

# A 19th Century Haitian Pioneering Anthropologist: An Intellectual Biography of Anténor Firmin

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Anténor Firmin was a pioneering anthropologist in the 19th century whose major work, *De l'égalité des races humaines (anthropologie positive)* was published in Paris in 1885 and was largely ignored or dismissed as a foundational text in anthropology (Fluehr-Lobban, 2000). The text was recovered in 2000, translated by Haitian scholar Asselin Charles and introduced into English as *The Equality of the Human Races (Positivist Anthropology)* in 2000 (with a paperback version in 2002) 115 years after its original publication. It was thus evaluated as a work of anthropology for the first time in the twenty-first century.

Firmin was one of two Haitian members of the Société d'anthropologie de Paris (Paris Anthropology Society) [1] from 1884-88 during his years in France as a Haitian diplomat. Although a member of the Société who attended many of its meetings his voice was effectively silenced by a racist physical anthropology dominant at the time, and by racism dur to his race. In the *Mémoires* that provide a transcript of the Société's deliberations (Gelain, 2001) apparently Firmin rose to speak only twice, and on both occasions he was silenced by racist or racist comments. At one point he rose to challenge the biological determination of race that pervaded the prevailing physical anthropology of Paul Broca and others when he was confronted by Clémence Royer (a pioneering woman of science who translated Darwin's *Origin of Species* into French) who asked Firmin if his intellectual ability and presence in the Société were not the result of some white ancestry he might possess. Firmin tells us in his own words in the Preface to *The Equality of the Human Races* that he

wanted to debate those who “divide the human species into superior and inferior races” but he feared his request would be rejected. “Common sense told me that I was right to hesitate. It was then that I conceived the idea of writing this book” (p. liv). We now know that a signed copy conveying “Hommage respectueux à La Société d’anthropologie de Paris, A Firmin” was presented to the Paris Anthropology Society in 1885, and that no review or further mention of the book, beyond it having been received, was made in the *Mémoires d’Anthropologie*, the periodical of the Société [2].

{}The publication date of 1885 of *De l’égalité des races humaines (Anthropologie Positive)* marks it as a pioneering text in anthropology well within the time framework of the other foundational texts in the field such as L.H. Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877) and E.B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) or *Anthropology* (1881). Although Franz Boas began his “geographical” writings about his research in Cumberland Sound and Baffin-land in North America in 1884-85, he did not produce a synthetic work of anthropology until his 1911 *The Mind of Primitive Man*, that being the year of Firmin’s death. Paul Topinard, one of the French racist physical anthropologists to whom Firmin devotes a great deal of his criticism, published his *Éléments d’anthropologie générale*, in 1885 the same year as *De l’égalité des races humaines*. In this work Paul Topinard outlines the established general principles of French physical anthropology at the time, racist, polygenist ideas grounded in biologically fixed notions of race “proved” by the then accepted science of anthropometry that was ‘perfected’ by the French physicians-anthropologists of the day. The differences between Firmin’s perspectives on anthropology as a new discipline and his critical perspectives on race as a scientific category and these other pioneers of anthropology are dramatic and significant.

In the first chapter of his tome Firmin establishes anthropology as foundational to science as “the discipline which has the most to offer to those questing minds wishing to find answers to the great problem of the origin and nature of Man and to the question of his place in creation... All other sciences gradually become its tributaries... no other field is as complex as this one...” (2002, excerpted from pages 2, 3, 4)

### **Firmin, Anthropologist and Scientific Positivist**

*The Equality of the Human Races*, subtitled *Positivist Anthropology*, in its twenty chapters and 451 pages (662 in the original French), embraces topics in what became – after Franz Boas founded institutional American anthropology – the four-field study of humanity including physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and ethnology. It is clear from the first chapter devoted to “Anthropology as a Discipline” that Firmin’s vision of anthropology is one of a comprehensive study of humanity with such potential breadth that all other sciences become as “tributaries to it” (p. 3). Firmin reviewed and critically assessed the philosophical and scientific tradition that had shaped the nascent science of anthropology from the philosopher Immanuel Kant to Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer. He defined anthropology as “the study of Man in his physical, intellectual, and moral dimensions as he is found in any of the different races which constitute the human species” (p. 10). A broad integrated science of anthropology was envisioned in which he distinguished between *ethnography* – the

description of peoples – and *ethnology* – the systematic study of these same peoples from the perspective of race. This early recognition of the difference between anthropological data and its theoretical analysis is a hallmark of Firmin’s contribution.

The anthropologist comes in once the ethnographer and ethnologist have completed their work. Anthropology is comparative, separating Man from the other animals addressing the questions: “What is the true nature of Man? To what extent and under what conditions does he develop his potential? Are all of the human races capable of rising to the same intellectual and moral level?” Anthropology requires the effort of the best minds – “It goes without saying that if they are to come up with valid results, anthropologists must do more than establishing some arbitrary ranking of the human races and their respective aptitudes” (p.12-13). Anthropology has been the discipline which can best provide answers to the great problem of the origin and nature of Man and the question of his place in nature. (p. 2).

It can be asserted that the credit of a modern anthropological anti-racism belongs to Ant  nor Firmin. Firmin grounded his scientific study of humanity and his anti-biological argument for the equality of humans in the ideas of Auguste Comte’s scientific positivism. His book pointedly is subtitled “Positivist Anthropology” and Firmin pays a deep bow to Auguste Comte as he argues that the case for racial equality is to be made using scientific facts, not *a priori* assumptions about racial difference or philosophical assertions of racial difference.

Throughout his tome Firmin practices positivist science examining tables of comparative craniometric data noting their irregularities and the means by which Paul Broca and Samuel Morton, and other racist and racist scientists of the day manipulated these numbers, by cubing skull measurements, allowing these physical anthropologists to draw their intended racist conclusions. After analyzing various scholars’ data on the cephalic index, measuring degrees of superior head forms from dolichocephaly to inferior brachycephaly, Firmin concluded that this index provides anthropologists with insufficient ground for dividing the races into distinct groups (p. 100). Broca’s facial index, projecting inferior African prognathism of the jaw to a superior lack of prognathism among Europeans is also subjected to critical scrutiny by Firmin whereby he projects that the most primitive Black race could be close numerically to the vaunted Parisian. He subjects other measurements of the skull, – the nasal index, the vertical index, the orbital index – to similar scrutiny noting that a rational classification is impossible when the data used to generate them are “not only erroneous and irregular, but also often contradictory” (p. 109). The confusing and often conflicting craniological charts with their frequently fabricated numbers are more entertaining to Firmin who would normally dismiss them were they not taken so seriously by the anthropologists and those who read their works as “science.”. And forecasting a different composition of the scientific community in the 20th century he comments:

Can anthropologists continue to record these figures without modifying those so assertive theories they have erected? Their science will face certain discredit when, in the twentieth century, it is subjected to the critique of Black and White, Yellow and Brown scientists who can write as

well and handle as expertly the instruments manufactured by the Mathieu Company [producers of anthropometric instruments], instruments that bring such eloquent results, even in the hands of scientists who doubt their effectiveness. (p. 102)

Motivated by an insatiable thirst for truth and the obligation to contribute, no matter how modestly, to the scientific rehabilitation of the Black race whose pure and invigorating blood flows in my veins, I take immense pleasure in navigating through these columns of figures arranged with such neatness for the edification of the intellect. (*Ibid*)

Firmin pursued the study of all of those “anthropological doctrines which have assumed the mantle of the august name of science while actually usurping its place” (1885[2002], p. 108).

Not only do craniological measures fail the test of positivist science for Firmin but all other racialized anthropometric devices and classifications – such as those dealing with hair and skin pigmentation – are also treated by Firmin as arbitrary and subjective (e.g. the arbitrariness of making a distinction between inferior wooly hair and superior straight hair), all are ultimately non-scientific. Firmin is among the first to locate skin color with the substance melanin, constituted of “fine granules under the epidermis” giving the Ethiopian’s skin its black hue (p. 118).

All of this “science” amounts to the “Artificial Ranking of the Human Races,” the title of Chapter Six of *The Equality of the Human Races*. Indeed, Firmin devotes almost half of this work to a critical analysis of racist anthropometry and racist classifications lending support to the doctrine of the inequality of human races. Rather than using the terms “racist” and “racialist” that I have employed elsewhere (2006), Firmin’s text notes the “bizarre”, the “curious”, the “illogical” notion of the inequality of the races.

Firmin never equivocated on the fact of the equality of the ‘Black’ race to the ‘White.’ Responding to the assertion by French Société d’anthropologie de Paris member Armand de Quatrefages that black people sweat less than white people, he speaks with authority on the subject:

I am Black and nothing distinguishes me anatomically from the purest Sudanese. However, I transpire abundantly enough to have some idea of the facts. My congeners are not beyond the laws of nature. I shall not bother to discuss the issue of the putative sui generis odor that is supposedly a particular characteristic of the Negro race. The idea is more comical than scientific. (1885[2000] pp. 61-63)

Nearly four decades before the founder of American anthropology, Franz Boas, Firmin’s earlier ideas that race and language are separate and independent entities resonate in Boas’ foundational *Race, Language and Culture* (1924). Firmin devoted considerable effort in separating language from race noting that it is an unreliable basis for the classification of race (pp.120-35).

**Inspiration to Twentieth-Century Anthropologist Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969)**

Anténor Firmin is thus either a marginalized and/or a forgotten founder of anthropology whose contributions might have been made in French anthropology, but were ignored due to his race and his critical treatment of the race concept in anthropology. Although a member of the Paris Anthropology Society, it appears that its members never considered, nor did they ever review, *De l'égalité des races humaines* in their publication *Mémoires d'Anthropologie*. Although Firmin's tome was lost to Francophone anthropology, it was remembered in Haiti and outside Haiti among Pan-Africanist and vindicationist scholars of color. However, his distinctive and pioneering contributions to an empirical and critical anthropology regarding race and other topics were lost to the development of mainstream European and North American anthropology in the formative years of the 19th century and thus to the decades of consolidation and growth of the discipline in the 20th century.

Firmin was primarily known in Haiti as a politician and diplomat, less so as a scholar, much less one who was pioneer in the young science of anthropology. I learned about Firmin in 1988 when a Haitian student of mine, Jacques R. Georges, extolled *De l'égalité des races humaines* as I was lecturing about de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races*.

Firmin's example was inspirational to Jean Price-Mars, the founder of ethnology and folklore studies in Haiti. According to Magdaline Shannon (1996), Price-Mars "had early in life developed goals based upon the ideas of such leaders as Anténor Firmin and Hannibal Price." (p. 163). Admiring the accomplishments of US Negroes, some of Price-Mars earliest public lectures focused on the equality of human races, sounding so much like Firmin that President Nord Alexis accused Price-Mars of being a "Firminist" and that his talk was "seditious" (Ibid, p.21). This was around 1906 while Firmin still actively opposing the Alexis government from exile in St. Thomas.

The influence of Firmin on Price-Mars is acknowledged in many of his writings and especially in the last work of Price-Mars long career, *Anténor Firmin* (1964). Both were scholar-politicians in the Haitian way of not dividing the world of ideas from the world of politics, although they were separated in age and time by a generation. Firmin was born in 1850 and died at 61 years of age in 1911, while Price-Mars was born in 1875 and died at the age of 91 in 1964. Price-Mars taught at the Lycée Alexandre Pétion where Firmin was a student. As intellectuals and politicians both were appointed Ministers to Paris – Firmin in 1884, Price-Mars in 1915 – as the usual means of removing troublesome individuals. As scholars both were committed to the proof of the equality of races, Firmin challenging racist French physical anthropology which he encountered during his years in Paris and symbolized in Paul Broca, and Price-Mars responding to Gustave Le Bon, who formulated a racist social psychology emphasizing the inferiority of the black man. It was in this method that Price-Mars observed voodoo and was impressed with it as a religion syncretic between African animism and French Catholicism.

### **Négritude and Pan-Africanism**

Until the publication in English of *The Equality of the Human Races* Firmin was recognized

more as a pioneer of *négritude* and early Pan-Africanism than as an anthropologist. Coultard (1962) notes that “Writers like Anténor Firmin, Hannibal Price, Claude McKay, George Padmore, and Jean Price-Mars were in the vanguard of the revaluation of African culture long before the nationalist awakening in Africa and before the concept of *négritude* was developed in the Caribbean.” (1962: p. 117).

Although Jean Price-Mars is usually credited with being the founder of “noirism” Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal’s liberation leader and first president, hailed him as the “Father of *Négritude*” (Fouchard, 1990). Although unrecognized, it is probable that Firmin and other illustrious minds of Haiti’s 19th century intellectual elite laid the primary foundation for what was to become the *négritude* movement. After all, Haiti became the first Black republic in 1804 decades before the colonization of Africa following the Berlin Congress in 1884-1885. At least four chapters of twenty in *The Equality of the Human Races* speak directly to the primary role played by the Black Race in world history and civilization, including “Egypt and Civilization”; “Intellectual Evolution of the Black Race in Haiti”; “Evolutionary Pace of the Black Race” and “The Role of the Black Race in the History of Civilization.” A cursory reading of not only these chapters but of the entire tome reveals Firmin to be “noirist” without arrogance or apology. Firmin attended the First Pan-African Congress in London in 1900 which W.E.B. DuBois also attended. Had he not been preoccupied with Haitian politics and a bid to become President as head of a Firminist movement, ending in his exile in St. Thomas by President Alexis Nord, Firmin might have continued this international involvement with the nascent Pan-Africanist movement. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s liberation leader and first president, acknowledged Firmin as a New World pioneer of Pan-Africanism at a speech at the University of Ghana in September 1964:

And let us not forget the important contributions of others in the New World, for example, the sons of Africa in Haiti such as Anténor Firmin and Dr. Jean Price-Mars, and others in the United States such as Alexander Crummell, Carter G. Woodson, and our own Dr. DuBois. (Speech delivered at the First Meeting of the Editorial Board of the Encyclopedia Africana, September 24, 1964, University of Ghana)

Lyle Shannon, the husband of Magdaline Shannon, the translator of Jean Price-Mars’ classic work *Ainsi parla l’oncle* [3], wrote to me upon learning of the translation of *De l’égalité des races humaines*:

Firmin was one of Haiti’s most distinguished patriots. His ideas led to the concept of *négritude*. Although people did not at the time think of it that way and despite the appreciation of Jean Price-Mars who predicated his own work on that of Firmin, he remained relatively obscure except in Haiti. (personal communication, October 20, 2000).

Although many white and black intellectuals see Price-Mars as the greatest of Haitian intellectuals, and attribute to him the title of “Father of *Négritude*,” he never acknowledged this claim although he lived well into the 20th century and witnessed both the end of European colonialism in Africa and the postcolonial rise of ideological and political

Négritude. Others can also claim this title; in 1934 Aimé Césaire of Martinique, French Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas and Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor launched *L'Étudiant Noir*, a movement of universal consciousness that Césaire called “négritude.” It may have been from Price-Mars that Kwame Nkrumah learned of Anténor Firmin.

Although Price-Mars grounded the study of Haitian ethnology, religion and folklore within the African continent, he nonetheless saw Haitians as a part of humanity without the need of “noirism.” This view parallels that of Firmin whose positivist assertion that the races are biologically equal was matched by a moral imperative that in mind and spirit as well humanity is unitary drawing upon common heritage. He writes in his Conclusion to *The Equality of the Human Races*:

Returning to the truth they will realize that human beings everywhere are endowed with the same qualities and defects without distinction based on color or anatomical shape. The races are equal; they are all capable of rising to the most noble virtues, of reaching the highest intellectual development; they are equally capable of falling into a state of total degeneration. Throughout all of the struggles that have afflicted, and still afflict, the existence of the entire species one mysterious fact signals itself to our attention. It is the fact that an invisible chain links all of the members of humanity in a common circle. It seems that in order to prosper and grow human beings must take an interest in one another's progress and happiness and cultivate those altruistic sentiments which are the greatest achievement of the human heart and mind (p.450).

With Firmin as the intellectual ancestor of Price-Mars, he paid him the greatest respect in his last work, *Anténor Firmin*, that was published posthumously in 1964. In this 423 page work of thirty-eight chapters, Price-Mars surveys and comments upon Firmin's political and diplomatic career in Haiti, in France, and his successful staving off of the cession of the Môle of St. Nicolas by the US while Frederick Douglass was the American Ambassador to Haiti [4].

He also devoted a chapter to Firmin as an *homme de science* in which he extols the importance and value of the contributions made in *De l'égalité des races humaines*. Referring to Firmin as a prodigy, he marvels at the remarkable achievement of writing a book of the scope of *De l'égalité des races humaines* in only 18 months, during his first brief years in Paris – 1883-1888 – noting that this is the sort of work that it would take others years of research and reflection to accomplish. He notes that Firmin, as one of two Haitian members of the Paris Anthropology Society with Louis Joseph Janvier, was subject to the polygenist ideas of French anthropology that pronounced him inferior. Yet, knowing this to be a false science, he nonetheless embraced the potential of anthropology and this is how he came “to his vocation as an anthropologist” (Price-Mars, 1964: 148). Price-Mars remarks especially on Firmin's critique of anthropometry and craniometry, noting that had the world heeded his ideas the tragedy of “Hitlerism” or Nazism might have been avoided.

Acknowledging both *De l'égalité des races humaines* and Firmin as “pioneering” among Haitian scholars, Price-Mars also mentions others in this constellation of scholarly greats, including

Hannibal Price who wrote *De la réhabilitation de la race noire par la République d'Haïti* (1900), from whom Price-Mars has taken his name.

### On Africa and Africans

Firmin wrote with confidence about ancient Africa, but little of the African continent of his day. It is well to recall that much of the African interior had yet to be fully explored or scientifically described and the Berlin Congress dividing the continent amongst the major European powers took place before the publication of *De l'égalité des races humaines* in 1885. Myth, ignorance, and tales of monstrosity characterized most European views of Africa. Lacking accurate knowledge of the present and adhering to the dictates of science, Firmin declared, "I want to limit myself to generally known fields where serious discussions can be conducted with evidence and verification" (p. 401). Thus, he turned to Africa's glorious past in support of his anti-racist theory. He devoted much attention to the ancient Nile Valley, recognizing the achievement of Nubia (referred to as "Ethiopia") as well as the better-known Egypt, understanding well ahead of his time the rivalry between the two separate, yet fraternal, civilizations.

Firmin acknowledged Egypt as "wholly African, not Asian", quoting the decipherer of hieroglyphics Jean-François Champollion (Firmin, 2002:225). He also included Sudanese Nubia, often referencing Meroë, well beyond the southern Egyptian border, from Memphis to Meroë in his praise of ancient Africa.

Egypt was a country of Negroes, of Black Africans. The Black race has preceded all other races in the construction of civilization. It is in the Black race that thought first emerged and human intelligence first awakened. From now on, whenever Blacks are labeled inferior they need only one simple laconic answer...For the old monuments of flamboyant and warm Egypt, from Memphis to Meroë, will do the talking. The Greeks paid homage to the ancient Egyptians; the Romans paid homage to the Greeks; and the whole of Europe salute them all! (Firmin, 2002: 252)

Firmin's arguments, had they been known, would have provoked a "scandal", so much did they represent a break with the prevalent ideas about "darkest Africa". This view suggests a close linkage with the later ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop in *Nations, Nègres et Culture* and acknowledges the works of Basil Davidson, *Africa: History of a Continent*, both popular in the 1960s.

Firmin died in 1911 at age 61, in exile in St. Thomas after a noble but failed political career in Haiti. He was described to me by translator Asselin Charles as "the best president that Haiti never had". Firmin's ideas represented the sort of subversive writing in the late 19th century that kept French intellectuals, thus the Francophone world, and by extension, wider worlds from his pioneering anti-racist thought and an early critical and progressive vision of anthropology. Yet, his final words to his contemporaries, and now to the generations hence irrespective of race, are words of regeneration through universal equality and love.

The doctrine of the equality of the human races, which consecrates these rational ideas, thus become a regenerative doctrine, an eminently salutary doctrine for the harmonious development of the species. Ultimately, it evokes for us the most beautiful thought uttered by a great genius, “Every man is man”, and the sweetest divine instruction, “Love one another.” (Firmin, 2002: 450-51)

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[1] The other Haitian member was Louis-Joseph Janvier who remained in Paris for 28 years and wrote a number of works including an essay with a similar title *L'égalité des races* in 1885.

[2] I express my gratitude to Ghislaine Geloin Professor of French at Rhode Island College for discovering these facts at the Archives of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris in 2000. She wrote the Introduction to a new French edition of *De l'égalité des races humaines (Anthropologie positive)*, published by L'Harmattan Press in Paris, 2001.

[3] Lyle Shannon has assumed the considerable mantle of responsibility for maintaining contact with scholars interested in the lifelong work in Haitian studies of his wife Magdaline Shannon who is no longer able to do so. In addition to her translation of *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*, she is the author of *Jean Price-Mars and the American Occupation 1900-1915*.

[4] The encounter between American Ambassador Frederick Douglass and Haitian Minister of Foreign Affairs Anténor Firmin as well as the diplomatic affair between the two countries as the US attempted to acquire the Môle of St. Nicolas as a naval base has been studied by Richard Martin, incorporating both Haitian as well as American perspectives. "Frederick Douglass, Anténor Firmin and The Môle of St. Nicolas", MA Thesis in African and Afro-American Studies, Rhode Island College, 2001.