

Racial Equality and Anticolonial Solidarity: Anténor Firmin’s Global Haitian Liberalism

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This article recovers Anténor Firmin’s contribution to anticolonial political thought by excavating his liberal worldmaking project of global racial equality and anticolonial solidarity. I assess Firmin’s contrast between “true” and “false” liberalism in Haiti, reconstructing his understanding of true Haitian liberalism as committed to the core ideas of historical progress, national regeneration, and rehabilitation of the Black race globally. I contextualize his Equality of the Human Races in metropolitan Paris during his first exile, arguing that his critique of anthropological racism should be seen as integral to his commitment to Haitian liberalism. I then situate his discussion of what he called “European Solidarity” in wider legitimating languages of French colonialism. This recovers Firmin’s neglected critique of colonialism as a reciprocal system of economic exploitation and discursive domination, and his attempt to rescue the universal ideal of solidarity from its truncated expression in languages of racial inequality and practices of colonization.

INTRODUCTION

In 1910, Haitian public intellectual and statesman Anténor Firmin revealed the “whole reason” for his “conduct” and “moral teaching.” He explained to a young *Firminist* that “the unfortunate black race” must accept the inevitable Darwinian struggle for existence:


We must arm ourselves with all the qualities necessary to fight the good fight, the fight which will result in the unequivocal proclamation, by science as well as by politics, of the equality of right of all men, whatever their origin, in the moral and mental evolution of the species. It is only through this equality of struggle, which can only be affirmed by effective and individual effort, that we must establish the edifice of social solidarity (Firmin 1910, 292).

The Black race was “at the bottom” of the global hierarchy. From this position, to “reject or curse” the struggle was to resign to a life spent “attracting the commiseration” of those “justly or unjustly” at the top. Firmin gave no “credit” to anyone advancing through the “tolerance or charity of others,” for this would cast them as “eternal debtors” and confirm the “moral if not material subalternity” of the race. Only by “trying to and surpassing the average of humanity” could an individual prove both the “superiority of his being” and the contributions of the Black race to universal solidarity (Firmin 1910, 292–3).

This article is about Firmin’s *fin-de-siècle* vision of the struggle for racial equality and anticolonial

solidarity, and the lessons political theorists might draw from it today. Firmin was a Haitian liberal for whom liberalism was necessarily antiracist and global. Political freedom in Haiti required overcoming social inequalities rooted in “race prejudice,” and a secure democracy would allow Haiti to fulfill its historical destiny of “rehabilitating” the moral status of the Black race globally. Firmin’s principal intellectual contribution to that destiny was *The Equality of the Human Races* (1885; hereafter *EHR*), a devastating critique of racist discourses pervading the emerging science of anthropology and the Western human sciences more broadly.¹ The chapter “European Solidarity” attempts to rescue the universalism of solidarity from its truncated expression in languages of racial inequality and practices of colonization. There, Firmin diagnoses colonialism as a reciprocal system of economic exploitation and discursive domination that is both cause and effect of what he called the doctrine of racial inequality. He thereby demonstrates that effective solidarity requires explicit critique of the ideological structures and everyday practices constituting the injustice or practice of domination to which alternative practices of solidarity respond and seek to transform. Firmin thus theorized racial equality and anticolonial solidarity as inextricably linked and placed the struggle for both at the core of a transformative global political praxis.

Contemporary political theorists are increasingly interested in ideas of solidarity. Analytic philosophers debate whether solidarity is either (i) a “symmetrical” joint action grounded in equality (Sangiovanni Forthcoming) or (ii) an “asymmetrical” moral disposition

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Received: April 11, 2022; revised: October 02, 2022; accepted: February 10, 2023. First published online: March 13, 2023.

¹ I follow the 2002 Charles translation of *EHR* where appropriate and cite the 1885 first edition when providing my own alternative. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

grounded in equity (Kolers 2016). Critical social theorists see solidarity as a feature of social practices and draw a fundamental distinction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic solidarities (Jaeggi and Celikates 2017). Theorists engaged with the anticolonial “genre” of political thought (Getachew and Mantena 2021) criticize both traditions for neglecting the history and present of racism and colonialism (Bhambra 2021; Mills 2008). For some, Western theories of solidarity are only purportedly universal: they effectively erase the differences between the global North and South, and those that remain central to the politics of solidarity in both (Mohanty 2003). The resulting celebration of difference has, in turn, come to be seen as incapable of supporting emancipatory social movements and effective anticolonial politics, and the emphasis has shifted to developing “new” (Chakrabarty 2021) or “decolonized” universals (Khader 2019).

Firmin’s distinctive account of anticolonial solidarity can be introduced schematically. He saw solidarity as a sentiment with both rational and affective dimensions that, when acted upon, could transform human relationships. His critique of charity indicates his anticipating the analytical view of solidarity as a universal ideal of *symmetrical* relations between moral *equals*. His reference to Black “subalternity” signals a focus shared with critical theory on (counter)hegemonic solidarities. Crucially, Firmin identifies three requirements for realizing solidarity that resonate with anticolonial critics of both dominant Western theoretical frameworks. First, systematic *critique of hegemonic discourses and practices* that truncate solidarity’s universality is necessary to its realization; a division of labor between critical and normative theorizing is insufficient. Second, because the practices restricting solidarity are fundamentally rooted in transatlantic slavery and European colonialism, critique must be grounded in historical and sociological studies of local contexts. This *recenters subaltern actors* who struggle against racial inequality and colonial domination through counter-hegemonic practices of solidarity. Third, Firmin’s anticolonial solidarity entails an obligation to *join the struggle*. These requirements reveal Firmin as a kind of predecessor of contemporary critical approaches: (i) critique of “hierarchies of domination and resistance” (Mohanty 2003, 193); (ii) “listening carefully” across distance to colonized others (Young 1997, 352–3); and (iii) transformative practices of solidarity in and through “anticolonial transnational counter-publics” (Valdez 2019).

The overarching aim of the article is to develop an understanding of Firmin’s political thought by placing it in some of his multiple discursive and practical contexts. I begin with the distinction he developed between “true” and “false” liberalism as a member of the Haitian Liberal Party. This allows me to reconstruct his understanding of liberalism as committed to the core ideas of historical progress, national regeneration, and the rehabilitation of the Black race globally. I then contextualize *EHR*’s critique of racial inequality in Firmin’s engagement with European human sciences during his first exile in metropolitan Paris. Highlighting

his comparative method of “juxtaposition” (Hooker 2019, 13–6), I show that Firmin stages a dialogue between French and Haitian thinkers in which the critique of anthropological racism emerges as integral to his liberalism. Next, I situate his discussion of European solidarity in wider legitimating languages of French colonialism to elucidate his understanding of colonialism as a reciprocal structure of discursive domination and economic exploitation. Finally, drawing on original archival research, I argue that Firmin’s previously unknown second edition of *EHR* reveals his attempt to leverage his theoretical critique of European solidarity to support his transnational and global practices of anticolonial solidarity.

Firmin’s contributions to anticolonial political thought should be better appreciated. As Andreas Eckert aptly notes, “it is one of the most irritating findings in the history of political thought that Firmin’s voice was almost completely ignored for well over a century” (Eckert 2021, 678). He continues to be excluded from influential accounts of Black intellectual history (Delices 2021) and Afro-modern political thought (Rogers and Turner 2021); although *EHR* is recognized as “foundational” to modern Africana philosophy (Gordon 2008, 56–63), it remains widely neglected. By recovering Firmin’s post Revolutionary Haitian vision of global politics, this article complements genealogies of anticolonial worldmaking rooted in Marxist critiques of imperialism (Getachew 2019). It introduces Anglophone readers to Firmin’s analytical framework, his contributions to nineteenth century critiques of racial inequality, and the contemporary relevance of, especially, his view of anticolonial solidarity. I hope, thereby, to contribute to the emerging reception of Firmin’s work by establishing its eminently *political* character.²

TRUE LIBERALISM

The difficulty of defining liberalism is well known (Bell 2016, 62–90), and its relation to race and colonialism is deeply contested. Charles Mills argued that, in both theory and practice, liberalism has historically been a *racial liberalism*: “white entitlement is the norm” of liberal theory’s foundational concepts of personhood, rights, duties, and government; and this occludes the history and present of “non-white to white” property transfer in the political economy of empire (Mills 2008, 1381, 1394). James Tully contextualizes the emergence of liberal theory in the immediate aftermath of formal decolonization, reframing deliberative and procedural approaches alike as “neo-colonial” responses to the “demands for recognition and participation” by subaltern actors globally (Tully *Forthcoming*). Similarly,

² The best attempts to recover Firmin’s thought are the recent collections of essays by Joseph and Mocombe (2021) and Williams (2014). This article is indebted to Joseph’s (2021) reading of Firmin as a Haitian liberal.

Uday Mehta diagnosed an “internal ... urge to empire” (Mehta 1999, 47–8) deriving from liberalism’s theoretical commitments to rational personhood and universalist frameworks of civilizational and historical progress. A range of scholars responded to Mehta, arguing that “liberalism does not lead ineluctably to either imperialism or anti-imperialism” (Pitts 2005, 4; cf. Bell 2016, 19–61). Indeed, Mills encouraged political theorists to “deracialize” racial liberalism. If, following Mills, “the struggles of people of color for racial equality over the past few hundred years can most illuminatingly be seen as just such a project” (2008, 1383), then this section of the article can be seen as clarifying Firmin’s own contributions to it.

Haitian liberalism is perhaps an odd place to seek clarity on these issues. The social scientific “silencing” (Trouillot 1995) of the Haitian Revolution is well known. And while Haiti is far from silent in African diaspora studies, its reduction to the site of revolution or reference point for Pan-Africanism and Black internationalism typically mutes its post-revolutionary period and figures like Firmin (Clitandre 2020). Haiti is also neglected in studies of the nineteenth century “global liberal constitutional moment.” Noting the importance ascribed by later Haitian liberals to their 1843 Constitution would enable comparison of Firmin with contemporaries seen as central to that moment, like Rahamohan Roy or Dadabhai Naoroji in India (Bayly 2007; Visana 2022). By signaling such points of inter-imperial comparison, the article provides a foundation for future comparative studies addressing the “epistemic disavowal” of not only the Haitian Revolution (Bhambra 2016) but of the global history of anticolonial theory and practice.

My primary aim, however, is to place Firmin’s liberalism in its Haitian context. As Getachew and Mantena (2021) argue, anticolonial political thought counters the tendency to read political theories as “abstract and isolated conclusions” and makes vivid the historical insight that understanding political argument requires understanding the context that “shapes and clarifies the nature and purpose of its theoretical interventions” (361). But even in context, Haitian liberalism proves elusive. Firmin’s protégé Jean Price-Mars complained that the leading figures of the Haitian Liberal Party neither produced a “manifesto” nor pronounced a “doctrine” to specify their version of liberalism; theirs was more an “agenda-driven organization” than a “party” and, at best, inconsistently “liberal” (Price-Mars 1948, 15–20; 1978, 61–4, 82). These difficulties can be mitigated by adopting an ideal-typical definition of liberalism (Joseph 2021, 104–5). Instead, I adopt a “summative conception” (Bell 2016, 69–73), seeing “Haitian liberalism” as a tradition constituted by arguments classified as liberal and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals in nineteenth century Haiti. This approach is consistent with Firmin’s own emphasis on context. It also allows me inductively to generate a set of “foundational principles” (Gerstle 1994, 1046) that are both specific to Haitian liberalism and of universal significance.

Firmin presented his political awakening as coincident with the birth of Haitian democracy.³ He lived from 1850 to 1911, a turbulent period in Haiti’s century-long “struggle for power between two elite groups, designated principally by color”: the “mulatto, city-based, commercial elite” and the “black, rural and military elite” (Nicholls 1996, 8). At his birth, it was clear that the 1843 Revolution failed to fulfill its promise. It was a movement for economic nationalism and cultural autonomy from France organized by the liberal faction of the mulatto elite. But post-revolutionary infighting exposed their self-professed liberal values as more opportunistic than principled, precipitated the Dominican War of Independence, and revived revolutionary sentiment among Southern Blacks advocating the destruction of mulatto power. His political engagement began when he joined the 1867 revolt that deposed Fabre Geffrard and installed Sylvain Salnave as President. Looking back in exile on the Danish island St. Thomas in Firmin (1905), Firmin described Salnave’s revolt and subsequent reign as the period in which “Haitian democracy was born” (Firmin 1905, 221).

The Haitian Liberal Party was an attempt to chart the course of that democracy. Its founding document was a letter sent from Boyer Bazalais to Edmond Paul on 19 February 1870. Salnave’s execution the previous month marked the end of a long civil war that, for Firmin, “had all the appearance of a social war ... without respite or mercy” (Firmin 1905, 222, 224). Bazalais and Paul were leading figures of the political grouping that formed during his rule and adopted the name Liberal Party. The letter called upon the allies’ “enlightenment and patriotism” to affirm their prior agreement to establish a weekly newspaper (Bazalais in Price-Mars 1978, 74–7). The first volume of *Le Civilisateur* appeared on 10 March 1870, intervening directly in parliamentary maneuvers during the transition from the post-Salnave provisional government (Paul 2015, 141–6).

Paul was the group’s chief ideologist, and even he was ambivalent about the utility of political labels. In a sense, terms like “‘Nationals’ or ‘Liberals’, republicans or imperialists” made little difference; attaching great importance to them signaled vanity or pomposity, not sound political judgment or analytical rigor (Paul 2015, 90). But they were useful insofar as they provided the sense of distinctive group identity needed for collective action. Accordingly, he identified substantive differences between the groups and the Presidential candidates around whose election they organized. The difference always came down to two factors. First, the members’ relative “capacity” for rule, understood in Saint-Simonian terms (Nicholls 1985, 251) as the combination of personal moral character and technocratic expertise needed to modernize Haiti and avoid the endemic corruption of state finances. Second, their

³ The details of Firmin’s biography are rarely presented together but can be pieced together from Manigat (2010), Péan (1987), and Price-Mars (1978).

respective commitment to either the “traditional despotism routine” of Haiti’s authoritarian rulers, or “the principles of liberty” was embodied in the institutional arrangement established by the 1867 Constitution (Paul 1871; 1896, 141).⁴

Paul was often deeply concerned with policing the boundaries of Haitian liberalism. The ability successfully to claim the Liberal mantle took on renewed practical importance between 1876 and 1879, as the formerly unified group split decisively into two irreconcilable factions. They were divided along personal more than ideological lines, with supporters of Bazelaïs in the National Assembly aligned against supporters of the new President Pierre Boisrond-Canal. As Paul described, Boisrond-Canal’s supporters loudly proclaimed his “unequivocal submission” to “the cause of liberalism,” that he was “imbued with its principles” (Paul 2015, 89). Paul worried about readers seizing on his earlier articles for *Le Civilisateur* to identify his politics with those of “that disastrous man.” In defense, Paul noted that it was “a funny liberalism” that would allow Boisrond-Canal to align himself with “those who marched to the overthrow of our liberal institutions,” especially his authoritarian successor Salomon, “the prevaricator of liberalism in Haiti” (Paul 2015, 94, 104). Boisrond-Canal was thus no liberal because he had aligned with an authoritarian faction in his quest for power and proved utterly incapable of rule once he had secured it.

Firmin’s key contribution to these early debates was an argument that “true liberalism” would eliminate “color prejudice,” the central barrier to political democracy in Haiti. The argument appeared in the inaugural editorial of the periodical he founded on 5 January 1878, at the height of what Price-Mars (1978, 61) later called “one of the fiercest ideological battles in our nation’s history.” While the periodical has unfortunately been lost, sections of the editorial are reproduced by Price-Mars. I supplement this text with reflections on this period in Paul’s work and Firmin’s *M. Roosevelt, Président des États-Unis et Haïti* (Firmin 1905; hereafter *Roosevelt*). A comparative history of the United States and Haiti that unfolds as a comparative history of British, Spanish, and French colonialism (Lucien 2021), *Roosevelt* adds Firmin’s analysis of color prejudice to what he had earlier called true liberalism. Together, these sources allow us to reconstruct the contours of Haitian liberalism as committed to the foundational ideas of historical progress, national regeneration, and the rehabilitation of the Black race globally.

The first issue of *Le Messager du Nord* announced Firmin’s intention to “work for the propagation of liberal ideas,” which were sorely needed in the current situation of mutually reinforcing social misfortune and

ideological controversy. The ongoing debate generated a “great confusion of the liberal flag.” To clarify it, Firmin contrasted his “sincere and reasoned liberalism” with the “suspicious,” “veiled,” “passionate,” and “thoughtless” variety of his unnamed opponents. This “true liberalism” looked to the future, embracing the “laborious but worthy path” toward Haiti’s “destiny” of social “advancement and dignity.” False liberals were those with politics rooted in the past, a “retrograde tendency” of political and social restrictions that would, ultimately, overturn the 1843 Republican constitution. Crucially, true liberalism also required “republican vigilance” to “safeguard institutions as well as interests”: citizens needed to see their social status as fair, strive to become “worthy of a free Republic,” and accept their “sometimes onerous” duties as the means of assuring the ascendancy of the People “over the direction of the general thing (*chose générale*).” The ideas of “honesty, progress, and stability,” then, formed the core principles of Firmin’s true liberalism (Firmin in Price-Mars 1978, 91–3).

Firmin’s early editorial argues that these principles should be embodied in policies of public education. “We demand public instruction for all, compulsory even,” he wrote, for “education alone equalizes men.” This argument signals Firmin’s adoption of one of the central planks in his mentor’s platform. Paul started his career by arguing that, “at the point Haiti has reached, the education of the masses is the most urgent need” (Paul 2015, 63). For him, only public education could prevent the “beast” of demagoguery familiar from Haiti’s post-revolutionary history: “as the beast succumbs when food is lacking; so dies the charlatan if the people are enlightened” (Paul 2015, 63). For Firmin, the republican moral culture undergirding true liberalism required “enlightened citizens” who were aware of their duties, and social as well as legal equals. Public education would spread enlightenment and eliminate the “unconscious training” of prejudice, allowing all Haitians to recognize one another as equals (Firmin in Price-Mars 1978, 93). The preserved sections of the editorial stop here. And while we therefore cannot know if Firmin discussed the place of either “race” or “color” in this analysis, he likely would have followed Paul’s lead in doing so.

Firmin’s later reflections on this period in *Roosevelt* confirm that he saw color prejudice as central to it. He often liked to quote a passage of Paul’s from 1861, which he saw as anticipating, “by intuition,” events that followed in Haitian history:

The mulattos in power were either impolitic or impotent, the blacks frankly reactionary or incapable. Like a game of seesaw, they replaced each other in turn in the highest seat, the Machiavellianism of the minority serving as a steppingstone to the vandalism of the majority. ... From the cradle, the country itself oscillated from impotence to incapacity, from incapacity to impotence. (Firmin 1905, 394, 416)

Firmin shared Paul’s view of the vast gulf separating the Haitian masses from an elite divided into two castes,

⁴ The 1867 Constitution largely restored the liberal framework of 1843. Among the most important of what Firmin considered its “far-reaching reforms” (Firmin 1905, 344–5) were executive term limits, legislative authority shared with the House of Representatives, abolition of the coffee tax, and a public education ministry (Manigat 2010, 85).

mulatto and Black (Nicholls 1996, 102–8). These were the two “shades of citizens who form the Haitian nation” and the “two poles of Haitian politics” (Firmin 1905, 373, 395). “Color prejudice” or “race egoism” was the false view that individuals deserved differential treatment because of their belonging to either group. With widespread color prejudice in Haiti, the “question of color” became a “dangerous weapon” deployed by both parties as an election strategy and instrument of rule. Firmin saw himself as uniquely positioned to answer it: like Paul, he was a Black member of the predominantly mulatto liberal party; like Bazelaists, his opponents had raised the color question against him, spreading rumors that “Firmin is a mulatto as light as a white” during his unsuccessful 1879 election campaign (426).

On Firmin’s analysis, color prejudice was the central barrier to achieving the aims of true liberalism: political stability and social progress in Haiti. Like any other prejudice, it was rooted in ignorance. It was endemic in Haiti because, long after the slave revolts that began the 1804 Revolution, “the great majority of the people remained confined in the pits of ignorance” (428). But it was unlike other prejudices, because the form of ignorance on which it fed was particularly pernicious: the mistaken belief that random epidermal nuances tracked moral distinctions supported the rigid hierarchy of social classes based on skin color, which prevented the development of “national cohesion” and “sociological unification,” the essential task of public power (428). One way of removing the “evil force” of color prejudice was to “exterminate” half of the population, a “radical cure” sporadically suggested by players of the “old game” of Haitian politics (425). But as Firmin emphasized, advocates of this “impossible” solution failed to appreciate the “delicacy” of the problem because they failed to reflect on “the historical chains that explain the existence of the wound” (423)—that is, they failed to take seriously that color prejudice in Haiti was a legacy of slavery and colonization. The other option was to use public education to illuminate “the darkness that reigns in the popular mind of Haiti” (426). Its centrality to the liberal platform thus stemmed from their analysis of color prejudice as rooted in an ignorance that was a contemporary effect of Haiti’s colonial past.

From this perspective, *Roosevelt* continues the project Firmin announced in 1878. Looking back, he emphasized the Bazelaists’ constitutionalism, their respect for the rule of law and recognition of the need for strong legislative power to temper the executive (393). After Salnave’s execution, the spirit of the 1867 constitution “had become sacred” to them, its institutional arrangements seen as the “palladium of liberalism.” This was especially true of Edmond Paul, for whom the liberal split into “our anarchic factions” had paved the way for Salomon’s 1879 triumph (Paul 2015, 147). Firmin agreed that the ultimate result of the ideological infighting was “the debacle of liberalism” and the “liberal party” alike (Firmin 1905, 393, 413). The question he asked in 1905, then, was what lessons could be learned from the debacle. Answering it

required contextual knowledge: history had to be told in “its sociological outlines” with demographic, economic, and commercial facts, but the point was to explain how these facts had changed over time (v, 431–5). This contextual understanding of Haiti’s frustrated historical-sociological progress was the only solid ground for good political judgment in the present—even painful histories were “essential to know in order to find one’s way through the inextricable mesh of our political actions” (390).

Firmin reconstructed the history of Haitian democracy as a tragic story of the cynical exploitation of color prejudice by the elite. Its motto for the future, therefore, had to be “honesty, liberty and justice, through the legally established order” (398). On the terms of his earlier editorial, color prejudice was an “unconscious training” that eroded the republican political culture needed to support this liberal constitutional order. “A democracy without freedom is just as absurd as a democracy without equality,” to which true liberalism would “always and sincerely combine fraternity” (429). With color prejudice at the root of the nation’s “fratricidal strife,” true Haitian liberalism had to be oriented to the goals of “progress, the rehabilitation of the black race, and national regeneration” (343, 395). And because achieving these goals meant overcoming colonialism, it also had to be internationalist. The lesson to be learned from Haiti’s various phases of isolation was that “the spirit of international solidarity” was the only “motive” and “guarantee” of “a regime of liberal freedom” (457). Indeed, *Roosevelt* concludes on Tenyson’s “poetic dream”: *In the parliament of men, the Federation of the world* (496).

While Firmin’s true liberalism was primarily an intervention in post-colonial Haiti, his emphasis on fraternity signals his critical engagement with republican ideas from the metropole. Alfred Fouillée developed a theory of modern society as a “contractual regime” he described as “liberalism pushed to its highest degree.” It was also “socialism rightly understood,” for, like Firmin, he argued that freedom is best secured through “a social organization where all the parties are in solidarity.” They shared the commonplace distinction between charity and solidarity (Fouillée 1880, 325ff., 420–1). But Firmin argued that Fouillée’s subsequent account of “liberal education” showed that he misunderstood the relationship between solidarity and freedom. He adduced Fouillée’s claim that “true philosophy” taught “the absorption of the individual life into the life of the whole society, and into that of the Whole” (Fouillée 1902, 23). This, he replied, was an unacceptable sacrifice of “the freedom of the human person”: “true philosophy, which for us is Western philosophy,” teaches that “man must be attached to man, but not merged.” Only with this understanding could “fraternity” become “morally meritorious” and “human solidarity” attain “the value of an act of commutative justice” (1910, 248).

Firmin also provides a helpful point of contrast with Fouillée’s metropolitan followers. Léon Bourgeois was a Republican Prime Minister and leader of the French “solidarist” movement whose influential pamphlet

Solidarité (Firmin and Sylvain 1895) developed Fouillée's work in more practical directions. With Fouillée, he saw economic and social inequalities as the accumulated product of joint social production in the division of labor over time. But he replaced Fouillée's neo-Kantian language of "duty" with a view of citizens as owing a "social debt" to past generations and contemporaries. Specifying the content of the "debt" required imagining what distribution of the benefits and burdens of social interdependence we would agree to if we were free and equal members of a contract prior to our association, which generated a normative standard against which to evaluate redistributive policies (Bourgeois 1902, 136–40). In the letter with which this article began, Firmin called Bourgeois' account of solidarity "beautiful" (1910, 291). The obvious harmony with Rawls' difference principle partly explains Bourgeois' renewed reception among liberal theorists (Sangiovanni *Forthcoming*). But it also gestures to his sharing what Mills called the "coloniality of Rawls' socio-political and normative assumptions" (Mills 2015, 23). Bourgeois was also an architect of the League of Nations, and I discuss his "(anti)colonial limits" elsewhere (Holley *Forthcoming*). What matters here is that Firmin's true liberalism avoids such limits. His commitment to eliminating race prejudice and the colonial structures that perpetuate it both grounds his deracialized liberalism and gives his account of solidarity a potentially global reach.

RACIAL (IN)EQUALITY

Firmin's reputation has suffered from the initial "muted reception" of his work. One way of approaching this "mystery of the historical record" (Delices 2021, 31) is to see *EHR* as a critical response to Arthur de Gobineau's *Inequality of Human Races* (Gobineau 1853). This approach helped recover Firmin as a "Haitian pioneer of anthropology" (Fluehr-Lobban 2000), and it provides my initial entry point here. However, I emphasize both that Gobineau was not Firmin's primary target (Rath 2021, 49) and that he considered *EHR* alongside *Roosevelt* as his "two main works" (1910, 389). Although the methods and rhetoric of the texts differ, there are abundant intertextual links between them (Firmin 1905, iii, x; 2002, 222, 357) and he engaged in a revealing polemic with compatriots who read the texts together (1910, 389–422). This authorial context is crucial to the recovery of *EHR* as a work of *political* thought. For while they have tended to be underemphasized, we will see that the concerns animating both *Roosevelt* and Firmin's interventions in Haitian liberalism are also present in his *magnum opus*.

When *EHR* was received by the Paris Anthropological Society in October 1885, it elicited no immediate "response, review, or commentary from the Society's members" and only two (short) subsequent reviews (Miller 2021, 31, 42). Led by Paul Broca, the Society was divided between proponents of rival views of humanity: the "polygenists" saw different races as

different species with independent origins; the "monogenists" saw humanity as a single species, with race as an important but secondary classification. Broca's suggestion that the term "race" provided a neutral way of discussing different human groups allowed the Society to avoid officially endorsing either the polygenists' preference for "species" or the monogenists' preference for "varieties." Firmin adopted a kind of synthesis of these views. There is a single human species. But he distinguished monogenesis sharply from the "unitarian doctrine," an ultimately "theological" story of degeneration from a single origin (Firmin 1885, 115). Instead, he argued, the multiple races of the single human species developed independently of and in parallel with one another by means of social (not biological) adaptation to their local environment, with which they entertain a "relation of direct dependence" (1885, 118). Firmin thereby preserved racial difference while avoiding essentialism by grounding race in history and geography rather than biology (Allen 2021).

We now know that, despite the claims of his later propagandists, Gobineau was not especially influential in his own context (Bernasconi 2008). In a sense, Firmin disagreed: although less essentialist than the early anthropologists, Gobineau was politically important because he had both distilled the unstated premises of their discursive context and exercised demonstrable influence within it. Firmin adduced Gobineau's claim that "the idea of an innate, original, definite, and permanent inequality between the races is one of the oldest and most widespread opinions in the world" (Firmin 1885, 203; Gobineau 1853, 58). Firmin's core argument is a critique of this claim:

Men are everywhere endowed with the same qualities and the same defects, without distinction of color or anatomical form. The races are equal; they are all capable of rising to the noblest virtues, to the highest intellectual development, as well as of falling into the most complete degeneration. Through all the struggles that have plagued and still plague the existence of the whole species, there is one mysterious fact that remains and manifests itself mysteriously to our minds. It is that an invisible chain unites all members of humanity in a common circle. (Firmin 1885, 662)

To Firmin, Gobineau's view was a mere "assertion" rooted in self-interest, pride, and the narrow patriotism of "civilized people." He had simply combined "great erudition" with "weak understanding" and a "proven lack of logic." He had not "systematically established" any "hierarchy among the human races." Here, Firmin simply dismissed Gobineau out of hand, for no "student of history" could take such claims seriously (1885, 203).

Some parts of Gobineau's work, however, required a direct response. Firmin argued that Gobineau was inconsistent and routinely undermined his own position: his arguments against "race intermixture" and the "unequal beauty" of the races, for instance, were contradicted by a footnote in which he recognized the "beauty" of mulatto women (Firmin 2002, 200;

Gobineau 1853, 255). Most egregiously, Gobineau's argument that the "Black variety" of the human species is "incapable of civilization" was grounded on an "exaggerated denigration of Haiti". To Gobineau, Haiti's violent history definitively proved that the Black race had a natural inclination to "despotically patriarchal social organization" and was therefore incapable of democratic government (Firmin 2002, 220–1; Gobineau 1853, 83). And in this case, Firmin saw his need to refute Gobineau as following directly from his commitment to the goals of Haitian liberalism: racial rehabilitation and national regeneration.

A crucial yet underappreciated feature of Firmin's engagement with Gobineau is his comparative method of "juxtaposition" (Hooker 2019, 13–6) to stage a dialogue between French and Haitian authors. In the passage Firmin transcribed, Gobineau argued that their different natural inclinations meant that the different races in Haiti should live in physically separated communities: a mulatto commercial center near the coast would trade with Europeans, supported by a decentralized network of small Black agricultural communities in the interior (1853, 83). Firmin worried that Haitian readers had received these ideas "too literally." He cites *The Gerontocracy in Haiti*, an anonymous "Haitian book" that argued that only the mulatto race could survive Haiti's Tropical climate. With "black Haiti as incapable of a long life as white Haiti," the country should recruit white European peasants to breed with the local Black population and produce offspring of "the most vivacious and best constituted race in America" (Anon 1860, 18–88). Edmond Paul developed his "complete theory of economic autarky" in response to this argument (Nicholls 1985, 103–8). On Firmin's reading, Paul was also responding to Gobineau. Without naming him, Paul argued that these segregationist visions "forget" Haiti's "mission" to create a racially mixed city, "with its arts, sciences, and virtues, where the mind would reign supreme" (Paul in Firmin 2002, 220–1).

Firmin's dialogical juxtaposition is indicative of his wider approach to questions of intellectual influence and the relationship between theory and practice. He notes that Gobineau's work was published when anthropology was still a neglected field. Yet anthropologists seemed to find his work so full of "enlightening paradoxes" that they "accepted his conclusions for Gospel truth." Indeed, Firmin argues that they "give daily proof" of this influence, even, crucially, "without their actually saying so" (2002, 145). Similarly, despite the "presumably Haitian authors" of *Gerontocracy* not mentioning Gobineau, Firmin considers it "but an amplification of his ideas." For they clearly shared the premise of natural racial inequality and, on that basis, "expressed various ideas that can only be detrimental to the nation's cohesion and solidarity." Neither does Paul's critical response to the pamphlet mention Gobineau. Yet Firmin reads it as a "summary refutation" of Gobineau's ideas precisely because it is part of Paul's vindicationist political project—his abiding aim to "help the Black people of Haiti prove to the entire world that they are endowed with as many great

abilities and talents as any other race" (219–21). In each case, then, whether a given author refers or not to Gobineau is beside the point. What matters to Firmin is their stance on the question of racial equality, especially as that stance is revealed by the political implications of their work.

Firmin saw his critique as being especially urgent in the context of anthropology's early disciplinary formation. It was "a critical time," with anthropologists searching for scientific laws to govern their emerging field. His use of anthropological methods and insights showed that its leading figures were advancing "arbitrary conclusions" that obscured the truth, reckless assertions disproved by the evidence. He, therefore, accused anthropologists of being "inspired by the spirit of system" and developing a mere "bias masquerading as science" (2002, 185). One of the central targets of Firmin's critique was Armand de Quatrefages. In his *L'Espèce Humaine* (Quatrefages 1877), the French naturalist argued that a "single fact" could disprove the view that "the Negro was in the past, and as such he is, equal to the White man." For while there was certainly evidence of a "political history," there was a "complete absence of an intellectual history... among Negroes"—no evident progress of "literary, artistic, and architectural achievements" (Quatrefages 1877, 333). To Firmin, this supposed "fact" was not a "scientific answer" but a rather "obvious rhetorical ploy" (Quatrefages in Firmin 2002, 154–5). Quatrefages did cite Gobineau, and Firmin ranked them together with others in "the whole proud and arrogant phalanx" of scholars who "proclaim that the Black man is destined to serve as a steppingstone for the White man in his quest for power." That their specious arguments won them fame and professional distinction proved that anthropology was being reduced to "the exclusive preserve of some closed coterie... made up of the whole of Europe and part of America" (2002, 156). That their first collective refutation came from a Black thinker from a former colony, in exile in the imperial metropole, further buttressed the case.

Firmin's critique of the emerging science of anthropology as resting on the sometimes-unstated assumption of white superiority is convincing and appropriately devastating. But his wider political aims in the text are best seen by emphasizing just how far he extended it. While his response to Gobineau provides a useful way of seeing *EHR*, it cannot be reduced to a mere "anti-Gobineau" tract. He demonstrated that the theory of racial inequality is empirically false, proving that all races are naturally equal in their potential for sociological progress and civilizational development. That he did so on anthropology's own terms demonstrated the discipline's parochial character. But in the final chapters, he announced a shift to asking *why* this "obsolete and antiscientific" doctrine continues to find widespread acceptance (2002, 377). To answer this question, Firmin recontextualized the now-disproven doctrine of racial inequality back into the wider metropolitan discourses in which it circulated. Thereby, he leveraged his critique of anthropology to indict the Western human sciences more generally as only presumptively universal.

ANTICOLONIAL SOLIDARITY

EHR's chapter on "European Solidarity" explores how the doctrine of racial inequality is tethered to practices of European imperialism. As discussed, Firmin characterized color-prejudice in Haiti as a "wound," the existence of which was explained by the "historical chains" of colonization. Here, too, he argues that the "one particular source" of the continued acceptance of ideas of racial inequality is colonialism: "the pervasive influence of European aspirations and attending policies of invasion and usurpation, which are fueled mainly by the spirit of domination and arrogant faith in the superiority of the Caucasian man" (2002, 384). Europeans "unite to dominate the rest of the world" because they "unanimously recognize" the superiority of the white race and its "mission of dominating the other races" to promote and "maintain civilization." In a text published the same year as the Berlin Africa Conference at which European heads of state agreed to coordinate their colonial projects, Firmin asks: "does not the question of race lie at the core of these outbursts of solidarity" (2002, 387)?

Firmin shared the language of progress and civilization with those he labeled ideologists of racial inequality. He divided the "human community" into "civilized nations and savage or barbarian peoples," "advanced groups or backward ones." The distinction relied on an "ideal of the civilized state" according to which each national community could be judged as "endowed with a superior or inferior civilization depending on its level of sociological development." But there could be "no question of race" in this framework, because race "implies a biological and natural fatality, which has no analogy, no correlation, with the degree of ability observable among the different human communities spread across the globe" (1885, 661). The problem, then, was not "the concept of civilization" itself but rather the way that "Europeans usurp" that concept (2002, 387). Europeans debased the "beautiful and scientific idea" of civilization by yoking it to their "colonizing lust" for larger territories. They were thereby "pursuing in the intellectual or moral sphere the same abominable results achieved by the former colonizers" (2002, 383). Conceptual and territorial usurpation went hand in hand.

Firmin emphasized that the real object of his critique was less personal than systemic. He argued that the exercise of political power in "modern civilization" requires "moral and scientific justification." Without a "justifying reason" to "legitimize" moral and political conduct, modern individuals suffer from debilitating guilt. The obvious material and cultural superiority of Europe combines with this need for legitimation to generate an "unconscious fascination with European achievements" among "scholars and scientists." This combination leads them to "unconsciously internalize" the "popular view" of the "organic superiority" of the white race: "declining to submit what has become a doctrine to any systematic critique," Firmin writes, "they seek merely to justify it" (2002, 383, 389).

Are these scholars aware of their unfortunate complicity? Nobody knows, nobody can know. What an individual thinks deep down will forever remain a mystery to others. Nevertheless, European policies of colonization clearly inspire certain ideas, which necessarily crystallize around race egoism and come to dominate the thinking of individuals. (1885, 570)

As in his treatment of Gobineau's reception, asking whether a given author is reflexively racist or explicitly imperialist largely misses the point. For as he repeatedly emphasized, so long as the doctrine of racial inferiority remains a background prejudice in the language of civilization, then white Europeans, too, remain dominated by it. Authorial *intent* matters less than systemic *effect*.

The greatest difficulty in unsettling the doctrine's hold over white Europeans was their obvious material interest in maintaining the colonial practices it justified. Firmin saw colonization as an economic project driven by "the need of major industrialized nations for constantly expanding spheres of activity and markets." To meet that need, they formulate policies of "invasion and usurpation" in the metropole and engage in practices of "dispossession" and "extermination" in the colonies. The defining aim or "main objective" of colonialism, as revealed by these practices, is "exploiting one's fellow human beings" (2002, 384–5). This exploitation extends to nonhuman nature as well: Europeans have "subjected nature to every imaginable experiment"; "the earth" itself is "undergoing a massive transformation," but for the first time, this transformation is "planned and carried out scientifically" (2002, 388–9). Firmin does not discuss the division of labor, the production process, or even slavery in this context; and he does not use the language of property or ownership in describing colonized peoples who "possessed since time immemorial... a land sacred to them" (1885, 568). But in a somewhat less developed parallel with Naoroji's "drain theory" (1901), he emphasizes that colonial exploitation of human and nonhuman nature enables the immense "accumulation of wealth" in European cities. Hence, the "wealth which has an exchange value and is immediately useable," ostentatiously on display in Paris, is predicated on the extraction of "the natural wealth lying underground" in Africa (2002, 389).

These economically driven practices of colonization rely on discursive ones to legitimate them. He acknowledges that, "of course, things are not talked about very openly" (2002, 383). Yet colonial policies are enacted by statesmen who routinely have recourse to "scientific theories" of racial inferiority. While these theories may "appear foreign" to the political sphere, they are essential to its legitimation (384). And as discussed, Firmin characterized European scientists as "colonizers" of the "intellectual or moral sphere": the greatest scientific geniuses are "all members of the Caucasian race," in large part because "the white race" also "controls science, the highest source of power" (389, 387). As with color prejudice in Haiti, it is possible for European

scientists to “free themselves” if they are “properly educated.” But even if they posed racial inequality as a “scientific question,” they would unavoidably remain “judges in their own case”; and their material interest in perpetuating colonialism means that “everything conspires against any efforts to change their thinking” (384, 385).

As this suggests, it is helpful to see Firmin as engaged in a kind of ideology critique. The picture he sketched of the reciprocal relationship between colonization and the doctrine of racial inequality “reflects a theory so pervasive in Europe that the most philosophical minds on the continent have not quite escaped its influence” (385). Part of his critique of those thinkers was to highlight their ignoring the “legal and political implications of the theories or doctrines they propound” (2002, 383). This was not a moralizing condemnation. For in revealing the doctrine as false, he presented himself as seeking to liberate white European minds as well. That is, he attempted to demonstrate to his European readers, who speak the language of “eternal justice and truth,” that they are trapped in a “hypocritical situation” of self-contradiction. Revealing the doctrine’s legitimating function demonstrates that a commitment to colonialism is “inconsistent with” and even “negates” the “moral temper of the century.” They therefore “resort to casuistry and the arbitrary interpretation of facts” to justify their actions. With the very ideas invoked to legitimate colonization and the subjugation of other races, then, Europeans render themselves “victims of an illusion” (450). Firmin thus presents racial inequality as what we would call an ideology in the “critical evaluative” sense (Shelby 2003): a false belief that, in legitimating European practices of colonization, brings those who hold it into unwitting contradiction with the values they otherwise purport to hold, and, thereby, into a condition of unfreedom.

Reconstructing Firmin’s picture of European colonialism allows us better to understand his charge that “the question of race” lies at the core of “outbursts of European solidarity.” The immediate context of the charge was the Siege of Khartoum, which began just as Firmin arrived in Paris from Caracas, in February 1884. When news of the death of British General Charles Gordon reached Europe the following year, the *Journal des débats* published an editorial in which John Lemoine wrote:

The victory of Islamism in the Sudan is the revival of Islamism in Asia and India. It is the offensive return to barbarism; let us beware. We must not allow vain disputes between civilized nations to intervene here; the West must close ranks. (Lemoine 1885, 1)

That the article mentions neither “race” nor “solidarity” is unsurprising in the light of Firmin’s critique of colonialism as an economic-discursive system in which such “things are not discussed very openly.” For as he argued, here the “question of race” has been “sweetened by the honey of parliamentarism” and “transformed into a European question, the cause of civilization.” This discursive transformation mirrors an earlier example

Firmin provided, in which European colonization of Asia and Africa was dubbed, “in parliamentary language, ‘the Oriental question’” (2002, 387–8). In this way, the supposedly universal language of civilization is revealed as “Eurocentric” (Sabaratnam 2020) in the sense of being both parochial and, crucially, distorting. For in affording excessive agency to Western historical experience, it leads its speakers to ask the wrong questions about, and as such, to misunderstand the nature of their own social practices.

The language of European solidarity was of course widespread when Firmin arrived in Paris. *EHR* was published shortly after Kaiser Wilhelm introduced the Berlin Africa Conference by noting that the invited governments recognized the “interest taken by all civilized nations” to “promote the civilization of the natives of Africa” by “introducing into Africa... the same regime ... founded upon the equality of rights and the solidarity of the interests of all commercial nations” (State Department 1885). The eventual agreement used the narrowly legal understanding of solidarity when clarifying that the powers “do not assume any guarantee, nor do they enter into any obligation and solidarity” with respect to the trade of spirits in the Congo (Hertslet 1909). And while Lemoine did not use the terms, the *Journal* discussed the need for “the solidarity of Europeans,” referring to material cooperation between European states and white settlers in the ongoing colonization of Africa (Unknown 1884).

Of the authors to whom Firmin directly refers, only the economist Paul Leroy-Beaulieu used the concept of “European solidarity.” He did so in his widely read reference text on *Modern Colonization* (1874). Leroy-Beaulieu began as an ambivalent supporter of colonialism’s liberal “moral and civilizing influence” against the spirit of “conquest.” But in the second edition (1882), he fervently embraced France’s pursuit of the “rare happiness of implanting their race and their language” abroad by founding “a great African and a lesser Asian empire” (Leroy-Beaulieu 1882, viii). He was consistent, though, both in his preference for colonization through “investment” rather than emigration, and in his argument that “European solidarity” was a distinguishing feature of modern colonial policy:

Instructed by the errors of our fathers, we ourselves have become more practical and moderate, less fond of false glory, more respectful of justice, we are trying successfully to establish in the East, on the basis of good faith, of European solidarity and of non-intervention in native affairs, this trade which was thought possible in the past to establish and develop only with the help of cunning, violence, oppression of the Orientals and the exclusion of other Europeans. This is the only good trade policy. (Leroy-Beaulieu 1882, 142)

The second edition retained this argument while introducing a new analytical category: “colonies of exploitation.” Demographically, these were distinct from “colonies of settlement” because they did not require considerable emigration. Economically, they were distinct from “trading colonies” and “agricultural

colonies” because they were organized around exploiting a territory’s “natural monopoly for the production of export commodities.” They thus required large capital investment and “the artificial organization of labor” through “slavery or immigration with indenture.” Colonies of exploitation generated “unprecedented wealth” while leaving the population less developed, prone to social crises, and ill-prepared for independence. His examples were the Tropical plantation colonies, and there is a strong suggestion of Haiti in his account of how the persistence of “class distinctions” stifles the “spirit of democracy” even after the abolition of slavery (577–8).

It seems clear that Firmin had this analysis in mind when writing the European Solidarity chapter. He may even have had it directly to hand: it was published just one year before he arrived in Paris, where it was received by a public that, according to its author, was beginning “to consider that half the globe in its savage or barbarous state, solicited the methodical and preserving action of civilized peoples” (Leroy-Beaulieu 1882, x). We saw Firmin argue that exploitation is the aim of *all* colonization. A contextual and comparative approach allows us to see that argument as a rejection of Leroy-Beaulieu’s typology and, thereby, a rejection of the very foundation of the most important ideological justification of modern French colonialism (Murphy 1948, 103–75; Todd 2021, 67). He, therefore, ranked Leroy-Beaulieu with Quatrefages and Ernst Renan as contemporary white European scientists who, in “pronouncing their sacramental sentences,” were speaking with a “deadly breath” (Firmin 2002, 383). That claim is followed by a quotation from Herbert Spencer that, for Firmin, laid bare the ideology of racial superiority underpinning the distinction between ancient and modern colonialism. Like the ancient Hebrews, the moderns “dispossess the inferior races every time we need their territories.” Unlike them, however, “we, at least, massacre only those we feel we have to massacre, and we let live those who submit to us.” Spencer’s argument that Europeans had the right to exterminate anyone who resisted their conquest was extreme. But for Firmin, it was simply a consequence of his “succumbing like everyone” else to the doctrine of racial inequality (384). From his perspective, historical contrasts between ancient and modern colonialism, or analytical typologies of colonies, were at best distinctions without a real difference. At worst, they were discursive means of legitimating racial-colonial domination.

The critique of European solidarity Firmin penned in Paris should be seen as integral to the vision of true liberalism he developed in Haiti. Recall that he argued for a liberalism that was committed to progress, national regeneration in Haiti, and the vindication of the Black race globally. Progress should be measured by the degree to which a given society approximates an ideal of civilization. But the universality of civilization is truncated by its role in the legitimating language of colonialism. This is revealed in the varieties of color-prejudice Firmin saw as local articulations of the ideology of racial inequality that circulates globally. His

picture of colonialism as a reciprocal system of exploitation and legitimation allowed him to argue *both* that colonialism is fueled by the doctrine of racial inequality *and* that policies of colonization necessarily inspire that doctrine. For it also allowed him to argue that colonialism dominates everyone: the lower-ranked Black race is sometimes killed, very often exploited, and always denied the dignity and respect owed to all human beings; while the higher-ranked white race is led systematically to misrecognize the world they inhabit and, by transforming the questions they ask about it, to limit their understanding of the range of possible actions in it. The crucial question, then, is how to start asking the right questions.

Firmin’s answer is that “listening” across contemporary difference (Young 1997) and historical distance to subaltern actors might move readers from the error of racial superiority to the truth of racial equality. *EHR* is prefaced with a caution about “the study of the past for present purposes.” History is a dangerous tool precisely because it so often fulfills the ideological function of legitimating colonization. But “historical comparisons” can be useful if they are given a “rational foundation,” which requires that they recognize the unevenness of historical progress and demonstrate that the path from barbarism to civilization is an evolutionary one of “trial and error” (1885, lvii). Done in this way, “history is there to remind the ignorant and forgetful of the truth” (2002, 348). The European Solidarity chapter is written from this critical-historical perspective, concluding with two suggestions for how those dominated by the doctrine of racial inequality can be brought “back to reality.” First, white Europeans must be “reminded” of their own history, their “ignorant and vicious ancestors,” and that the center of Enlightenment was once covered in darkness. Second, and crucially, they must be shown that the widespread belief “that Blacks have no social history” is false—it must be proven that “the Black race” has “played a defining role in the destiny of the human species”; or, as he also puts it, it must be demonstrated that “Blacks ... have an eventful history” (2002, 390–1).

This is precisely what Firmin attempts to do. Although he emphasized that he was “not writing history” in *EHR* (2002, 371), the European Solidarity chapter falls between those on “The Evolutionary Pace” and “Role of the Black Race in the History of Civilization.” Well-versed in Egyptology, he argued that “the ancient Egyptians... were black Africans.” He saw the idea of a “Black Egypt” as central to the “argument against the idea of racial inequality,” for it proved that “from the time they entered the stage of history, Blacks have shown evidence of admirable progress” (2002, 237, 368). Citing the history of South America, he argued for the kind of boomerang effect from colony to metropole familiar from W.E.B. Du Bois’ account of the “African roots” of the First World War (du Bois 1915): as the effects of the Bolivarian revolutions “ricocheted on the century-old institutions of Europe,” so “European politics are propelled by” imperial rivalries in Asia or Africa, where every incident has “repercussions among the European nations” (2002, 386, 398).

The example of Bolivar introduces Firmin's reference to the Siege of Khartoum, thereby framing the outbursts of solidarity that followed in Europe as reactions to events taking place outside it: "the Mahdi," he wrote, "cannot imagine the role he plays in the ins and outs of European politics" (386–7).

Rescuing colonized peoples' historical agency is thus a constitutive feature of rescuing their political agency in the present. In this as in most respects, Firmin celebrated the world-historical significance of the Haitian Revolution: "Haiti's independence has affected the economic system and moral order of all the European powers that owned colonies" and "had considerable bearing on the internal economy of all the American nations where slavery existed" (2002, 398). He adduced biographical sketches of individual Haitians to demonstrate that "nature has endowed the Black race with the best of dispositions" (365, 367). Above all, he joined the chorus of nineteenth century anticolonial voices praising Toussaint L'Ouverture as an exemplary figure who "offers tangible proof of the superiority of the Black race" (369). For Firmin, both the structural ramifications of its revolution and the "extraordinary morality" of its participants meant that, in the argument for the equality of races, "the example must start from Haiti" (lviii).

CONCLUSION

If colonialism leads us to ask the wrong questions, then anticolonialism starts by asking different ones. For Firmin, to recover the concepts of "civilization" and "solidarity" from their truncated expression in parochial languages of racial inequality and colonialism was to recover "another universalism" (Getachew 2016) as the basis on which to transform the relationship between the races. As a "Black Atlantic humanist" (Daut 2017), embracing the concept of the unity of the human species meant coming to "see only the essential characteristics that make of all human beings a community of beings capable of understanding one another" (2002, 83). The doctrine of racial inequality inhibits mutual understanding because it distorts the way that members of both races see the fact of racial diversity, respond to it with hierarchical systems of rank and privilege, and come to see themselves as occupying one position in an inferior-superior relationship. This picture radically constrains their range of possible questions and answers about the social world they inhabit: Lemoine's editorial injunction "the West must close ranks" is an answer to the question "how should civilized peoples act" given the Siege of Khartoum? Firmin's critique of anthropological racism shows that this is the wrong question, and enjoins us to ask, instead, how to respond to the heretofore unquestioned premise of racial inequality. Thereby, it clears the ground for asking what possibilities exist for a nonhierarchical relation between the races.

Firmin describes such a transformed relationship as one of human solidarity. He saw civilization and solidarity as internally related: solidarity is a "sentiment"

that accompanies civilizational development, a "deep, active sympathy" deriving from rational understanding of "moral unity" (2002, 379). Gradually it spreads from family to country and "extends to the largest collection of individuals who can move together in a circle of common ideas." But the doctrine of racial inequality prevents this extension. The equality of human races is thus "the true basis of human solidarity," a "sincere alliance" and "moral commitment" grounded in "the highest and noblest reasons that can be imagined in human nature." Acknowledging fundamental human equality enables the races "to support and love one another" in relations of "true brotherhood," each complementing the other in a unity that preserves diversity (449). Indeed, *EHR* concludes with an injunction: "we must act against this obstacle which has become an established prejudice" (450). Asking a different question, then, yields a different answer.

With this conclusion, Firmin argues that the universal ideal of true human solidarity grounds an obligation to struggle against the doctrine of racial inequality that is the greatest obstacle to its realization in practice. My arguments thus far have attempted to recover the *politics* of *EHR*. I hope to have established both its distinctive contributions to the history of anticolonial political thought and its contemporary relevance. To conclude, I will briefly consider Firmin's efforts to fulfill the final obligation of anticolonial solidarity—to join the struggle, or "fight the good fight."

First, Firmin attempted to build solidarity through the creation of what Inés Valdez helpfully calls an "anticolonial transnational counter-public" (2019, 161–77). He published a previously undiscovered second edition of *EHR* (Firmin 1893, 95) to extend the "circle of common ideas" across the metropolitan and colonial world. This edited and abridged version of his *magnum opus* was serialized across 42 issues of the Haitian diaspora journal *La Fraternité*, a liberal periodical founded by Haitian diplomat Benito Sylvain. Its aims were consistent with Firmin's: by advancing "the interests of Haiti and the black race," the journal would promote "the union of peoples... to march more effectively to the victory of progress and civilization." This role was "affirmed by the beautiful law of human solidarity" (Sylvain 1890). Indeed, Firmin's European Solidarity chapter is reproduced nearly unchanged. This new archival evidence further cautions against restricting his context to the origins of modern anthropology, for aside from his core arguments against polygenism, no other section of the text was reproduced more accurately. That he republished it in a periodical circulated throughout the colonial world significantly expands the context of his early reception. It also, and crucially, provides a real bridge between his theoretical critique of racist social science and his political activities in transnational and global anticolonial movements.

While a detailed comparison of the two editions is beyond the scope of this article, we should note one change to the European Solidarity chapter that could suggest a development in Firmin's views. While *EHR* concludes on a flight of optimism, the original chapter contains a skeptical assessment of future relations

between the “two Americas.” After the digging of the Panama Canal, he wrote,

They will become separated physically, just as they have been separated morally for centuries, each with a distinct civilization, one Anglo-Saxon and the other Latin. Mexico will remain for a while a buffer zone between these two blocks with different but not opposite intellectual orientations, but it will quickly evolve toward American *Yankeeism*. (2002, 388)

Firmin removed this passage from the second edition. If we read this edit as a shift from pessimism to optimism, then it is theoretically consistent with what Firmin later called “true democracy,” in which “the people need optimism.” Democratic leaders must be optimists with faith in the “profound masses” as the “source of all power” and, accordingly, cultivate the “spirit of solidarity” among and with them (1910, 99). If we read the edit as a softening of a critique of American imperialism, then it is strategically consistent with Firmin’s aim in *Roosevelt*. As *EHR*’s critique of anthropology is integral to Firmin’s liberalism, so the historical discussions cleared the ground for *Roosevelt*’s comparative history of colonialism, which aimed to help readers in the United States and Haiti chart a new path through their shared post-colonial present based on mutual understanding and, perhaps, solidarity.

Seeing Firmin’s critical theoretical work as inseparable from his anticolonial political practice, finally, allows us to see him as a kind of anticolonial worldmaker. His transnational publication strategies combined with his celebration of the “spirit of racial solidarity and especially of civilization” between the 65 million citizens of the newly independent Latin American nations. Their common subjection to the Iberian empires had formed a “linguistic bond” that should allow a citizen of Venezuela, Mexico, or Chile to “enjoy all the citizen prerogatives” of Cuba or Santo Domingo, if they found themselves living “under the shadow of a new flag” (1910, 89–91). Most concretely, he also outlined his plans for a Pan-Caribbean Confederation. Grounded in and expressing “the spirit of Antillean solidarity,” it would formalize regional ties institutionally to generate a “powerful sympathy between Antilleans, outside of, and above, all distinctions of race, origin, and nationality.” In a highly suggestive passage, he notes that he discussed these plans with Ramón Betances and José Martí, respectively the leaders of the revolutionary Puerto Rican and Cuban independence movements (131, 116).

If later anticolonial worldmaking projects were shaped by encounters with Marxist critiques of imperialism (Getachew 2019, 3–5), Firmin’s centered the Haitian Revolution as the origin of a global antislavery and anticolonial political imaginary. Alongside the *Fraternité* edition of *EHR*, Firmin and Sylvain exchanged letters discussing “a Congress of scholars” to examine the question of racial inequality. Firmin’s letter reiterates his belief in the power of debate to influence the course of both “politics and philosophy”

in the coming century. As he wrote, with European powers “so preoccupied with transcontinental colonization,” it was evident that “the politics of the first half of the twentieth century at least, will be dominated by colonial questions.” Unsettling the doctrine of racial inequality would contribute to the progress of “sentiments of respect and solidarity,” thereby initiating a “more profound moral horizon for twentieth-century man” and even giving a different character to “international relations between the civilized” and “backward races” (Firmin and Sylvain 1895).

Firmin’s assessment of the coming century torn asunder by colonial questions was an astute political judgment. It also suggests a final point of comparison on which to conclude. For it anticipates Du Bois’ celebrated claim that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” His argument is well known: by denying the rights of “the black world” to participate in the “opportunities and privileges of modern civilization,” colonialism was fatal to both the colonized and the “high ideals of justice, freedom and culture” (Du Bois 1970, 135). Firmin represented Haiti at the 1900 Pan-African Conference and was present in London when Du Bois issued that declaration. Indeed, the arguments of this article provide the foundation for future work comparing Du Bois and Firmin’s contributions to Afro-modern political thought. Whereas the critical force of Du Bois’ remarks on the global color-line emerged fully in later writings, Firmin’s letter not only anticipates his declaration by 5 years but was also the summation of an analysis elaborated already in 1885. In this sense, Firmin’s Pan-Africanism was coherent with his liberalism, for he saw the commitment to the rehabilitation of the Black race as requiring new transnational and global institutions rooted in and expressing anticolonial solidarity. By recovering that analysis, then, this article has recovered a neglected lineage of a core argument of anticolonial political thought—namely, that racial domination locally is inseparable from colonial exploitation globally.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article has benefitted greatly from conversations about Firmin, anticolonial solidarity, and global liberalism with, especially Duncan Bell, Robin Celikates, Andreas Eckert, Jeanette Ehrmann, James Tully, and Inés Valdez. I am grateful to Celucien Joseph for generously sharing some of his work on Firmin. I presented versions of the arguments in this article at Cambridge, Berlin, Bremen, and the Association for Political Theory Annual Meeting. My thanks to the commentators and audiences on those occasions for productive conversations.

FUNDING STATEMENT

Research for the article was supported by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship, Grant 890395.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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