt Christianity or civilisation”. The reason lay in their phrenological faculties. He went on to explain that “in the American Indians, the organs of reflecting intellect, and of all the moral feelings, are greatly inferior in size to the same organs in the Europeans”. By contrast, “the moral and intellectual organs are decidedly larger in the Sandwich Islanders than in the Indians”. To Combe, this was the fundamental reason why the Sandwich Islanders “have received European civilisation with greater cordiality and success”.⁷¹ Stressing phrenologically-determined uncivilisability of the non-whites in their present state, Combe did not deny their prospect completely. Rather he provided two pathways to civilise the non-whites. Following the law of hereditary descent, the Indians could approach civilisation either through “progeny of marriages between Europeans ... and native Americans”, or through gradual improvement of their phrenological faculties across generations.⁷² Either way, what is clear to Combe is that “the improvement, will, no doubt, have its limits”.⁷³

Indeed, Combe himself was pessimistic about the prospect of a rapid civilising mission. Elsewhere, he noted how “permanent” distinct features between different races remained.⁷⁴ “The annals of the races of [Africa]... exhibit one unbroken scene of moral and intellectual desolation”, and “no nation is at this day to be found whose institutions indicate even moderate civilisation”.⁷⁵ The aspect of America is even “more deplorable”. The Indians “have profited nothing by the introduction amongst them of arts, sciences and philosophy”, and “remain at the present time, the same miserable, wandering, houseless and lawless savages as their ancestors were”.⁷⁶ Here again, the contrast between Lamarckian transformism and phrenological law of hereditary descent became important. While in Lamarck’s vision, transformation could and most probably should happen within one lifetime – indeed, Lamarck made this point explicit⁷⁷ – phrenologists believed that changes within existing organs could only take place over “centuries of time”,⁷⁸ with improvements in each generation vastly limited. “Ages and ages

⁷⁰ Poskett, 2021.

⁷¹ Combe, 1836a, p. 49.

⁷² Combe, 1836a, p. 44, 49.

⁷³ Combe, 1836a, p. 49.

⁷⁴ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 727.

⁷⁵ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 728.

⁷⁶ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 729.

⁷⁷ Lamarck, 1815, Vol. 1, pp. 181-182.

⁷⁸ Combe, 1836a, p. 65.

have rolled over their heads, and they still continue precisely in the same state.”⁷⁹

Combe’s phrenologised civilisation were no passing whim. Historians have generally treated phrenology as a science of individuals, rather than groups. Cryle and Stephens, for example, suggested that because phrenologists were devoted primarily to “individual observations”, they were of little interest to the late 19th-century racist anthropology.⁸⁰ To be sure, this has been the expressed opinion of some anthropologists in later decades, including Paul Broca, founder of the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris.⁸¹ But in reality, Combe, the leading phrenologist has been concerned with phrenological implications on the mental characters of distinct races since at least as early as 1824. Writing for the second issue of *The Phrenological Journal*, Combe made his belief decidedly clear. In a twenty-page article titled “On the Coincidence between the Natural Talents and Dispositions of Nations and the Development of their Brains”, he put forth the official phrenological position, that “a particular form of brain is the invariable concomitant of particular dispositions and talents, and that this holds in the case of nations as well as of individuals.”⁸²

Moreover, this has been one important source of disagreement between Combe and his mentor, Spurzheim. Writing in 1825, Gall and Spurzheim observed that there were “individuals in all nations who have the same moral and intellectual character”. Summing up their examinations in London, they believed that the results rendered it “impossible to distinguish by [phrenology] alone whether an individual was a Frenchman, German, Italian, Spaniard or an Englishman”.⁸³ But Combe would have none of it. Boasting that “the phrenological Society of Edinburgh possesses the largest collection of national crania in Europe”, Combe asserted that “a general type pervades the great majority of each tribe” and that what Gall and Spurzheim observed was simply “an exception to the general rule”.⁸⁴ Indeed, so convinced was he that throughout his opening article in 1824, he provided a global survey of “national crania”, going from Hindoos, Charibs, New Hollanders, Negros, American Indians, even to the Ancient Egyptians and Europeans.⁸⁵

In effect, Combe was offering his own phrenological insight to explain an “empirical” dilemma in the settler colonies threatening to bring down the old civilisationist model. Endorsers for the old civilisationist model, such as Dugald Stewart, insisted that different “capacities of the human mind” were “the result merely of the different circumstances in which men are placed”. “This,” says he, “has long been an incontrovertible logical maxim”.⁸⁶ Under this maxim, the non-Europeans were simply the product of different circumstances and should be civilised fairly soon once under the influence of European “civilisation”. Indeed, such is the very rationale behind the 19th-century civilising missions. But were this the case, it became very difficult for the European colonisers/civilisers by the end of 1820s-30s to explain the enduring “stagnation” among the non-whites towards civilisation. The following two articles during that time served a fine demonstration of this dilemma.

In 1822, an article appeared on the ‘literary gospel of Edinburgh’ reviewing John

⁷⁹ Combe, 1836a, p. 70.

⁸⁰ Cryle & Stephens, 2017, p. 146.

⁸¹ Broca, 1880, p. 756.

⁸² Combe, 1824, p. 7.

⁸³ Gall, 1825, Vol. 5, p. 417-418.

⁸⁴ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 733.

⁸⁵ Combe, 1824.

⁸⁶ Stewart, 1854/1815, p. 69.

Howison's *Sketches of Upper Canada*.⁸⁷ The latter, published in 1821, was renowned as the "standard source on Canadian conditions", going rapidly into three editions, even translated into German. The reviewer began with a passionate eulogy on the degree of improvement in North America by colonial settlements. Since then, "a greater and more important change has been effected ... than perhaps by any event in the whole range of history", with "civilisation ... spread over an extent of country equal to a large portion of Europe".⁸⁸

But when describing the state of the aborigines, the author's tone took a drastic turn:

From all that we learn of the state of the aborigines of this great continent from this volume, and from every other source of information, it is evident they are making no advances towards civilization. It is certainly a *striking* and *mysterious* fact, that a race of men should thus have continued for ages stationary in a state of the rudest barbarism. That tendency to improvement, a principle that has been thought more than perhaps any other to distinguish man from the lower animals, would seem to be *totally wanting* in them. Generation after generation passes away, and no trace of advancement distinguishes the last from the first. ... It might naturally have been expected, that, in the course of ages, some superior genius would have arisen among them, to inspire his countrymen with a desire to cultivate the arts of peace, and establish some durable civil institution; or that, at least, during the long period since the Europeans have been settled amongst them, and taught them, by such striking examples, the benefits of industry and social order, they would have been tempted to endeavour to participate in blessings thus providentially brought within their reach. But all has been unavailing.⁸⁹

The tone of disbelief was apparent, bringing into question the old civilisationist model.

The reviewer was not alone in his astonishment on the enduring "savagery" of the natives. John Dunmore Lang, an Australian politician and the first prominent advocate of an independent Australian republican nation, whose statue now stands in Wynyard Square, Sydney, shared the same confusion in his encounter with the Australian Aborigines. In 1834, publishing the first edition of *An Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales, both as a Penal Colony and as a British Colony*, which ran through four editions until 1878, Lang reflected on the failed attempts at civilising the aborigines:

Throughout the whole period of government, Captain Philip endeavoured with a zeal and perseverance which evinced the correctness of his judgement and the benevolence of his disposition, to conciliate the aborigines of the territory. But all the efforts of the Governor, as well as of other humane individuals in the colony, to effect the permanent civilization of that miserable people, proved utterly abortive.⁹⁰

Lang went on to cite cases of young natives, who, despite being brought up in European families to "learn the arts of civilisation", "sooner or later...uniformly rejoined the other children of the forest and resumed the habits of savage life".⁹¹ Particularly prominent was a native called Bennelong. Domesticated in the Governor's family, and capable of "acquitt[ing] himself at the table with the utmost propriety", Bennelong was taken by Captain Philip to court many highest circles in Britain. Upon returning to his native land, however, Bennelong "speedily divested himself of his European attire, and rejoined his tribe as a naked savage,

⁸⁷ Howison, 1821.

⁸⁸ Anonymous, 1822, p. 250.

⁸⁹ Anonymous, 1822, p. 262-263.

⁹⁰ Lang, 1834, p. 36.

⁹¹ Lang, 1834, p. 37.

apparently *unimproved in the least degree* by his converse with civilized man”.⁹² One is easily reminded of Pegu the Hottentot, but the story of Bennelong was likely to be genuine, with his letter to Governor Philips preserved and published on an 1801 German scientific journal as the first use of English by an Aborigine.⁹³ This was further corroborated by his obituary posted on *Sydney Gazette* in 1813. Damning in its tone, the obituary lamented on the failed civilising mission, noting that:

His voyage to and benevolent treatment in Great Britain produced *no change whatever* in his manners and inclinations, which were naturally barbarous and ferocious. The principal officers of Government had for many years endeavoured, by the kindest of usage, to wean him from his original habits and draw him into a relish for civilised life; but every effort was *in vain* exerted... In fact, he was *a through savage*, not to be warped from the form and character that nature gave him by all the efforts that mankind could use.⁹⁴

Facticity aside, what is significant was the sheer difficulty colonisers such as Lang had in reconciling the universal civilisationist model with the enduring failure of civilising missions. If humans were conceived as inherently nature-transcending, at least in their potential, then by definition, they must be capable of approaching civilisation. But if this were so, as suggested by the enlightenment stadial theorists, why was it that some groups of humans displayed such a stagnation towards civilisation?

It is certainly no coincidence that in his global survey of crania later published in *A System of Phrenology*, Combe cited, among many other sources, precisely these two authors as authoritative accounts of the Indians and Aborigines. To Combe, these depictions of the colonies put enlightenment stadial theories in a very awkward position. Contra Stewart, who claimed that “national characters are produced by diversities of soil and climate”, the mental qualities of the natives were anything but climate-dependent.⁹⁵ While in New South Wales, “a few natives have existed in the most wretched poverty, ignorance, and degradation”, the same soil and climate “enriches Europeans as fast as they possess it”. The civilisationist model also met considerable difficulty in America. Here, too, “Europeans and native Indians have lived for centuries under the influence of the same physical causes”. And yet, while “the former have kept pace in their advances with their brethren in the Old Continent”, “the latter remain stationary in savage ignorance and indolence”.⁹⁶ The experience of colonial settlers by the end of 1830s posed a strong and definite dilemma for the prevalent belief in universal civilisation. Since “Nature is constant in her operations, and that the same causes invariably produce the same effects”,⁹⁷ then it is clear, at least to Combe, that there must be something more fundamental than environment that explains the divergence in mental qualities between the Europeans and non-Europeans.

Combe’s answer, as always, lay in phrenology. This was hardly surprising, as Frederick Douglass later recalled after a breakfast with Combe: “Phrenology explained everything to him, from the finite to the infinite”.⁹⁸ In the case of American Indians, apart from “the general size ... greatly inferior to that of the average European head, indicating inferiority in natural mental

⁹² Lang, 1834, p. 38.

⁹³ Bennelong, 1801/1796, p. 373-377.

⁹⁴ *Sydney Gazette*, 1813, January 9.

⁹⁵ Stewart, 1854/1815, p. 536.

⁹⁶ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 730.

⁹⁷ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 730.

⁹⁸ Douglass, 1881, p. 245.

power”, the crucial difference could be found in phrenological organs. “[Their] deficiency in the moral organs, and in Concentrativeness and Adhesiveness, would account for the looseness of their social and patriotic relations”.⁹⁹ In a typically triumphant tone, Combe believed that his phrenological diagnosis would unravel “the cause of the peculiar inaptitude of that race of men for civil life”.¹⁰⁰

Combe’s diagnosis was equally condemning for the Aborigines. Their skulls “indicates an even more lamentable deficiency in the regions of moral and intellectual organs”. Phrenological faculties were again the crucial cause of their uncivilisability. With “extreme intellectual incapacity” demonstrated by the organs of “Reflection”, “every talent necessary for architecture, and the constructive arts in general is defective, while Ideality is so small, that sentiments of refinement or elegance will scarcely be at all experienced”. Even “the most unaccustomed eye”, concluded Combe, will perceive just “how far the skulls fall short of the Europeans in the organs of Reflection, Ideality, and Constructiveness”.¹⁰¹

Thus, from Combe’s phrenological lens, the old civilisationist model is not so much wrong, but inadequate as it only applied to some human beings. Progress was in harmony with the phrenological natural laws as the faculty of Ideality is so created to “reap direct enjoyment ... at every step of our progress”.¹⁰² But that does not mean all humans are equally amenable to progress. Those prone to progress such as the Europeans, were born with a superior set of phrenological organs in charge of intellect. And those stuck in their savagery were determined by their deficient phrenological constitution. The universal aspiration to “civilisation” is saved, only by basing it on the natural-scientific “constitution of man”, thereby rendering some as “less-than-humans”.¹⁰³ With phrenology and scientific naturalism, the racialisation of civilisation is thus constructed out of a dilemma to reconcile the old civilisationist model with the enduring failure of civilising mission in the settler colonies.

As leader of the phrenological movement, Combe was not alone in racialising civilisation. His brother, Dr Andrew Combe, former medical student in Paris, was equally pronounced on the question of civilisation. In 1837, Andrew Combe published a fiery rebuttal against German anatomy professor Friedrich Tiedemann on the intellectual capacity of the “Negro”. Measuring “52 European brains and 4 Negro brains”, Tiedemann observed that “the Negro brain is equal in size and similar in structure to that of the Europeans”, and as a consequence, “the former is *equally capable of civilisation* as the latter”.¹⁰⁴ It is of interest to note that even for someone like Tiedemann who rejected the fundamental uncivilisability of the non-whites, the prospect of civilisation came still as a direct inference from phrenological measurements. But as “one of the first physiologists of Europe”, Tiedemann’s denial was deeply unsettling to the phrenologists.¹⁰⁵ Recognising the severe consequence of “his name and influence ... mislead[ing] many”, Andrew Combe took to task a detailed refutation.¹⁰⁶

Combe’s rebuttal was ingenious. Rather than dismissing Tiedemann’s measurements, he decided that a more efficient strategy was to use the same data to confirm racialised civilisation.

⁹⁹ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 744.

¹⁰⁰ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 746.

¹⁰¹ Combe, 1836b, Vol. 2, p. 737.

¹⁰² Combe, 1836a, p. 21.

¹⁰³ Sartre, 1963, p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Tiedemann, 1836.

¹⁰⁵ Combe, 1838, p. 13.

¹⁰⁶ Combe, 1838, p. 13.

Combe first noted that Tiedemann's measurement of the average brain weight was in accordance with phrenologists' claim of European superiority. While the average European brains "runs from 3 lbs. 2 oz. to 4 lbs. 6 oz.", the average Negro brain "rises to only 3 lbs. 5 oz.", "3 oz. above the lowest European averages", with "the highest Negro [brain] 5 oz. short of the highest average Europeans".¹⁰⁷ Combe further reminded, following the phrenological localisation of organs, that "the real question of interest, as regards Negro improvement, is not so much the general size of his brain, as the relative size of its anterior lobe", since "the anterior portion is the seat of *intellect*".¹⁰⁸ This is admitted even by Tiedemann himself, conceding that in the Negro brain, "the anterior portion of the hemisphere is narrower than is usually the case in Europeans".¹⁰⁹ While sympathetic to Tiedemann's "philanthropic warmth", it simply "does not follow", concluded Combe, "that the negro with the *narrow forehead* is capable of approaching to European civilization".¹¹⁰

The Combes were further confirmed by practicing phrenologists in the settler colonies. Dr Charles Caldwell, a physician and a converted phrenologist from the US, credited as one of the key leaders of scientific racism in the US, corroborated Combe's diagnosis with a detailed anatomical report on the phrenological organs of the Indians:

The average size of the head of the Indian is less than that of the head of the white man. ... The chief deficiency in the Indian head lies in the superior and lateral parts of the forehead, where are situated the organs of Comparison, Causality, Wit, Ideality and Benevolence. The defect in Causality, Wit and Ideality is most striking.¹¹¹

Caldwell was convinced that this phrenological constitution rendered the Indians inherently incapable of "civil life". His diagnosis was even more ruthless. To him, only "when the wolf, the buffalo and the panther, shall have been completely domesticated, like the dog, the cow, and the household cat, then and not before, may we expect to see the full-blooded Indian civilized like the white man".¹¹² Centuries of time indeed. But Caldwell went further. "Such is their [the Indian's] entire unfitness for civilization, that every successive effort to mould them to that condition of life ... will extinguish the race".¹¹³ Anticipating later discourse of racial extinction, his prediction was decidedly gloomy. With "the abode of civilisation ... the mere man of the forest is no longer wanted, and he is therefore, passing away".¹¹⁴ Cold-bloodedness aside, what was particularly noteworthy in Caldwell's remark – and what many historians of "race" have failed to notice – is that the indictment of racial determinism and extinction was at least in its earlier phrenological manifestations intimately connected with the civilisation *problématique* in settler colonies.¹¹⁵

In South Africa, Dr Andrew Smith, an army surgeon on the Cape's eastern frontier from 1821 to 1825 and founder of the South African Museum, was among the earliest phrenologists in the settler colonies. Learning phrenology through Thomas Pringle, a close correspondent

¹⁰⁷ Combe, 1838, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ Combe, 1838, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ Tiedemann, 1836, p. 239.

¹¹⁰ Combe, 1838, p. 19.

¹¹¹ Caldwell, 1826, p. 191.

¹¹² Caldwell, 1826, p. 192.

¹¹³ Caldwell, 1826, p. 195.

¹¹⁴ Caldwell, 1826, p. 195.

¹¹⁵ Stepan, 1982, for example, while addressing the role of phrenology, completely bypassed its close connection with the discourse of civilisation in the making of race.

with Combe, Smith was “much pleased with it”.¹¹⁶ Publishing on “the Aborigines of South Africa” in the local scientific periodical, Smith’s observations left no ambiguity regarding the fate of the “Bushmen”. With intellectual faculties severely underdeveloped, the Bushmen displayed a “total want of thought” and of “the idea of futurity”, resulting in their incapacity to advance beyond “the scanty means of subsistence”. Stuck “in an uncivilized state”, “[their] apparent certainty of the approaching extinction” was the result of “the gradual extension of civilized life”.¹¹⁷

Phrenologists in Australia were equally pessimistic. Already in 1822, the first Supreme Court Judge Barron Field had employed phrenology to study the New Hollanders. A poet and one of the few phrenologists in the colonies, Field too, believed that phrenology offered the answer to “the might problem” of their enduring stagnation to civilisation after “attempts of more than thirty years ... to civilize [them]”.¹¹⁸ The Aborigines, observed Field, had ready powers of imitation. But in terms of the organ in charge of “reflection, judgement or foresight”, they were seriously wanting. “The inference”, he proclaimed confidently, “is certainly that the Australians will never be civilized”.¹¹⁹ The duty of the colonist, as Field so poetically (and somewhat irritably) charged, was to recognise the Australians’ phrenological uncivilisability, and to see to their extinction as humanely as possible:

Still let him prompt the lib’ral colonist
To tender offices and pensive thoughts
Then let him pass, – a blessing on his head!
And, long as he can wander, let him breathe
The freshness of the woods.
May never we pretend to civilize,
And make him only captive!
Let him be free of mountain solitudes;
And let him, where and when he will, sit down
Beneath the trees, and with his faithful dog
Share his chance-gather’d meal; and, finally,
As in the eye of Nature he has lived,
So in the eye of Nature let him die!¹²⁰

Appropriating phrenological ammunition: global reception and contestation

All the above discussion might well be dismissed as pseudo-scientific ramblings from the margin. But the point is precisely that phrenology was not taken as a marginal pseudo-science in the first half of the 19th century. Rather, as a branch of knowledge promising to bring forth “the establishment of the nature of man on a scientific basis”, phrenology was hailed as *the* leading science, esteemed by and indeed, fundamental to some of the most prominent 19th-century thinkers, including Comte and Spencer.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Pringle to Combe, June 25, 1823, MS 7211.

¹¹⁷ Smith, 1831, p. 119.

¹¹⁸ Field, 1822, p. 205.

¹¹⁹ Field, 1822, p. 224, 225.

¹²⁰ Field, 1822, p. 228-229.

¹²¹ This strand of influence has, however, been overlooked by even some of the leading post-colonial approaches to social and political thought, see for example, Hobson, 2012; Owens, 2015; Go, 2016.

Credited as the founder of sociology and social sciences, Comte's phrenological inheritance is often a glaring omission in disciplinary history.¹²² Praising its founder, Franz-Josef Gall as *incomparable* and his works as *immortels*,¹²³ Comte drew extensively from phrenology. In *Système de politique positive*, Gall was cited twenty-one times, closely following Aristotle as the second most cited source in the entire volume.¹²⁴ Like Combe, and so many others, Comte saw in phrenology "a final true victory of the positive spirit in intellectual and moral studies" and was always passionate to recommend phrenology to his correspondents, including John Stuart Mill.¹²⁵ Even Mill himself, though later condemning phrenology publicly, confessed in his private correspondences to Comte, that "[phrenology] have irrevocably opened the way to truly positive research, and [is] of the first importance".¹²⁶

Indeed, it is hardly any exaggerations when Comte stressed the "fundamental importance" of phrenology to his own works.¹²⁷ To begin with, his proposal for a positive sociology was directly inspired by the phrenological version of scientific naturalism. Comte believed that by "free[ing] philosophy [of human nature] from every trace of Ontology as well as Theology", Gall's study of cerebral functions "completed the social and intellectual conditions of the discovery of sociological laws, and the foundations of Positivism".¹²⁸

Phrenology was far beyond an inspiration. Proudly asserting Sociology as emanating from Gall's theory of cerebral localisations,¹²⁹ his positive sociology was itself premised on the phrenological division of organs into the sentimental, intellectual, and active.¹³⁰ Positive sociology, as Comte would have it, is devoted to "the fundamental problem" to which "[Gall's] theory of the Brain gives rise", "the subordination of Egoism to Altruism". Thus, the Comteian question was articulated in the typical phrenological jargon:

To enable the three social instincts, with the aid of the five intellectual organs, to gain ascendancy over the impulse resultant from the seven personal propensities, restricting these latter to the necessary limits, so as to concentrate the three active organs on the furtherance of social interests.¹³¹

Besides forming the key *problématique*, the phrenological division stood also essential for deriving Comte's sociological laws. Many students of social sciences are, no doubt, aware of Comte's law of three stages, where human development was cast as "the succession of three mental states: theological, metaphysical and positive".¹³² But it is perhaps little known that this sociological law itself was founded on phrenology. As Comte explained, while the earlier stages found among "primitive man" were shaped by "the dominance of *propensities* and *sentiments*", "the general result of our fundamental evolution" was made possible through "the continuous

¹²² See Aron, 2018/1970, Chapter 3; For recent exceptions, see McVeigh, 2020.

¹²³ Comte, 1875, Vol. 1, p. 672.

¹²⁴ Comte, 1875, Vol. 1.

¹²⁵ Comte a Mill, 4 mars, 1842, p. 28. Elle a certainement constitué la véritable prise de possession finale par l'esprit positif des études intellectuelles et morales.

¹²⁶ Mill to Comte, 11 July 1842.

¹²⁷ Comte a Mill, 4 mars, 1842. p. 28. Je puis vous assurer que je n'en ai nullement exagéré la valeur fondamentale dans les volume de mon ouvrage.

¹²⁸ Comte, 1875, Vol. 1, p. 51.

¹²⁹ Comte, 1875, Vol. 1, p. 592.

¹³⁰ Comte, 1875, Vol. 1, pp. 548-560. Here the French "sentiment" was slightly inappropriately translated as "feeling" or "affective".

¹³¹ Comte, 1875, Vol. 1, pp. 592-593.

¹³² Comte, 1875, Vol. 1, p. 505.

efforts ... to develop our most eminent faculties of *intellect*".¹³³

Not surprisingly, in correlating human progress with phrenological constitution, Comte ended up smuggling back the racialising tendency of phrenology. The Africans, according to Comte, were generously endowed in the organs of sentiments, and "as much above the White, on the side of feeling, as it is below it on the side of intelligence". In similar fashions, "the Yellow race" was endowed in the organs of activity, inferior in the organs of intelligence and sentiments. While Comte insisted that the one-to-one correspondence between races and phrenological faculties necessitated their "intimate cooperation", his phrenological diagnosis was decidedly racist, not to mention gendered. Ultimately, "the van of civilisation" would have to be reserved for the white man, as determined by their superiority in the phrenological faculties of intellect.¹³⁴

Comte was not the only founder of social sciences indebted to phrenology. Nor was he the most famous in his own time. While his health deteriorated with cancer in the 50s, on the other side of the Channel, Herbert Spencer was gaining ascendancy as "the single most famous European intellectual" in the 19th century.¹³⁵ Publishing his first monograph, *Social Statics* in 1851, Spencer remained an ardent follower and preacher of phrenology. Indeed, he had been ever since he was a teenager, encountering phrenology at the age of eleven when Spurzheim delivered a lecture in his town.¹³⁶ His first literary efforts, an article published in 1844 on the phrenological journal, *Zoist*, were concerned with the localisation and functions of the organ of Benevolence.¹³⁷ While in his autobiography, Spencer made considerable efforts evading his earlier phrenological legacy, as Taylor rightly noted, phrenology was still much apparent in *Social Statics*.¹³⁸ Writing on the reception of phrenology, Van Wyhe remarked passingly that *Social Statics* reads like a gloss of Combe's *Constitution*. This is very much accurate, if not an under-statement.¹³⁹

A polemic against Benthamism, *Social Statics* was underlined by a distinctly phrenological conception of natural laws. Spencer's core arguments were twofold. He argued that (1) Benthamite abstract reasoning about the "greatest happiness" is nonsensical, and that (2) state interventionism based on abstract utilitarian principles could only damage the people. Both, however, were substantiated by his appropriation of phrenology.

First, following Combe's denunciation of the enlightenment metaphysical conception of human nature, Spencer had little patience with abstract utilitarian reasoning. The philosophers of "expediency", complained Spencer, committed "the most unfortunate assumption" which postulated "mankind to be unanimous in their definition of greatest happiness".¹⁴⁰ What they failed to see is the phrenological basis of individual differences. Put in his phrenological jargons, "man ... consists of a congeries of faculties", and "each of these faculties, if normally developed, yields to him, when exercised, a gratification constituting part of his happiness".¹⁴¹ But since "the minds of no two individuals contain the same combination of elements", "the

¹³³ Comte, 1869, Vol. 1, p. 446.

¹³⁴ Comte, 1875, Vol. 2, p. 377-378.

¹³⁵ Eriksen, 2001, p. 37.

¹³⁶ Spencer, 1904, p. 228.

¹³⁷ Spencer, 1844.

¹³⁸ Spencer, 1904, p. 634; Taylor, 2007, p. 76.

¹³⁹ Van Wyhe, 2004, p. 194.

¹⁴⁰ Spencer, 1851, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Spencer, 1851, p. 280.

standard of greatest happiness possesses little fixity”.¹⁴² Again, phrenological natural laws led seamlessly to racialised civilisation. “Progress is necessary to the well-being of the Anglo-Saxons, [while] on the other hand, the Esquimaux are content in their squalid poverty, have not latent wants and are still what they were in the days of Tacitus”.¹⁴³

With his phrenological formula well under way, Spencer went on to reject Benthamite state-interventionism. Once again, phrenology was crucial in his rejection. Spencer argued that men will act for the good of others without the artificial restraints of state due to the faculty of “Moral Sense”. While not referring to phrenology explicitly, as Young noted, this faculty of “Moral Sense” was likely a rip-off from Combe’s phrenological faculty of “Benevolence”.¹⁴⁴ After all, Spencer’s very first publication was on this organ. And indeed, this point was subtly confessed in his autobiography.¹⁴⁵

Spencer’s second argument against interventionism was likewise phrenological.¹⁴⁶ Inferring from the third organic law in Combe-ian phrenology, the principle of organ-function correspondence, Spencer claimed that “a society is organised upon the same principle as an individual being”.¹⁴⁷ This would render any state intervention redundant, since, by analogy, “man, who in spontaneously fulfilling his own nature, must incidentally perform the function of a social unit”.¹⁴⁸ Progress of a society, furthermore, would mirror that of animal organisations, with an ever-increasing division of labour as a natural, rather than any intended result of increasing subdivision of functions and separation of their agents.¹⁴⁹

Following from this, two points are noteworthy regarding the racialisation of civilisation. To begin with, while it is widely appreciated that Spencer played a crucial role in popularising social evolutionary worldviews with profound racialising consequences in the second half of the 19th century,¹⁵⁰ less attention has been paid to his initial connection with phrenology. What is striking is that Spencer’s social theory of evolution, as indicated above, and indeed, as he admitted explicitly in his later comments on *Social Statics*, grew out of his arguments for function specialisation, which he elaborated under the spell of phrenology.¹⁵¹ Phrenology was the foundation of Spencer’s social evolutionary theory in the first place.

But phrenology was far more than an intellectual foundation. In basing his social evolutionary theory on phrenology, Spencer also inherited its insight on racialised civilisation. IR scholars, taking cues from Spencer’s hostility against interventionism, have generally presented Spencer as a Eurocentric anti-imperialist.¹⁵² Whilst not far off the mark, this depiction itself does not entirely do justice to his more complex understandings of race-civilisation relations in *Social Statics*. True, Spencer did speak out against imperialism. But he also reserved a positive role for imperial violence on the non-whites. In a typical phrenological reference to

¹⁴² Spencer, 1851, pp 4-5.

¹⁴³ Spencer, 1851, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Young, 1970, p. 158.

¹⁴⁵ Spencer, 1904, pp. 438-439. After confessing to some lingering influence of phrenology on his interest in psychology, Spencer added that in his *Social Statics*, “the sentiment of justice [Moral Sense] is interpreted after the same general manner as that of benevolence”.

¹⁴⁶ Young, 1970, p. 159.

¹⁴⁷ Spencer, 1851, p. 448; See also Combe, 1836a, p. 12.

¹⁴⁸ Spencer, 1851, p. 442.

¹⁴⁹ Spencer, 1851, p. 453.

¹⁵⁰ Go, 2016, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ Spencer, 1892, p. 120, 266.

¹⁵² See for example, Hobson, 2012.

the faculty of “Destructiveness”, Spencer argued in *Social Statics* that the “predatory instinct [of the Europeans]... has subserved civilisation by clearing the earth of inferior races of men”. Therefore, “just as the savage has taken the place of lower creatures, so must he ... give place to his superior”.¹⁵³ Progress, accordingly, was the natural result of superior, civilised races supplanting the savage ones. Anticipating his later social Darwinism and the wider discourse of struggle between races, Spencer, then as a student of phrenology, was essentially articulating along the same lines expressed by other distinguished phrenologists, such as Combe, Caldwell and Smith.

To be sure, phrenology and its racialised implications for civilisation was not uncontested. A former Maryland slave and later leader of the abolitionist movement, Frederick Douglass was acutely aware of phrenology’s racialising implications. “If a phrenologist ... undertakes to represent in portraits, the difference between the two races – the negro and the European – he will invariably present the highest type of the Europeans, and the lowest type of the negro”.¹⁵⁴ The construction of an inferior mental capacity, as Douglass noted, was then directly linked to the legitimisation of slavery. “By making the enslaved a character fit only for slavery, they excuse themselves for refusing to make the slave a freeman.”¹⁵⁵ But even for someone like Douglass, his attitude was still somewhat ambivalent. Writing his memoir in 1882, Douglass recalled his meeting with Combe during the 40s “with much satisfaction”.¹⁵⁶ Having read *Constitution* a few years before, he credited the book to have “relieved [his] paths of many shadows”.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, he even singled out *Constitution* as one of the few phrenological works containing a fair portrayal of African character.¹⁵⁸

While phrenologists were in significant ways responsible for racialising civilisation in the first half of the 19th century, it would be grossly overgeneralising to establish an efficient causation between phrenology and racialised civilisation. As Armitage rightly noted, the risk in operating with such causally effective and hypostatised entities is that such an “idea” itself becomes mysterious agents of change, “making intermittent entries into the mundane world from the idealism’s heavenly spheres”.¹⁵⁹ Without an account of “what actors do”, phrenology stood highly ambivalent. This is why actors must be seen as *appropriating* phrenology to their specific contexts.

The ambivalence within phrenology can be best seen in the abolition movement. Lecturing in New York two years after the publication of People’s edition in 1836, Combe made a phrenological comparison between Indian and African. While the “Indian has more Destructiveness, less Cautiousness, less Benevolence”, making them impossible slaves and naturally antagonistic to the European, the “Negro” was “of a gentler nature”. As a consequence, they are “easily subdued”, and “content to live under the guidance of European race”.¹⁶⁰ Deploying phrenology, Combe was thus able to naturalise relations of domination between racialised communities.

But phrenology was also deployed to fight for race and gender equality. As one of the few

¹⁵³ Spencer, 1851, pp. 416-417.

¹⁵⁴ Douglass, 1854, p. 20.

¹⁵⁵ Douglass, 1854, p. 35.

¹⁵⁶ Douglass, 1882, p. 300.

¹⁵⁷ Douglass, 1882, p. 299.

¹⁵⁸ Douglass, 1854, p. 21.

¹⁵⁹ Armitage, 2012b, p. 499.

¹⁶⁰ Combe, 1939, p. 306.

white women in the Philadelphia Phrenological Society,¹⁶¹ Lucretia Mott was a leading figure both in the abolition movement and later in the first women's rights movement in American history, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.¹⁶² Encountering phrenology through personal acquaintance with Combe, Mott had remained a loyal disciple and a close correspondent with Combe ever since.¹⁶³ Today, Mott is hailed as one of the most committed abolitionists and progressive thinkers of her time.¹⁶⁴ What is striking, however, is that she justified emancipation and women's rights by recourse to phrenology. Differences in the size of phrenological organs notwithstanding, it is undeniable that these organs were shared universally. Thus, to Mott, phrenology provided the scientific confirmation of the common humanity regardless of colour. Since "man cannot rightfully hold property in another man", slavery could only be wrong. Speaking at the American Anti-Slavery convention, Mott further defended the cause of abolition, stressing that "it was the organs of Combativeness and Destructiveness that fuelled such anger over the cruelties of slavery".¹⁶⁵ By appealing to the phrenological constitution universally endowed, Mott was able to naturalise the abolition movement. Her justification for women's rights was similarly based on phrenology. Unlike Comte, who used phrenology to naturalise women's confinement to domesticity – as women were born with a superior set of faculties in charge of sentiments¹⁶⁶ – Mott chose to encourage woman to fully apply her organ of "combativeness" and to "go forth into society" to challenge "legislative enactments [which] deprived her of her just rights".¹⁶⁷

Mott was not the only "feminist" phrenologist. Among the three principal leaders of the Seneca Falls Convention was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, primary author of its *Declaration of Sentiments*. Like Mott, she naturalised gender equality by appealing to the phrenological fact that "a women's head had just as many organs as man's and they are similarly situated".¹⁶⁸ Faced with ridicule from male critics, she also stressed the natural-ness of the forceful defence of the women's rights movement due to the organ of "Combativeness".¹⁶⁹ But unlike Mott, Stanton later employed phrenology to demote black rights, thus stressing white women's privilege over other races after the Civil War.¹⁷⁰ It is perhaps hard to find a better illustration of the ambivalence within phrenology.

In general, however, leading white male phrenologists were still far more interested in constructing racial hierarchy based on their new natural-scientific doctrine than to put up a case for racial or gender equality. The controversy provoked by the abolition movement was important to the extent that apart from the many progressive legacies, it brought into sharper focus the question of African civilisability. If the Africans were incapable of civilisation at least in the short run, then slavery would seem more justifiable, either as a simple relation of domination and subordination between superior and inferior races, or as a regrettable yet necessary process of civilising mission. Indeed, despite his criticisms, Spencer was of the opinion that slavery at least helped accelerate the civilising process of Africans. "Devoid of

¹⁶¹ Mott to Combe, Sep 8, 1839, MS 7251.

¹⁶² For a full discussion of Mott's central role in both movements, see McMillen, 2008.

¹⁶³ Combe, 1841, Vol. 2, p. 49.

¹⁶⁴ Bittel, 2013, p. 120.

¹⁶⁵ Mott to Combe, Jun 13, 1839, in Mott, 2002/1839, p. 51.

¹⁶⁶ Comte, 1875, Vol. 3, pp. 170, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Mott, 2017/1856, p. 132.

¹⁶⁸ Stanton, 1997/1848, p. 103.

¹⁶⁹ Stanton to Mott, Nov 12, 1849, in Stanton, 1997/1849, p. 149.

¹⁷⁰ Mitchell, 2007, pp. 130-131.

this”, Spencer predicted, “probably the severest discipline continued for many generations was required to make him [the Black] submit contentedly to the necessities of his new state of civilisation”.¹⁷¹

The question of African civilisability eventually became part of a larger and more fearsome debate between advocates of scientific naturalism and students of human exceptionalism. Inspired by the new techniques of social statistics invented by Belgium astronomer Adolphe Quetelet, racial scientists waged an international campaign against the stubborn ethnologists following the spirit of James Prichard. The siege ended with Knoxian racial laws sublimated in international thought. By the end of the 19th century, as Bell noted, racism was in the air.

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¹⁷¹ Spencer, 1851, p. 417.

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