“One of the most dangerous documents ever produced”: the United Nations, the Global South and the politics of race in the early decolonizing era, ca.1946-1955

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The problem of the twentieth century
is the problem of the color-line.
(W. E. B. Du Bois)

The issue of the contact of colours and civilizations
(…) is destined to become a dominant issue of the
twentieth century.
(Jan Smuts)

The most dramatic modern aspect in politics,
national or international, is (…) that of the white
man’s world now in a defensive (…) position in face
of non-white peoples.
(Gilberto Freyre)

In 1952, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) agreed to establish a commission to study the “racial situation” in South Africa, a topic that had been raised in the organization since 1946, when India first brought the “treatment of Indians” under white rule to the global diplomatic spotlight. The creation of this commission was unprecedented, and opposed by many governments who saw it as a clear violation of the UN Charter in its paramount principle, that of non-interference on member states’ domestic affairs. To many in the West, the “race question” was becoming increasingly politicized and mobilized by anti-colonials to subvert the rules of conventional interstate diplomacy and push a “dangerous”

political agenda. This view was expressed, for instance, when the British Colonial Office considered the commission’s 1953 report as potentially “one of the most dangerous documents ever produced in the United Nations.”

By the mid-1950s, the so called “race question” had already been object of much debate, in the corridors of the United Nations headquarters in New York as well as in the offices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), its specialized agency in Paris. In the late 1940s, the organization launched a project to study the multiple aspects of racial prejudice and devise policies to fight them. Under the influence of the US school of cultural anthropology, experts associated with UNESCO issued a momentous statement in 1951 declaring “race” to be nothing but a “scientific myth.” Or, in other words, arguing that there was nothing “racial” (i.e., biological) about human differences and, as a logical conclusion, no scientific grounds existed for discrimination and segregation. These words did not sit well with those scientists and governments that were not yet willing to dismiss the scientific value of race or the political “fact” of racial difference. That only one year later UNESCO had to retract itself and issue a more hesitant statement only goes to show how contentious the race question was in the early 1950s. I cannot elaborate on this case here, but I raise it to illustrate how, in the post-war era, the sciences of man (of which “race” still was a crucial, foundational, concept) were becoming both increasingly politicized and internationalized. Everywhere, race and the forms of knowledge produced about it were no longer a domestic, isolated, issue.

The forms of anti-racist advocacy taking place at the UN in general, and at UNESCO in particular, by the mid-century led to much criticism in the West and in South Africa, which became the first “Western” country to withdraw from the organization in 1955. In this paper, I want to take the South African example as a pretext to revisit the global and comparative politics of race (and racism) in the early decolonization era. I argue that the “race question” emerged in the post-war

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4 Letter from the Colonial Office to the Foreign Office, 16 August 1954, British National Archives, FO_371/112413.


6 I use the term “Western” to indicate South Africa’s affiliation with the Free World in the Cold War context.
order as an eminently international problem and, as such, was increasingly and crucially negotiated (and struggled over) in institutionalized diplomatic spaces, such as the UN and its specialized agencies. I intend, however, to recover the history of anti-racism in a southern, post-colonial, trajectory and configuration. The paper, therefore, focuses not on the presumed Western origins of post-war anti-racism, but on its transnational ramifications in the Global South.\(^7\) I am particularly invested in mapping out a southern dialogue on the “race question” taking place between and around India, Brazil and South Africa, which were all major international players in the early decolonization era.

This is a transnational and comparative history. Transnational because, in a quite basic manner, “the perceptions and actions of [involved] actors regularly transcended and crossed existing political boundaries.”\(^8\) It is a comparative story as well, but not in a conventional way. I am not interested in comparing India to Brazil or South Africa in their specific racial policies or attitudes at home. Rather, I follow Anne Stoler’s suggestion and want to engage with “comparison” not as an analytical tool of the historian, but as an object of historical inquiry, that is, as a narrative form mobilized by historical actors themselves to make “truth claims” about the nature of race, the workings of racism, or the possibility of a non-racial future.\(^9\) Of course, as Ann Stoler argued, “the epistemology of comparison is [...] charged politically.”\(^10\) In the decolonization era, comparisons were consequential to diplomatic debates and political struggles over “race”. As I will show below, the circulation of arguments, comparisons, and analogies all played different but important roles in shaping how the race question unfolded at the United Nations. India, Brazil, and South Africa, I argue, were particularly relevant spaces around which considerations and imaginings over the problem of “human conviviality” were formulated.

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\(^10\) Anne Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, op. cit, p. xiii.
Post-war anti-racism and/in the Global South: India and South Africa

It is especially important for such agencies as Unesco and the UN and affiliated bodies to view race relations and minority problems on a world-wide scale. Despite the uniqueness of the situation in South Africa, or Brazil, or the United States, much can be gained by viewing these situations generically.

(Louis Wirth, University of Chicago, 1951)

In 1950, UNESCO gathered a panel of experts to “define race,” a venture that ultimately resulted in the first statement on race, mentioned above. Besides this ambitious and difficult task, another purpose of the meeting was to lay down proposals of future social science research on racial issues. Noting that practices of discrimination are “mostly maintained owning to the confusion among racial theories on one hand, and ignorance about […] the means for fighting it on the other hand,” the experts gave much importance to the question of identifying “the most efficient means for filling […] the gaps in knowledge about racial problems.” The panel convened at a time when UNESCO was slowly moving its focus from problems of post-war peace and reconstruction – a debate often too limited to Europe – to broader questions associated to the (post)colonial world.

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12 At the meeting, Franklin Frazier was the Chairman and Ashley Montagu was the Rapporteur. Remaining members were Ernest Beaglehole, Juan Comas, Luiz de Aguiar Costa Pinto, Morris Ginsberg, Humayun Kabir, and Claude Levi-Strauss. Robert C. Angell and J. R. Xirau, of the Department of Social Sciences, were also present as members of the Secretariat. Edward Lawson also attended as a representative of the United Nations.
14 If we consider the activities carried out within Tensions Project, there was a clear dominance of Western scientists and contexts, which worked against UNESCO’s universalists ambitions. The “Way of life” series produced publications on Australia, Austria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Work on national stereotypes was completely developed by western scholars, with specific publications on Switzerland and Benelux. The UNESCO poll on public opinion was carried out in Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK and the US. Publications on the social psychology of tensions had mostly European societies as their fields of study. The project on local communities was carried out in Australia, France, India, and Sweden. This uneven geographical distribution of research reflects, of course, the Western-centric
This shift responded to a rising concern that the organization was not living up to its cosmopolitan ambitions. Lack of diversity and deficient global representation reflected not only on research objectives but also on the very composition of the staff. For instance, in 1947, from the 557 posts in UNESCO’s secretariat, French or British nationals occupied 514. As the first Secretary-General Julian Huxley later recalled, it was particularly important to appoint more “coloured” officials to cement the idea of the organization’s “universal character.” The appointment of Brazilian Anthropologist Arthur Ramos as head of UNESCO’s Social Sciences Department might have been, partially, a result of these concerns. However, we should not dismiss it as a merely strategic move.

Rather than tokens of diversity, intellectuals of the Global South engaged the organization to advance their own vision of the post-war world. When Ramos reached Paris, for instance, he intended to push for a “survey on Africa and Latin America [...] aimed at collecting data on the economic, social and cultural problems of those relatively backward people.” Upon his sudden death months later, an anthropologist became “almost essential” to the staff, especially because the Social Sciences Department was venturing “into the field of less-developed peoples more and more.” While the position was eventually filled by the Swiss Alfred Métraux, in the following years the field-oriented research projects carried out by UNESCO on partnership with local institutions allowed scholars on the ground to use the organization’s resources to their own advantage. Member-states themselves called the UN’s specialized agencies to research areas of vital national interest that could ultimately contribute to the remaking of the post-war world.

UNESCO’s “move southwards,” thus, was a general tendency in the early 1950s, as many departments and projects expanded their scope internationally, at the request of scholars and governments themselves. In 1951, for instance, the Indian government called UNESCO to assist in “the study of various group

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16 Ibid., p. 412.
tensions – religious, provincial, linguistic and racial – which poison the relations between different communities with a view to eradicating these from [the] national life."¹⁹ A mission was carried out by six research teams formed by Indian scholars under the coordination of a UNESCO consultant, Gardner Murphy, of the City College of New York. One of the premises of the initiative, Murphy later explained, was the idea that the social sciences were “useful to the administrator” in the difficult task of understanding the nature and causes of “hostilities between human groups [in order to lead them towards] effective living with one another.”²⁰ In India, however, race was not a central variable, remaining largely marginal as an investigative tool in relation to the more relevant concepts of caste, class, tribe, and, above all, religion. Taking place in the wake of partition, the project paid particular attention to the causes of tension between Hindus and Muslims in a variety of settings.²¹ That this initiative came at the invitation of the Indian government indicates that UNESCO’s call for social understanding was appealing to postcolonial states struggling to cement national unity above divisive politics.²² It also played into expectations that a closer collaboration with India, including in the scientific field, could help to promote international understanding between East and West, the Occident and the Orient.²³

Curiously, it was in relation to debates on cultural understanding that race featured more prominently in relation to India, where it served to ground ideas

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¹⁹ “Indian National Commission for UNESCO. Project for Research on Social Tensions,” UNESCO/SS/4, Paris, 13 November 1951. The Tensions Project in India was the first time UNESCO was closely collaborating with a member state by request of the latter.


²¹ “Project for Research on Social Tensions,” Indian National Commission for UNESCO, UNESCO/SS/4, Paris, 13 November 1951. The project included research on Hindu-Muslim, inter-caste and minority-majority tensions in urban centres, villages, factories, and in the context of school education. It involved ten Indian scholars: B. S. Guha (Department of Anthropology, Calcutta); V. K. Kothurkar (University of Poona); H. P. Maiti (Patna University); Radhakamal Mukerjee and Kali Prasad (University of Lucknow); Pars Ram (Muslim University of Aligarh); Hilda Raj and L. C. Bhandari (Delhi University); C. N. Vakil (Bombay University); G. D. Boaz and B. Kuppuswamy (Madras University); and Kamla Chowdhry (Ahmedabad Textile Industry Research Association). I am using the name of the institutions as provided by the Indian National Commission for UNESCO.

²² *Ibid.* According to the Indian National Commission, since 1948, the Government of India had financed the study of group tensions on “religious, provincial, linguistic and racial” grounds. So when the Tensions Project took off, it was well received and seen as an opportunity to advance this agenda with UNESCO support. The organization offered a grant of Rs. 1 lakh in 1950.

²³ Interestingly, Gardner Murphy disputed this view by pointing out that Western scientific collaboration and technical assistance could often reproduce power relations and play into Western ideas of civilizational superiority. See: Murphy, *In the Minds of Men*, p. . I will turn to this kind of criticism bellow. On how UNESCO’s initiative on East-West understanding was heavily embedded in orientalist framing, in the Saidian sense, see: Hazard, *Postwar Anti-Racism*, pp. 88-99.
about the quintessential unity of the nation. In a paper presented to UNESCO as part of a conference on the “interrelation of cultures,” Suniti Kumar Chatterji of Calcutta University described “Indian civilization” as a “harmonized” amalgam of “racial and linguistico-cultural elements” of Indo-European, Dravidian, Australoid, and Mongoloid origin. Considering this “international outlook,” he noted, “an Indian […] cannot but feel the most cosmopolitan person in the world.” A similar view was presented by P. T. Raju. Describing the country as “a melting pot of so many races,” Raju credited India’s experience of national cohesion to Hinduism, which, he thought, held the unique ability of “absorbing and assimilating” new, foreign, elements into itself. For this reason, he claimed, “Hindu culture and civilization afford the best example for UNESCO in its endeavour to remove social conflicts and evolve a unified culture.” At a moment when another well-known “melting pot,” the United States, was still ridden with racial strife, India had already solved her race problem. To both Chatterji and Raju, the caste system had historically functioned as a unifying mechanism, for it allowed social hierarchy and stability to be based on “character” and “avocation” rather than race, and, therefore, contributed to the “cultural fusion of races” as the basis of Indian society.

To be sure, this understanding of the Indian people as a “cosmic race” – to borrow a common expression at the time – voiced the postcolonial aspirations of

26 Ibid., p. 1.
27 “The Culture of India,” by Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Enquiry on cultural inter-relations. The culture of India, UNESCO/PHS/GE/3, Paris, 18 August 1949, p. 18. Raju openly rebutted the criticism of the caste system as being deeply misinformed about caste’s historical function to promote social and spiritual unity. He also advances a view of India’s national formation as essentially a colonial process, whereby Aryans integrated “primitive barbarians” into Hindu society. It is interesting that these claims were being made before UNESCO in the humanist climate of the post-war era, which, in my view, only indicates how easily anti-racist rhetoric could accommodate deeply exclusionary projects. While Chatterji and Raju were attempting to formulate a liberal, cosmopolitan, vision of India’s past with a view of her contemporary insertion in the post-war international stage, their arguments are predicated on the “Aryan model of history” which has been insightfully analyzed by Vasant Kaiwar. See: Vasant Kaiwar, “The Aryan Model of History and the Oriental Renaissance: The Politics of Identity in the Age of Revolutions, Colonialism, and Nationalism,” in Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar (eds.), The Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 13-53.
28 The idea of the “cosmic race” was elaborated by the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos in the 1920s, and had the similar function of forging a sense of national unity based of racial, cultural and spiritual grounds. On the development of this idea and its critique, see: Marilyn Grace Miller,
the Indian state, both regarding its domestic efforts to forge national unity above divisive lines, and its diplomatic ambitions as a self-appointed mediator between East and West. In the 1950s, Indian diplomacy successfully engaged UNESCO as an international platform to pursue these goals and promote the prestige of the country as the spokesperson of Asia, or the “Orient”, in the emerging post-war world. In some of UNESCO’s publications, India was represented as a culturally rich and spiritually advanced millennial civilization, to which the West could turn for wisdom.29

In the early 1950s, thus, UNESCO was ready to start looking at the less-developed countries and the (post-)colonial world for answers to its racial puzzle. When the panel of experts on race convened for its last session in February 1950, several cases were identified as possible areas of interest for future research, from inter-group relations in Malaysia and the social effects of miscegenation in Brazil to the recent drive for greater racial segregation in South Africa.30 In the following years, UNESCO paid increasing attention to the many facets of the race problem on the ground, in several locations in the Global South. Yet, this exploratory turn was not without its contestations. Research on race had to be managed carefully, a lesson that Métraux and the Social Science Department learned from difficult experiences. As he told Kenneth Little of the University of Edinburgh in 1952, “some member Governments are not taking very graciously our discussion of the race problem.”31 Little had been requested to write a monograph on “Race and Society,” to be published as part of a collection of studies on “Race in modern science”. The book had chapters on South Africa, Britain, Brazil and Hawaii, and examined the social and historical factors leading to particular configurations of the race problem in each of these societies. Métraux was especially concerned that the book could give rise to criticism from the British National Commission

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29 For instance, both the *UNESCO Courier* and the *International Social Science Bulletin* published special volumes on South Asia in which this reading of India was prominently expressed. See: *UNESCO Courier*, 4(5) (1951); *International Social Science Bulletin*, 3(4) (1951).


31 Letter from Alfred Métraux to Kenneth L. Little, 21 April 1952, *UNESCO Papers*, Box 147.
for UNESCO, because of “the impression some of the presentation of the facts [...] can cause on ‘colonials.’”32

Yet, it was in South Africa that the “Race Question” encountered its most entrenched opposition. Little’s book was charged with presenting several factual “inaccuracies” on the South African situation. And this was not the first occasion a controversy of this nature had erupted. In 1951, another book in the collection on race, “The Roots of Prejudice” by Arnald Rose of the University of Michigan, was equally attacked on “technical grounds.”33 A controversial statement was that “in South Africa politicians [have been] elected to office after a campaign devoted merely to raising white people’s fear about Negroes,”34 in a patent reference to the rise to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948 under the banner of increased racial segregation, or the policy of apartheid. As Saul Dubow has argued, the Afrikaans nationalist campaign did fuel fears of black dominance and encouraged increasing race awareness, in a “tactical ploy” to appeal to white constituencies and secure the electoral victory.35 While at this point Apartheid was not yet a coherent state policy or a well-structured ideology, the “apartheid slogan” fed on the notion that segregation was imperative to preserve the Afrikaans’ “national body” against the threats of racial equality and universal political enfranchisement being advocated by the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) at home and through the UN system abroad.36 In the following years, the Nationalist government struggled to theoretically and programmatically refine its segregationist project in face of much contestation from oppositionist movements and also from within the Nationalist Party itself.37 Increasing diplomatic criticism

32 Ibid.
33 Report on certain facts related to the race campaign undertaken by UNESCO in South Africa, UNESCO Papers, Box X07.21(68.01).
36 Dubow, Apartheid, pp. 11-25.
37 Deborah Posel, The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Posel has pointed out that historical literature tends to treat apartheid as a “grand plan,” that is, a greatly cumulative process and concerted effort to strengthen segregation put in place immediately after the electoral victory in 1948. Yet, she argues, the notion of a coherent master plan “misrepresents the political process whereby Apartheid was built, greatly exaggerating the extent of continuity, control, and long-term planning involved” (p. 5). Posel points out that no single vision of what segregation would actually entail existed in 1948, and contestation over the meaning and practice of apartheid remained strong throughout the 1950s, even within the Nationalist intelligentsia, not to mention the myriad of actors and organizations contesting it “from below.”
at international organizations, too, shaped the ways in which apartheid was being persistently reformulated and (re)presented to the world.38

At any rate, it might seem somewhat expected that the Nationalist turn to apartheid and UNESCO’s turn to the “Race Question,” both of which coinciding in the late 1940s and early 1950s, would necessarily set both in a path of conflict. Yet, Michelle Brattain has demonstrated that this relationship was more complex, or “strange” even. As a founding member of UNESCO, South Africa welcomed the latter’s initiatives in international understanding and several technical areas of cooperation where, in Pretoria’s calculation, there was “much to gain” by getting involved, such as fundamental education, agricultural and conservation practices, and science and technology.39 Surely, it is true that the rise of apartheid did result in tensions and disagreement. Quite predictably, UNESCO’s statements on race, which denied all scientific basis to segregation and refuted biological justifications to anti-miscegenation laws, received universal criticism from apartheid’s officials, so much so that the most drastic of responses – i.e., withdrawal – was considered from the outset. Yet, South African diplomats still believed UNESCO could serve as a platform where international criticism could be more effectively rebutted and the nationalist position on apartheid could be elucidated before the world.40 To be sure, this did not prevent much divergence, sometimes even hostility, on the basic issue of race, which eventually led to South Africa being the first non-communist country to actually withdraw from the organization in 1955.41

Indeed, UNESCO officials were aware that Pretoria was ready to wage a diplomatic war against the race program. As Métraux himself acknowledged, one of the reasons why the 1950 statement on race had to be improved was that “the South Africans may attack us on the basis of so-called ‘scientific inaccuracies’.”42

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40 Ibid., p. 225. As Brattain pointed out, because UNESCO was a specialized agency devoted to promote cooperation, it was less likely to entertain open denunciation of any member state, and thus could be appealing to South Africans, especially given the criticism of apartheid taking place at the General Assembly since 1946.
41 On South African’s position on the race question and the withdrawal, see: Hazard Jr, Postwar Anti-racism, pp. 80-82.
42 Letter from Métraux to Ashley Montagu, 2 March 1951, UNESCO Papers, Box 147.
At home, too, the politics of the science of race was volatile and rapidly shifting. In 1948, the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) was established “to finally settle the colour question” by openly supporting and conceptually refining the notion of separate development, that is, apartheid.\textsuperscript{43} A predominantly, but not exclusively, Afrikaans institution, SABRA was the pro-apartheid counterpart of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), an academic organization of liberal and anti-racist orientation created in 1928 to study the race problem and promote inter-racial cooperation. SAIRR was strongly supportive of UNESCO’s race program, a position that rapidly came under fire as local antagonism against the organization gained ground. After the release of Little’s “Race and Society,” SAIRR Director Quintin Whyte wrote to UNESCO to express his criticism of the book for presenting “inaccurate information” on the South African situation. This was a point raised by the South African government itself. But Whyte’s argument was that “the task of those working for greater racial harmony in [this country] is not made easier” by such publications.\textsuperscript{44} While he later conceded that UNESCO’s materials were commonly a “good weapon” in SAIRR’s fight against segregation, their use was increasingly contested in the polarized South African political (and academic) context.\textsuperscript{45}

India’s and South Africa’s relationships with UNESCO in the early 1950s are representative of radically different political dispositions. New Delhi secured UNESCO’s support on its domestic efforts to cultivate social conviviality beyond divisive lines, while engaging the organization as a platform to promote a cultural diplomacy through the country’s position as a natural mediator between East and West could be advanced.\textsuperscript{46} The rise of apartheid, on the other hand, undermined Pretoria’s place at UNESCO, where a worldwide campaign against race prejudice had gained momentum, leaving the Nationalist government increasingly isolated and unable to digest the re-definition of the race concept as a function of post-war

\textsuperscript{44} Letter from Quintin Whyte to the General-Director of UNESCO, 23 April 1953, \textit{Wits Historical Papers}, SAIRR Collection, AD1715.
\textsuperscript{45} For instance, Rose’s “The Roots of Prejudice” had been banned under the law on “obscene literature”, see: Report on certain facts related to the race campaign undertaken by UNESCO in South Africa, \textit{UNESCO Papers}, Box X07.21(68.01).
anti-racism. These circumstances did not differ too much from what was already underway at the General Assembly of the UN, where South Africa’s segregation policy had been the subject of much debate since 1946, when India “shocked” the West by submitting a complaint against the unfair treatment of people of Indian origin in that country.  

India’s diplomatic move generated a dispute that in the following years raised the crucial question of whether racial discrimination was compatible with UN membership at all, an issue that was becoming increasingly explosive in the eve of decolonization.  

As Mark Mazower has argued, India’s campaign against racial discrimination is indicative of an epochal transformation, expressing a blow against the status quo of European imperial power and marking the rise of “the postcolonial world” as a new, ascending, force in world politics.

Indian delegates at UNESCO, too, pressured for change along anti-racist and anti-colonial lines. In 1948, at the UNESCO General Conference in Beirut, the head of the Indian mission, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, stated that democracy could not exist “where large racial groups do not have political privileges,” and argued that unless UNESCO committed to fight for “economic justice and racial equality,” it would “become powerless to handle an awakened Asia or awakening Africa.” A year later, speaking at the First Conference of the Indian National Commission for UNESCO, Radhakrishnan noted that the persistence of state-led race discrimination was a reminder that “we must move drastically, [for] people are in revolt against conditions of political, economic and racial servitude.” Even if they are “slow in altering, […] these things are bound to go.”

India’s advocacy abroad repositioned the race question in relation to perhaps what was the most significant aspect of the post-war era, that is, the re-making of the world without empires.

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Indeed, decolonization was a reality in Asia and a mounting aspiration in Africa. As Nehru himself acknowledged, UNESCO was especially important at a when Asia and Africa were no longer mere “fringe[s] of Europe.” Yet, in order to meet the aspirations of the (post)colonial world, the organization had to descend “from its ivory tower” and effectively work for the benefit populations on the ground. It appears, however, that UNESCO was not yet ready for such a drastic shift. In its effort to fight racism, it largely avoided direct confrontation with cases of patent racism, e.g. South Africa or the American South, and did not challenge the subjugation of colonized peoples. The colonial situation was perhaps the most limiting blind spot in UNESCO’s crusade against the evils of racism.

In debates and publications, mention of colonialism was made in passing, and in ways that did not challenge the reality of European rule. At the meeting of experts on race, for instance, one of the only references to the issue related to the outcomes different colonial practices could have on race relations, considering “the difference in attitude of the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin people toward other ethnic groups.” One year later, Métraux noted that as the race project ventured into the field of comparative studies, it would only be natural to look at “colonial policies and the cultural assimilation of coloured peoples.” Surely, one should not overlook the diplomatic motivations for this silence. This was, after all, an international body composed of sovereign states that were not always willing to cooperate in the direction proposed by the intellectuals sitting at the secretariat’s table. South African diplomats were unequivocal in voicing their criticism on the organization’s procedure of delegating the study of race to experts with little or no with the governments themselves. This method “only exacerbated the problem of race relations, and cause racial disharmony within [Member states].”

Moreover, certain states were rather apprehensive about a cosmopolitan project whose goal was to transcend national interests, and instead tried to curtail the organization’s independence. UNESCO, for its part, tended to go for political compromises so not to alienate member states, which evidently limited the scope

52 Ibid., p. 6.
of its scientific agenda.\textsuperscript{56} At a time when racism and segregation had fallen into disrepute, it was not “diplomatic” to publicly scrutinize the most extreme cases. Rather, UNESCO looked instead at good practices. In that, it turned to Brazil.

\textit{Brazil, a “pilot study” – or the pathways of racial redemption}

Brazilian have an important tradition to cherish in their patterns of inter-racial relations. The world has much to learn from a study of race relations in Brazil, […] this “Laboratory of Civilization.”

(\textit{Charles Wagley, Race and Class in Rural Brazil})\textsuperscript{57}

Published in 1939 in the United States, Arthur Ramos’s book “The Negro in Brazil” was a “thoroughly transnational collaboration,” as Micol Seigeil put it.\textsuperscript{58} Written at the request of Richard Pattee to a foreign audience, the book was an intervention in an already well-established debate on the African diaspora in the Americas. In his introduction to the work, Pattee, who was also its translator, emphasized the peculiar racial situation in the country, for “instead of urging the desirability of segregation,” Brazil had “preferred to stimulate and encourage the fusion of a mixed race.” The study of this historical development was important, Pattee argued, because “the racial views and doctrines evolved in Brazil cannot fail to shed light on the perplexing difficulties to be found elsewhere.” In short, Brazil was “a great laboratory for practical sociology.”\textsuperscript{59} The presumption that the experience of a country in race relations could be dissected for useful lessons and practical tools to combat prejudice elsewhere was common amongst UNESCO officials in the early 1950s. After all, Métraux asked, “what better argument can be opposed to race prejudice than a demonstration that harmonious race relations are possible?”\textsuperscript{60} As the organization was tending towards more systematic field studies and looked for social “laboratories”, Brazil’s international reputation as a

\textsuperscript{56} Pavone, \textit{From the Labyrinth of the World}, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{60} Métraux, \textit{UNESCO and the Racial Problem}, p. 10.
non-racist giant, or, as Marcos Maio put it, a sort of “anti-Nazi Germany” was well established and diffused, resulting from the English translation of Brazilian scholars, such as Arthur Ramos or Gilberto Freyre. Yet, as Todd Sheppard has argued, other countries, such as Mexico, enjoyed a similar reputation as possible theatres where race harmony was in the making. UNESCO’s choice of Brazil, then, cannot be explained by the country’s presumed, although widely accepted, constitution as an anti-racist nation. Rather, the networks of scientific knowledge on race and the diplomacy of post-war anti-racism are additional elements to this story.

Ramos’ appointment to UNESCO was a decisive moment. Indeed, he was convinced of the potentialities of applied anthropology in helping materialize the principles of anti-racist humanism so dear to the organization. Even before his arrival in Paris, Ramos had informed his colleague Costa Pinto of his intention of using UNESCO to turn Brazil into a “research laboratory on human relations,” an agenda he had been pursuing for some time. Following Ramos’s first project, the meeting of experts on race, in 1950 UNESCO’s programme on social sciences included field research in Latin America “with a view to discovering the factors making for harmonious race relationships.” Although at this point, Brazil was not singled out there were clear pro-Brazilian forces in the organization. Three of the eights participants on the meeting of experts on race had research experience on Brazil, i.e. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Franklin Frazier, and the same Costa Pinto. After Ramos’s demise, a Brazilian anthropologist, Ruy Coelho, was appointed as the first assistance to the Race Relations Division. In addition, Paulo Carneiro, the Brazilian delegate to UNESCO, strongly supported Brazil-related initiatives and the presence of Brazilian personnel in the organization. When the General Conference met in Florence, in July 1950, it was Carneiro who lobbied for Brazil as the preferable option, in spite of other proposals suggesting a comparative line, involving more than one Latin American society. He argued that in the country

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64 Work Plan for 1951, UNESCO Executive Board, 19 EX/6 (3), Paris 23 January 1950, p. 8
65 Maio, *Brasil no concerto de nações*, p. 15.
UNESCO would find a “rich field of study,” where the mixing of the population evolved with “a remarkable absence of tensions.”\(^66\)

The pilot study marked a distinct shift from the organization’s initial effort in dissecting the intricacies of race in modern thinking and science, to more field-oriented research on the social realities of race relations. In Brazil, UNESCO’s work played an important role in institutionalizing the social sciences as rigorous tools for understanding, and acting upon, social relations (not necessarily “race” relations alone).\(^67\) To the organization, it enthroned “applied anthropology” (and applied social science in general) as perhaps the most appropriate tool in the effort to re-constitute social conviviality, the fabric of human unity, in the post-war era. The turn to Brazil was also expressive of a particular sensibility, common to most of anti-racist thought and politics in the mid-century. As Gil-Riaño has argued, anti-racism operated within a narrative of redemption, of transition from a world dominated by the fallacies of scientific racism, to a “harmonious future” in which race would no longer be a source of tensions or violence.\(^68\) To UNESCO officials, Brazil was such a promising laboratory precisely because it was perceived as more advanced in this teleological line. Between 1950 and 1951, Métraux and his team of scholars searched for clues on how to isolate the factors leading to these results and, hopefully, generalize them to the rest of the world. In his anti-racist future, Métraux hoped, “instead of being flaunted openly, race prejudice will become a shameful sentiment that men will hesitate to avow.”\(^69\)

_The politics of racial comparison: the UN Commission on the Study of the Racial Situation in South Africa_

The news that UNESCO had decided to send a research mission to Brazil were received, in the country, with much euphoria. As a South African diplomat reported, it was published in “big headlines,” with “special pride being taken” on the fact that the organization wanted to make of Brazil’s policy on race relations

\(^{66}\) _Ibid.,_ p.19.
\(^{68}\) Gil-Riaño, _Historicizing Anti-Racism_, p. 9-10.
\(^{69}\) Métraux, _Unesco and the Race Problem_, p. 390.
“an example to the world” of “how to run a multi-racial state.” Interestingly, in a view I think is correct, the South African observer pointed out that rather than an expression of national consensus, the image of fulfilled multi-racialism was not without its internal critics. The newly gained international exposure on the race question had invited both intellectuals and black organizations to denounce the various instances of racial prejudice still permeating Brazilian society, including in the foreign service structure and immigration policy. Moreover, this situation had “unpleasant possibilities for South Africa,” for it could “prevent Brazil from adopting a friendly attitude towards us [...] and may indeed force Brazil into the position of being a hostile critic of [us] on such matters as India’s complaint of racial discrimination.” To me, this assessment of the situation is interesting on mostly three grounds. Firstly, it shows how diplomatic debates on race shaped national perceptions and local politics on issues of rights and non-discrimination in powerful ways. Secondly, it signals to how shifting ideas on race permeated the “diplomatic imagination,” framing the processes in which international relations and political outcomes are imagined, predicted and pursued. Thirdly, there is at operation here a particular reading of the ramifications of the race question in the Global South, in a space between India, Brazil and South Africa.

The reason why Brazil’s position was of consequence in a dispute between India and South Africa is that the Latin American bloc - as a collective diplomatic force - did not fit well in the structures of the Cold War and the early postcolonial world, and could side either with the West, the Soviet bloc or Afro-Arab states in a variety of issues. To South Africa, therefore, to earn the understanding of Latin America was a crucial task, and one that diplomatic missions in Rio de Janeiro and New York tried to hard perform. For instance, in the midst of the UN debate on the Indian Question in South Africa in 1947, a Brazilian diplomat arranged a private meeting of the Latin American group to which the South African delegate was invited. The latter was told he was “amongst friends” and that Latin America would consider a course of action “helpful to South Africa.” In that occasion, the

71 The South African diplomat mentioned the fact that the Brazilian diplomatic services did not hire coloured staff and that the national immigration policy encouraged white European entrants while barring other groups. Both points are correct.
Brazilian delegate told his South African counterpart that the two states “should get closer together, as Brazil also has the problem of an indigenous population.”

Months later, in 1948, South Africa opened three Legations in South America to “foster understanding of our problems in that quarter,” especially given “the fact that Latin America as a voting bloc occupies such a commanding position in the United Nations and its specialized agencies.” The newly appointed diplomat to the post was instructed to use his previous experience in London to work in “the rebuttal of ignorant or prejudiced criticism of our Non-European administration” in Brazil, a country that has been “consistently friendly or benevolently neutral.” Brazil was a particularly important audience in Latin America, given it was “the only country [in the region] to participate in the last war and to attend the Paris Peace Conference,” and, for this reason, had a stronger say in “the world’s post-war reconstruction than other countries.” Perhaps more interestingly than such high-politics machinations, the South African representative was also instructed to collect information on Latin American “policies towards Indigenous Indian populations” and on “problems of racial discrimination,” especially “bearing in mind accusations which have been forthcoming […] as to the Union’s treatment of its non-European population.” While South Africa would generally “loath to resort to the kind of accusations sometimes indulged in by its detractors,” it was nonetheless advisable to “have the material available in case of need.”

In my view, this case illustrates the way in which post-war diplomacy gets entangled to the global politics of race, and how comparisons are a critical part of this conundrum. The reason why the Latin America’s indigenous policies was of interest to South Africa is that it gave the latter the ability to, through a politics of comparison, reposition apartheid in relation to a broader narrative of, say, native administration under a modern state. In doing so, comparative frames could work to erase the idea of apartheid’s exceptionality, which, incidentally, was at the core of much of the criticism directed to it at the United Nations. If apartheid was just a system of discriminatory governance akin to others experiments in postcolonial

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74 Top Secret, from Secretary of External Affairs to the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Union of South Africa in Rio de Janeiro, 27 April 1948. NASA/BTS/1/10/3_Vol 1.
75 Ibid.
contexts, then it could not be legitimately singled out as an object of international debate and intervention. This issue came to the spotlight in 1952, when India was the sponsor of the first UN resolution to address apartheid generally (and not just the question of the treatment of Indians in South Africa), and included a proposal for the creation of an ad hoc commission “to study and examine the international aspects and implications of the racial situation in South Africa in the light of the purposes and principles of the Charter.”76 Believing that it would not help matters to “point a finger at South Africa,” the US delegation attempted to dissuade India to present her draft by proposing instead a resolution “without any commission,” but that would nonetheless put the General assembly “on record as opposing the type of discrimination being practised in South Africa.”77 If a commission was to be formed at all, it should be strictly “technical,” and should “make a painstaking study of problems of multi-racial societies,” and not apartheid alone.78 The Indian delegation declined the US suggestion, considering it would serve to submerge “a crucial problem into an overall academic study which [would] only sidetrack [the] urgent situation in South Africa.” There was “no point” in studying race issues in Latin America, the US or India, “where development is in right direction.” After all, the race question, generally speaking, was already under study elsewhere, and particularly at UNESCO. Moreover, such a general enquiry would “scare many [delegations].”79

That a comparative agenda could be conceived as a diplomatic strategy to dilute the mounting criticism of apartheid is revealing of how strongly politically motivated racial comparisons were. Beyond the more philosophical or academic debate on whether or not South African policy was exceptional – and thus should be singled out at the UN –, comparisons could have very specific implications. As apartheid was being debated at the UN, the Prime Minister D. F. Malan issued a public statement supporting a suggestion raised by El Salvador the previous year. Drawing on the legal principle of “clean hands,” it proposed that “the disregard

78 Ibidem.
of human rights by member States who attacked other member States could also
be placed on record.”\textsuperscript{80} As Malan pointed out, if this principle of international law
was taken into account, then Indian would not “fare” well, given its “cruel record
of denial of civil rights to [racial and religious] minorities.” If India’s campaign to
take apartheid to the UN succeeded, Malan stated, then “the Charter may as well
be torn up.”\textsuperscript{81} Even if not particularly successful, South African diplomacy would
raise, explicitly or implicitly, the “clean hands” principle at other moments in the
years to come. At any rate, the comparative rationale is clear here: for this reason,
South African diplomatic services were invested in collecting information of race
problems in other countries that could be possibly used to discredit their criticism
of apartheid.\textsuperscript{82} In 1952, however, Malan’s attack on India’s credibility was largely
ineffective. An amended version of the Indian resolution was approved, and the
few changes introduced did not revoke its main innovation, i.e., the creation of an
ad hoc commission.\textsuperscript{83}

The UN Commission for the Study of the Racial Situation in the Union of
South Africa (UNCORS) was an unprecedented body, and one that was pushing
the limits of UN’s authority in spite of much outcry over the fundamental issue of
domestic jurisdiction. Some of the most conservative delegations, e.g. the British,
considered it to have been illegally constituted and therefore did not recognize its
authority. Other actors wanted to use this opportunity to broaden the scope of the
race question – so far still academically bounded – and translate it into policy and
recommendations. In 1953, India successfully proposed a resolution that not only
kept the Commission alive, but also authorized it “to suggest methods to alleviate

\textsuperscript{80} “Hands off South Africa! Prime Minister’s Statement on Indian Interference,” October 1952,
\textit{Wits Historical Papers}, Item no. 51, AD1715, p. 3. For Malan, the clean hands principle, although
not formalized, referred to the notion of equity in jurisprudence, i.e. “he who comes to court, must
come with clean hands.”
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{82} See, for instance, Eric Louw’s speech at the General Assembly in 1960, where he attacked
many of South Africa’s critics on their practices of discrimination at home: Sweden, Norway,
Liberia, Ghana, the Soviet Union and India were targeted. See: United Nations, General
Assembly, 15\textsuperscript{th} Session, Official Records, 905\textsuperscript{th} Plenary Meeting, 14 October 1960.
At the South African national archives, one finds records catalogued under “Racial Discrimination in Other
Countries,” containing reports with information arguably collected for the same reasons. See:
\textit{NASA/BLO/2/1/Vol 2}.
\textsuperscript{83} The final resolution resulted from a draft proposed by Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden,
which added an amendment to the 18-power (Indian) draft. See: \textit{Foreign Relations of the United
and solve the problem.” Many did not rejoice at this expanded competence. The British delegation was particularly annoyed that “the fact-finding commission has now been illegally perpetuated and its terms of reference illegally extended.” In 1954, this irritation only grew stronger when UNCORS requested the Secretariat to share relevant information on race collected by specialized agencies, and asked member states to do the same if they considered that their “own experience in the matter of the elimination of interracial tensions and the gradual removal of discriminatory practices is of value.” At operation here was the idea that the work of the Commission could profit if they assessed the South African case in relation to “the measures which may have been taken by government to alleviate tensions between ethnic groups.” Some delegations refused to comply with the request on legal grounds, but it was British diplomacy that better expressed the serious sense of anxiety associated with this global enquiry on race. The Foreign Office showed concerns that this possible sharing of information could taint ongoing cooperation projects with specialized agencies, especially in the field of technical assistance in the colonial world, where European administrators at times had to share sensitive materials with UN technicians. More importantly, though, the Commission was leading the UN into a dangerous terrain. As the UK Colonial Office saw it, “anti-colonials” were managing to use UNCORS to conduct a “general study of racial policies throughout Africa.” In this view, the Commission was an example of the dodgy anti-colonial “technique of undermining the position of colonial powers by indirect methods rather than frontal attack.” The racial question in South Africa, thus, was consequential to broader debates on the relationships between race and colonialism, and on the possible role of the UN in fighting colonial racism.

As these tensions unravelled between the UK and UNCORS, the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre was working on a report commissioned by the latter in early 1954. Freyre was a renowned social scientist, widely known as the “father” of the field of race relations in Brazil, whose work had been crucial in cementing the idea of that country as a racial paradise. Indeed, although not a participant of

85 Ibid.
86 Letter from UNCORS to the UK Delegation to the UN, 2 March 1954. FO/371/112413.
87 Confidential Letter from Foreign Office to UK Delegation to the UN, 21 June 1954. FO/371/112413.
UNESCO’s pilot project, he contributed to the final publication. His association with UNCORS took place after a resolution requested an expert on race relations to present a positive case based on a context that—although situated in a different geographical location—bore resemblances to the South African situation. Put in charge of the task, Freyre reproduced many of his previous findings. He stressed the distinctiveness of Portuguese colonizing methods in Brazil, while mentioning some present developments in Portuguese Africa. But here he also took his earlier conclusions as comparative frames to understand the South African predicament. He concluded that perhaps the most fundamental problem was the distinction in Iberian and Anglo-Saxon views on the relationship between race and civilization. In the Portuguese case, these two terms were independent, which explained why different racial groups were effortlessly assimilated into (post)colonial societies in the making without compromising an emerging and harmonious national culture. In the South African case, they were inseparable, which resulted in the conviction that non-white groups could not participate in white civilization and nationhood, but needed to be segregated from it. While he admitted that legal action, such as anti-discrimination laws, could be an appropriate step, the most efficient measure to combat racism was to promote cultural and psychological change, including by reformulating school textbooks and affirming the value of non-European cultures (and, as a consequence, of the representatives of these cultures).

Freyre’s recommendations were consistent with UNESCO’s approach to the race question in the mid-1950s. As Gil-Riano has argued, one of the reasons why it was so fundamental to distinguish race from culture was that racial science presupposed the existence of inflexible biological hierarchies and often denied the possibility (or the desirability) of “cultural change,” in particular regarding the capacity of non-European peoples to adhere to modern civilization. Racism was a deterrent both to social mobility in particular societies and to modernization as

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89 See: UNESCO Courier, 8(8-9), August-September, 1952.
90 Resolution III of 23 January 1954.
92 Gil-Riano, Historicizing Anti-Racism, pp. 118-119.
a global imperative, particularly in the underdeveloped Global South. In its early years, UNESCO was invested in fighting both these aspects of the race problem through projects in fundamental education and technical assistance, often in close cooperation with colonial powers. However, as the decade progressed it became increasingly evident that colonial modernization and development could not end the reality of racism and discrimination. In 1955, the Bandung Conference clearly articulated the critical idea that decolonization and anti-racism were conditions of possibility of each other. Interestingly, that gathering only served to reinforce the suspicion that India was carrying out a “vendetta” against South Africa. The conference itself, a South African diplomat remarked, was “entirely an Indian project, framed to give Mr. Nehru an opportunity of putting across his ideas and gaining adherence to his policies.” This prediction was, in Pretoria’s reading, confirmed by Nehru’s pre-conference manoeuvres, including his meeting with two leading anti-apartheid activists, Ismail Ahmed Cachalia and Moses Kotane, both of whom stopped in Delhi on their way to Indonesia, allegedly to inform the Indian Prime Minister of the recent developments in the anti-apartheid struggle.

India’s diplomatic crusade against apartheid resonated in other diplomatic spaces as well, such as UNESCO. This was clear already in 1954, during the 8th General Conference held in Montevideo, when the Indian delegation proposed a motion regretting that race “discrimination in various forms continues to vitiate relations between human being,” despite the commendable steps already taken by UNESCO. The motion then calls member states to adopt “measures calculated to eradicate race prejudices.” Unsurprisingly, the South African delegation was the only one to oppose the resolution, on the grounds that it represented a “deviation from the scientific approach [to which UNESCO was bound] and [was] liable to

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94 The word “vendetta” was used by South African diplomats when rebuffing Indian accusations at the UN. See article “India’s New Step”, *Die Transvaler*, 15 November 1955.


97 “Extract from Speech of Minister of External Affairs (Committee of Supply),” Hansard 5072-5082, 5 May 1955. *Wits Historical Papers, SAIRR Collection, AD 1715.*
lead to action in the political field.” This was the last drop in the five years war that apartheid apologists had waged against that organization and its incursion on the “race question.” UNESCO’s publications and statements on race had for long been under fire due to alleged inaccuracies, as already explained above. But now they were seen, too, as “an incitement of the non-Whites against the Whites,” as Eric Louw told the South African Parliament in 1955. The Indian-led resolution approved at Montevideo was another indication that it was “a futile hope to try and teach these people ‘from inside.’” After all, Louw remarked, UNESCO had sixty-nine member states, of which only twenty-two were “white states.” Just like as in the UN system at large, there was “a stone wall of prejudice” against whites at work there. Later that year, Pretoria formally requested to withdraw from the organization, which took effect one year later, in 1956. According to the Durban-based newspaper Indian Opinion, the withdrawal marked South Africa’s “retreat into moral isolation.” In retrospect, they were right. Pretoria’s unwillingness to cooperate with international organizations or to negotiate any aspect of its policy only served to polarize diplomatic positions on apartheid as the years progressed. The politics of comparison according to which apartheid could be relativized, or normalized, as an unexceptional form of discriminatory rule was rendered wholly unpersuasive.

Conclusion

UNESCO’s efforts to displace racial thinking have failed. Yet, in my view the “race question” as a proposition remains intellectually appealing. Firstly, it casts doubt on the epistemology of race itself, by emphasizing that the ways of knowing what and where race “is” is also part of the political problem of racism. Secondly, it shows that the act of speaking of and landing meaning to something as “racial” is itself part of the social constructivism of race. But the richest lesson

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98 “Union of South Africa,” Letter from Alva Myrdal to Director-General of UNESCO, 12 April 1955. UNESCO Papers, X07.21(68.01).
99 “Extract from Speech of Minister of External Affairs (Committee of Supply),” Hansard 5073-5082, 5 May 1955. Wits Historical Papers, SAIRR Collection, AD 1715.
100 For more on the newspaper Indian opinion, see: Isabel Hofmeyr, Gandhi’s Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
we can draw from UNESCO’s “race question” initiative is that the gesture of naming what is racial and what “is not” is not innocent. And is not the exclusive prerogative of the social scientist either. During the years of decolonization, a wide spectrum of actors intervened on this debate, from colonial officials and freedom fighters to international organizations and diplomats. Perhaps the most pressing issue of this period was to establish to what extent colonial inequality, on the one hand, and struggles for liberation, equality and independence, on the other, were, well, “racial.”

Surely, apartheid was at the very core of these debates, and much has been written about the ways in which diplomatic and political struggles about it shaped our world in important ways.102 In this paper, I wanted to intervene in this debate by looking at how the South African situation dramatized a particular politics of race as unfolding in an emerging Global South. I am interested in challenging the idea of apartheid as an exceptional case by historicizing its conceptual history in the networks of postcolonial diplomacy. Taking on Anne Stoler’s point about the politics of comparison, I am interested on the ways in which racial comparisons shaped imaginations of what apartheid was, as well as prompted certain forms of criticism of it and delimited the scope of possible “solutions” to the problem. The issue of whether or not apartheid was exceptional, thus, is less interesting to me as a question to be addressed by the historian than it is as a particular discursive crystallization about South Africa, whose origins can be found in the very early years of anti-racist advocacy. By showing that the global politics of race in the post-war era was fundamentally comparative in nature, I wanted reposition the history of apartheid in a transnational configuration, and one that had to do not only with the Cold War or the national question, but also with a broader process of reconfiguration of race, both politically and conceptually. By looking at Brazil and India as other important spaces in which the diplomacy of race, colonialism and decolonization unfolded at the same time, I hope to have started to delineate a different cartography of the post-war era.