

CLAUDIO PUGLIANO. *Brain and Race: A History of Cerebral Anthropology*. Nuncius Series 4. Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. 343. \$179.00 (cloth).

In *Brain and Race*, Claudio Pogliano traces the weighty discourse about the “threadbare issue concerning the existence of racial differences with respect to the cubic capacity of the skull”—to borrow the words of Lancelot Hogben in 1934—that preoccupied white male scientists on either side of the Atlantic for almost three centuries (302).

Pogliano shows how far cerebral anthropology was motivated by the combined agendas of empire, racism, and slavery. He does so by demonstrating the limited impact that consistently weak evidence of any correlation between race and intellect had on tempering scientific fascination with the subject. He also shows how scientists capitalized on the racist preoccupations of Western states and societies to advance the cultural legitimacy of their science, and the vast number of violent acts they were willing to act out on people of color in its pursuit.

Brain and Race is deeply influenced by *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981). Written by the evolutionary biologist and scientific historian Stephen Jay Gould, it is a work famed for arguing that science does not operate “free from social and political taint” and using biological determinism as its case. In *The Mismeasure of Man*, Gould sought to put a lid on the biological determinism debate, and *Brain and Race* forms part of a strand of historical scholarship that has sought to resign this racist scientific dead-end to history.

Pogliano’s is not the first book to examine how science was embroiled in the construction of racial theories. Other examples include Roxann Wheeler’s *Complexions of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (2002), Andrew Curran’s *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (2011), and Michael Keevak’s *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (2011). Nor it is

the first to focus on how scientists examined the head in an attempt to discover biological evidence for human difference. James Poskett's *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (2019), for example, examines the material culture of the head sciences in the context of the emergence of global science. What *Brain and Race* offers that is new is tracking the evolution of ideas and approaches to examining the brain and race that were exchanged between different scientists and scientific texts, and the nuances and intricacies of this intellectual exchange.

The chapters are organized chronologically, and each includes a range of visual evidence to illustrate shifts in approaches and thinking. The introduction provides a useful discussion of how the material sources are used to supplement the analysis. Unfortunately, rather less information is provided on how and why the textual source base used for the analysis was selected, which leaves a certain methodological gap for the reader.

Chapter 1 focuses on the emergence of new natural philosophical theories about human difference in the long eighteenth century. Pogliano demonstrates the wide-ranging and speculative nature of this debate, as well as how those who supported slavery did not always subscribe to theories of fundamental racial difference, and vice versa. This supports the research findings of historians such as Roxann Wheeler, whose work also shows, like *Brain and Race*, how many old and new beliefs about human difference converged at this time. One criticism of this chapter (and the book more generally) is its lack of engagement with the broader historiography. By doing so, Pogliano could have provided greater weight to his arguments and more clearly signaled his distinct contributions.

Chapter 2 explores the period 1800–1850, and the emergence of the scientific disciplines of craniology and phrenology. Pogliano shows how racism started to drive research on the brain towards the search for biological racial difference, and how much of this early research focused on the skull. Chapter 3, “Climax,” focuses on the period 1850–

1900, when the science of brain and race was at its peak, and increasingly focused on the brain's anatomy. Two key developments of the era were the emergence of anthropology as a distinct science, and new theories of species evolution. This led to increasing uncertainty that intelligence could be anatomically measured, and growing interest in the plasticity of the brain.

The final chapter examines the demise of brain and race research in the twentieth century. It illustrates how increasing criticism of the methods employed by researchers destabilized the science, alongside changing attitudes to race. For example, Pogliano draws attention to the work and writing of the German-Jewish physician-journalist Fritz Kahn, who argued that the data scientists had produced and used was deeply flawed, and the only clear trend that could be observed was the tendency for scientists to identify their own race and nationality as the most intellectually "superior."

In the summary at the end of the book, Pogliano does a great job at drawing out the larger themes and trends and tying them together. However, there are a few issues that he could have addressed more explicitly. The first is how slavery, empire, and institutionalization enabled scientists to "obtain" skulls and brains for study. This is important because it would have influenced scientists' attitudes to their "subject," but also because there is a human dimension to the violence acted out by these scientists. This is necessary to acknowledge because it still has the capacity to harm. Equally—although Pogliano defends his use of terminology at the start—it is likely that some readers may still find the use of some terms outside of quotations or quotation marks, notably *negro* and *idiot*, jarring and potentially upsetting.

Masculinity is another theme that could have been addressed more explicitly. This is particularly true in the sections of the book where Pogliano draws comparisons between the way race and gender were studied in respect to the brain. Greater explicit analysis of

masculinity, including in different national contexts and within science, would have offered a more critical dimension to the scientific theories of the brain and race that scientific men of this period produced. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that one of the key takeaways of the book is how the science of brain and race was consistently used—over several centuries and different contexts—by white male scientists to present themselves as the archetypal human model of reason and intellect.

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