



Mapping race and environment: Geography's entanglements with Aryanism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how theories of Aryanism influenced geographic theories of race and environmental influence. The argument is made that the entanglements between Aryanism and geographic theories of race provide a new site in assessing the history of geographic thought. It begins by illuminating the rise of Aryanism in colonial India. As it moved across time and space, Aryanism became a foundational element in racial science, and informed a number of disciplines, including geography. The majority of the article is devoted to exposing the influence of Aryanism in American geography from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. The paper finds that the influential geographers Arnold Guyot, Nathaniel Shaler, Friedrich Ratzel, Ellen Semple, and Ellsworth Huntington were all indebted to Aryanism in the production of their theories of race and the environment.

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This article will show how theories of Aryanism in colonial India influenced human geography's constructions of race in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its origins in British and German Orientalism, Aryanism posited that the linguistic similarities shared by a wide swath of humanity lay in a proto-Indo-European language that traveled across Eurasia with human migrations. Aryanism's initial emphasis on language shifted into a theory of race in the mid-nineteenth century and found favor with colonial bureaucrats, anti-colonial Indian nationalists, and natural scientists. Arguing that a superior race of people known as Aryans conquered Europe, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent, Aryanism helped fuel the rise of racial science across fields of knowledge. Geography proved to be no exception. In this discipline, Aryanism permeated theories of environmentalism, which identified a range of physical geographic features, such as landforms and climate, in order to explain racial and cultural superiority, ascendancy, and

decline.

Critical assessments of geography have exposed its development through the expansive projects of race that include slavery, American manifest destiny, and colonialism.¹ Yet within this vast literature the specific entanglements between Aryanism and geography's environmentalism remain underexplored. I, therefore, show how the prominent geographers Arnold Guyot (1807–1884), Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904), Nathaniel Shaler (1841–1906), Ellen Semple (1863–1932), and Ellsworth Huntington (1876–1946) used the Aryan idea in their environmentalist understandings of race. These geographers have received much attention. They are often regarded as formative for the discipline's establishment in the United States, and their environmentalist theories relied on a variety of racial ideologies. I argue that their statements on India, however fleeting within their corpus, provide an important lens for interpreting how

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¹ D. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition*, Malden, 1993; A. Kobayashi and L. Peake, Unnatural discourse. 'Race' and gender in geography, *Gender, Place and Culture: a Journal of Feminist Geography* 1 (1994) 225–243; D. Livingstone, Climate's moral economy: science, race and place in post-Darwinian British and American geography, in: A. Godlewska and N. Smith (Eds), *Geography and Empire*, Malden, 1994, 132–154; D. Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment and Culture in Historical Perspective*, Oxford, 1996; A. Kobayashi, Critical 'race' approaches to cultural geography, in: J. Duncan, N.C. Johnson, and R.H. Schein (Eds), *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, Malden, 2004, 238–249; K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Minneapolis, 2006; A. Nayak, Geography, race, and emotions: social and cultural intersections, *Social and Cultural Geography* 12 (2011) 548–562; M. Mahtani, Toxic geographies: absences in critical race thought and practice in social and cultural geography, *Social and Cultural Geography* 15 (2014) 359–367.

Aryanism helped shape the discipline.

By examining Aryanism in environmentalism, this article begins the process of reorienting the loose canon, understood as both texts and concepts, that has comprised the discipline of geography.² While my account of the history of the discipline does not unearth new archival sources, I bring together new histories focusing on colonial knowledge production and the work of Orientalists who developed Aryanism to read anew these geographers' published writings on race in India. These texts constitute an archive by containing the racial classifications that formed the basis of colonial power. This archive is, of course, partial. It is limited to sources in English, and English translations. Future scholarship on the links between Aryanism and geography will require turning to original language sources and private papers about Aryanism and Indology. In addition, the need remains for further research that explores the entanglements between geography and Aryanism that had different disciplinary articulations in its various national settings. The present study is confined to establishing that Aryanism traveled across continents and disciplines and found its way into geographic theories of environmentalism.

My analysis therefore exposes a new discourse that informed geographic constructions of race, namely, Indology. Aryanism's interaction with geography reveals how the discipline was shaped by Orientalist knowledge, from philology to racial classification. I argue that attending to Aryanism's influence on geographers' writings reveals the intricate and expansive role of colonial ideologies that traveled across national contexts and helped shape American geography. While British geographers developed and deployed colonial classifications of race in India, my focus on Aryanism in American geography enlarges the context in which the discipline's history is cast.

To better understand how Aryanism made its way into American geography, we must first examine Aryanism's colonial genealogy and geography. The first section provides an account of the development of Aryanism as it shifted from a category of language to one of blood and traversed colonial networks that wove together Britain, Germany, India, and the United States. I then turn to the aforementioned geographers, who, writing in the mid nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, advanced explanations of racial, cultural, and civilizational variations through the forces of physical geography. Environmentalist explanations of race and civilization, of course, existed well before the rise of racial science and Aryanism. Glacken's comprehensive analysis of environmentalism showed its modifications in relation to other theories of culture dating back to Mesopotamia and ancient Greece.³ In addition, environmentalism found validation in interpretations of the Bible in which God granted Europeans geographical and cultural superiority.⁴ By the nineteenth century, this Eurocentric vision appealed to science and today, it remains embedded in popular and scholarly forms of 'neo-environmental determinism'.⁵ The geographers discussed in this article developed their theories of environmentalism in these discourses, but also engaged with Aryan idea.

Genealogies and geographies of Aryanism

Thomas Metcalf observed that the Aryan idea 'joined England and India in a compelling discourse at once of history and of science'.⁶ Following Metcalf's point, I will now chart the rise of this discourse from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. As Aryanism dispersed from its origins in philology, or comparative linguistics, to race science, it also came to span the multiple spaces of empire, from colonial India to New Zealand.⁷ Aryanism's passage across geographical and disciplinary boundaries led to its use by American geographers.

Aryanism's emergence as a category of language

The East India Company's ascendancy accelerated when it gained Diwani status, or the right of revenue collection, from the defeated Shah Alam II in 1765. With these profits from the regions of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, the Company funded Indian scholarship in hopes of resting their tenuous legitimacy on the stable ground of India's political and cultural past. The Company held translations and interpretations of Sanskrit and Persian texts, via *pandits* and *uluma* (both terms for learned men or scholars), to be vital in securing their expanding control over India.⁸ Indeed, Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of Fort William (Calcutta), promoted Company officials who studied Indian languages.⁹ It was in this context that the concept of Aryanism emerged.

In the Asiatic Researches of 1786, Bengal High Court Justice William Jones posited a vanished proto-Indo-European language that united Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Celtic, Gothic, and Persian.¹⁰ Sanskrit, Jones speculated, must have first appeared in India's distant past by invaders, 'conquerors from other kingdoms in some very remote age', who subjugated the subcontinent's indigenous inhabitants.¹¹ Two decades later, the German orientalist Friedrich and August Schlegel and the latter's student, Franz Bopp, conducted comparative studies and advanced a monogenetic theory that suggested these related languages shared a single origin.¹² Friedrich Schlegel's work in particular transformed Jones' emphasis on linguistic similarities into racial affinities.¹³ In Schlegel's aftermath, Aryan, meaning 'noble' or 'pure' in Sanskrit, became the designation for a distinct race.¹⁴

In his pioneering work in Sanskrit studies, Friedrich Max Müller asserted that there was a 'time when the ancestors of the Celts, the Germans, the Slavonians, the Greeks, and Italians, the Persians and Hindus were living together within the same fences'.¹⁵ Müller theorized that Aryan migrations consisted of two groups, one bound for Europe, the other headed towards India and Iran. As Aryans conquered and civilized the spaces they migrated across, their encounters with indigenous inhabitants and the natural

⁶ Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge, 1997, 81.

⁷ T. Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, Basingstoke, 2002.

⁸ M. Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company*, Chicago, 2008.

⁹ M. Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, Ithaca, 1989.

¹⁰ L. Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, New York, 1974, 190.

¹¹ W. Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, London, 1807, 34.

¹² R. Thapar, The theory of Aryan race and India: history and politics, *Social Scientist* (1996) 3–29.

¹³ Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*; J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, London, 1997; B. Ashcroft, Language and race, *Social Identities* 7 (2001) 311–28.

¹⁴ B. Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London, 2009.

¹⁵ M. Müller, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, London, 1859, 14.

² I. M. Keighren, C. Abrahamsson, and V. della Dora, On canonical geographies, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2 (2012) 296–312; R. Johnston and J.D. Sidaway, Have the human geographical can(n)ons fallen silent; or were they never primed?, *Journal of Historical Geography* 49 (2015) 49–60.

³ C.J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1973.

⁴ J.M. Blaut, Environmentalism and Eurocentrism, *Geographical Review* 89 (1999) 391–408.

⁵ A. Sluyter, Neo-environmental determinism, intellectual damage control, and nature/society science, *Antipode* 5 (2003) 813–817.

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