

Maarten Couttenier, *Anthropology and Race in Belgium and Congo (1839-1922)* (New York: Routledge, 2024, 436 pp., ISBN 9781032591605).

As a child, I lived in the Brussels suburb of Uccle, and my mother occasionally took us shopping on nearby Rue Vanderkindere. At the time, I had no idea that the man the street was named after was Léon Vanderkindere (1842-1906), a prominent pro-Flemish, pro-Germanic anthropologist, polygenist, and Aryanist who argued that race was a determining force shaping history. Reading about him in the midst of a busy semester at the small college where I teach, I was struck by what happened when Vanderkindere was offered a teaching position at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in 1872. Vanderkindere hesitated because the position was in history rather than in his main area of expertise, physical anthropology. Not to worry, a future ULB colleague reassured him: ‘most students did not show up. Those who did were not listening and never took notes’ (119). *Plus ça change...*

But things do actually change, and in his latest book, Maarten Couttenier traces the vagaries of the field of anthropology in nineteenth-century Belgium and shifting ideas about race in the country. Couttenier has researched and written extensively on Belgian anthropology, museums, and colonial collecting, including in the pages of this journal. His latest book contributes to what we know about the history of race, anthropology, and Belgian colonialism, and it advances knowledge about the provenance of human remains removed from Africa to Belgium. It was decades ago now that George W. Stocking pioneered the historical study of anthropology in Britain and the United States with *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (1968). The cultural and imperial turns in history writing led to an outpouring of research into the cultural underpinnings of more recent European overseas empire building. Not as much has been written about the intellectual and academic foundations of Belgian colonialism, which makes sense because the sciences played a negligible role propelling Belgian colonialism, as it largely resulted from a single individual’s initiative, that of King Leopold II (1835-1909). Consider how, by the middle of the nineteenth century, other European nations already boasted geographical societies which laid the groundwork for later colonial conquest, for example the Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin founded in 1828. Belgians did not witness the establishment of their own national group until the founding of the Société Royale Belge de Géographie in 1876, at the time of the Conférence géographique de Bruxelles, a meeting that Leopold II planned and hosted at the Royal Palace.

*Anthropology and Race in Belgium and Congo* traces thinking and debates about race in Belgium from the first half of the 1800s into the post-World War I period. Couttenier brings up and discusses the published and sometimes unpublished claims of dozens of scientists, thinkers, and scholars, offering summaries of their work and their main arguments in capsule form. An example is his discussion of *L'avenir du Congo belge menacé* (1919) by Alexandre Delcommune, an explorer, writer, and colonist who spent two decades in Congo. In just a handful of pages, Couttenier reveals how Delcommune criticized armchair scholars, expressed fears about threats to white authority in Congo, and argued against race mixing despite the fact that he married a Congolese woman with whom he had a daughter. Couttenier's monograph presents dozens of such short assessments of Belgian (and other) students of race, anthropology, the Congo, and history, putting them into conversation with each other. Couttenier has spent inestimable time perusing mountains of texts to write this study, and the resulting work can serve as a reference for anyone seeking more knowledge about specific scientists.

Couttenier makes several major points, one being how contemporary values and cultural norms fundamentally shaped anthropological, historical, and related research in Belgium. Supposedly neutral academics touted the scientific basis of their work without ever abandoning inherited aesthetic values. With few exceptions, researchers and others with pretenses to scientific authority endeavored to make their data fit preconceived notions, albeit unconsciously. Anthropologist Émile Houzé, for instance, was determined to find a representative 'Belgian' skull (142), meaning he used a political entity only defined in the 1830s to determine a category for the collection of data of purportedly empirical osteological research. Another point the book makes is to describe the slow-motion collapse of physical anthropology as a field in Belgium. The Société d'Anthropologie de Bruxelles (SAB), an important institution in the late 1800s, had lost much momentum by the first decade of the twentieth century, in no small part because of the debunking of physical anthropology.

The book also confirms the uselessness of 'race' as a scientific unit of analysis while explaining the persistence of its use among Belgians into the 1900s, including among colonials in Congo. Scientists not only cherry-picked evidence but also reverted to fuzzy categories not grounded in empirical evidence, including the concept of 'race'. An example is Léon Vanderkindere, for whom race was central. As Couttenier puts it, 'Despite the importance of "race" in his argument, Vanderkindere offered no clear definition of the concept' (90). Although even some contemporaries such as historian Henri Pirenne asserted the dubiousness of race, debunked racist ideas found their way into everyday discourse in school textbooks among other means.

As Couttenier explains, physical anthropology's long-running fixation on race led Europeans to collect human remains in Africa and ship them back to Europe; some such remains continue to be held in Belgium. Couttenier

returns again and again to instances when people sent body parts back to Europe for research purposes. 'By 1908, when the Congo Free State became a Belgian colony, the anatomical anthropology collection of the Belgian Congo Museum contained skulls, mandibles, bones, teeth, and even three fetuses in alcohol' (250). One of the book's surprises is how little being a colonial power impacted contemporaneous academic debates in Belgium about race, and how seldom it was that more up-to-date practices and beliefs in Europe influenced the study of race in Congo during the Belgian state rule period after 1908.

Despite the book's strengths, there are weaknesses. The enumeration of individual scientists and other thinkers occasionally leads the analysis to miss the forest for the trees. For example, the back-to-back readings of dozens of thinkers shrouds the fact that Europeans applied racist physical anthropology across the board, both to Africans and Europeans, raising the question as to how racist anthropology was toward Africans specifically. Moreover, Couttenier refers to dozens of acronyms without providing a guide, and the index contains proper names only; no concepts, organizations, or other subjects are indexed. One oddity of the book is the way in which numerous sentences and paragraphs begin with a lower-case letter because they start with a family name that remains uncapitalized, for example that of Jean-Baptiste d'Omalus. The study also contains frequent errors including the recurring use of 'pointed out to' instead of either 'pointed out' or 'pointed to'. Nonetheless, the book is a considerable achievement and will be a significant resource for understanding the sciences, racial thinking, and colonialism in the Belgian case.

Matthew G. Stanard, Berry College