

ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

The Elusive History of the Pan-African Congress, 1919–27

by *Jake Hodder* 

There's something peculiar about the Pan-African Congress.¹ While its political and symbolic importance is well recognized in historical accounts, the details of its meetings – even their most basic facts (when, where, what, why, who) – are inconsistent or unclear. The Stanford historian James T. Campbell, for example, puts the First Pan-African Congress as meeting for three days in the 'elegant surroundings of Paris's Palais de Justice', rather than the Grand Hôtel where it did convene.² A number of texts misplace or misdate the conference sessions, which met in Paris in 1919; London, Brussels and Paris in 1921; London and Lisbon in 1923; and New York City in 1927. The three-volume *Pan-African Chronology* places the Second Pan-African Congress in London and Paris, without mention of its main session in Brussels. Yet, in another entry thirteen pages earlier, Brussels is listed but the dates of the London meeting have changed.³ Even so careful a writer as Harold Isaacs reported that the Third Pan-African Congress was held in Lisbon in 1925, overlooking its London session and placing the event two years later than when it was held.⁴ This error is understandable, given that the movement's own figurehead W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), in his bestselling autobiography, notes that his Third Pan-African Congress was held in Paris, where it never did convene.⁵

These inconsistencies might seem unimportant. They are extreme examples: some are typographical errors, and differences in when or where or who met at an individual event are trivial in comparison to the broader accounts of global black activism offered in much of this work. In historical scholarship, the Pan-African Congress is often understood in the wider context of race conferences held in the first half of the twentieth century, including the Pan-African Conference of 1900, the Universal Races Congress of 1911, and the Fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945 (each of which Du Bois also attended).⁶ It is understandable that, for brevity, historians might collapse these rather different political events together. Conferences are often used as plot devices; markers for broader trends to stand out over precise details. Indeed, the locations of many conferences have become practically shorthand for the wider historical moments they represent; one need only think of Locarno, Bandung, Bretton Woods or Versailles.

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My argument, however, is that these mistakes do matter. They matter, not because they suggest a disregard for historical accuracy, but because they reveal precisely the opposite: collectively, they offer us a strikingly *accurate* picture of the Pan-African Congress. From its very inception, the exact details of its meetings were often unclear. The conferences were organized on shoestring budgets, meeting plans put together at short notice were prone to frequent change and, in the press, supporters and detractors alike selectively presented its sessions in ways which obscured their improvisational nature. Scholars tasked with reconstructing these events do so therefore from a curiously untrustworthy historical record. For the past five years, I have been retracing the interwar Pan-African Congress movement, piecing it together from the papers of prominent and lesser known attendees, visiting the locations of its meetings and analysing the over 550 news reports published in the American, European and African press. Even after these efforts, establishing precisely who attended each session, what they discussed and, in the case of the Lisbon meeting in 1923, whether a ‘congress’ ever happened at all, has proved stubbornly elusive.

This work has been one part of a project supported by an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant on the development of internationalism after the First World War.⁷ The purpose has been to consider how these conferences refashioned black political claims in response to the emergence of new forms of international governance in the 1920s. Doing so has required critical dissection of the international conference itself as a political instrument, and closer attention to how the method of conferencing was used to validate particular kinds of political claims over others. In what follows, I use the Pan-African Congress to encourage a broader methodological reflection on how historians approach seemingly unreliable sources. I argue that by addressing errors like those above we can see how they themselves are important artefacts of the complex political manoeuvres engaged in by race reformers in the aftermath of the First World War. Discrepancies in accounts of the Congress are an invitation to consider the significance of both the impromptu nature of the events and the staged enactments of authority which conferencing entailed. Organizers used the conference method to package racial equality within a formal diplomatic framework which appealed to the postwar ideals of enlightened international governance, all the while having to do so from a position of relative marginality.⁸

The paper begins by laying out how the practice of conferencing became central to international politics in the 1920s and how this offered new opportunities for non-state actors. Following this, it considers three key elements of conferencing in turn: delegates, venues and resolutions. In each case I show how the organizers of the Pan-African Congresses mobilized the performative dimensions of conferencing in an attempt to establish its delegates as the legitimate representatives of the people of Africa and African descent in international organizations and events. In each case, however, I also show how organizers worked within tightly constrained circumstances which

required them to be strategically ambiguous with some aspects of its meetings. This ambiguity continues today to shape our understanding of what we think the Pan-African Congress was, where and when we think it happened, and why we think it mattered. Lingering on the source of these ambiguities allows us to better understand the promise and failure of international governance on the race question in the 1920s. But it also invites us to reconsider the role of errors in historical work. This paper argues that placing errors at the centre of our analysis allows us to question how political authority was circumscribed in the past, whilst also recognizing the ingenuity and resourcefulness on the part of those marginalized by it.

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF CONFERENCING

The significance of the interwar Pan-African Congress movement is widely recognized, to a great extent through its nominal association with the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester at the end of the Second World War. One recent edited collection observes that the meetings held between 1919 and 1945 were ‘the most important crucibles for training and mobilizing many of the future leaders of post-colonial Africa’.⁹ While this may be partly true of the 1945 Manchester Congress, which has obtained almost mythical status for its role in spurring liberation movements, it is demonstrably untrue for earlier meetings which had limited African representation. As the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (1942–80) remarked in 1974, ‘the objective of most Pan-African Congresses [before 1945] was not to establish any institutions but simply to prevail upon the colonizing powers to be more responsible, more humane, more interested’.¹⁰ In reality, the meetings between 1919 and 1927 shared little direct connection to its earlier or later namesakes, in their organization or their politics.¹¹ Rayford Logan (1897–1982), one of the organizers of the interwar Congresses, later speculated that these meetings bore little if any influence on post-1945 independence movements. Instead, he suggested, they reflected the unique political circumstances in which delegates met in the 1920s.¹²

Chief among these circumstances was the development of a new international system after the First World War, exemplified by the creation of the League of Nations in 1920.¹³ The League’s arrival was welcomed with a remarkable degree of optimism by many marginalized groups, in ways which are frequently overlooked. Not least, because black activists’ faith in liberal internationalism diminished sharply as the interwar years progressed, bottoming out in the Abyssinian crisis in 1935. Du Bois and fellow Congress organizers, however, were part of a cohort of race reformers in the early 1920s who fervently believed that the League of Nations had a decisive role to play in securing racial equality, both in international affairs and in the domestic realm.¹⁴ While many different internationalist projects gained prominence in the wake of the First World War, the League had a remarkably diverse political appeal in the early postwar years. As Daniel Laqua has shown, for example, figures across the non-communist Left championed

many key tenets of liberal internationalism. Progressives, reformers and socialists alike embraced the ideal of a League of Nations, which was viewed as wholly accordant with a more equitable and racially inclusive international order, even if they became increasingly frustrated with its execution.¹⁵

The League's creation was a predominantly Anglo-American affair, but the United States never ratified the Treaty of Versailles and therefore never joined the League. Nonetheless, Du Bois told readers in 1923, African Americans 'must not be deceived by the propaganda in American papers concerning the "failure" of the League of Nations. The League is still the most hopeful international movement in the world'.¹⁶ Du Bois argued that no other organization had done more to rise above racial discrimination. The League welcomed Haiti and Liberia as founding members, Ethiopia joined in 1923, and in Africa, through the League's establishment of international mandates and conventions against slavery and forced labour, 'Versailles has come to mean probably the most far-reaching modern event' for African peoples, wrote Mabel Janet Byrd (1895–1958) in 1928.¹⁷

While the emergence of modern international governance offered new mechanisms to pursue racial equality, both legally and informally, it was through the practice of conferencing that these opportunities were most effectively harnessed. As Stephen Legg has argued, the League of Nations acted as a model 'not just through *what* it did, but also *how* it did it'.¹⁸ The League was designed as a permanent system of conferences; its home in Geneva was a revolving door of representatives and experts who were called on periodically by the League's various committees. Between 1920 and 1926, 459 meetings were held under the auspices of the League, which addressed issues from public health and trafficking to the rules and procedures of international conferences themselves. Through the practice of periodic conferencing, the League evolved during the 1920s from a political institution created essentially to prevent war into 'a great administrative agency'. In the process, a precedent was established for conferences to be viewed as the accredited mechanism for the conduct of modern international affairs.¹⁹ In the years following the First World War the scale and frequency of international conferences grew remarkably. This phenomenon was widely noted by contemporary commentators. In his 1929 book on the subject, the international relations scholar Frederick Dunn wrote that the 'rapidity with which the conference method has come to the forefront in the conduct of international intercourse is one of the most striking developments in the present era'. Dunn, and others, argued that conferencing had matured from an ancient, sporadic tool used in exceptional circumstances (for instance the formulation of peace treaties), into a near constant apparatus of governance.²⁰

Race reformers, like many non-state groups, were quick to recognize the opportunity which conferencing offered to attain unprecedented visibility and influence in political affairs. When the First Pan-African Congress convened in Paris in 1919, the city was awash with advocacy groups seeking to

influence proceedings at the Peace Conference, including labour, peace and women's associations. With the creation of the League of Nations these groups achieved continuing public access. The Covenant of the League was largely silent on how the organization should engage with non-state groups, which turned out to be particularly advantageous to their participation.

As Thomas Davies notes, more so-called International Non-Governmental Organizations were founded in 1919 than in any previous year, and over the course of the 1920s twice as many were founded as in the entire nineteenth century. The centre of their activity shifted to Geneva where many groups relocated or established special branches. These groups adeptly grasped the procedures of the League and were at their most effective when they articulated demands through the framework of periodic conferencing. It is notable that most non-state organizations themselves emerged from conferences and went on to organize such events in their own right, holding over two thousand conferences between 1919 and 1932.²¹

To understand the importance of conferencing in this period is key to understanding the nature of source material on the Pan-African Congress. Whilst the Congress was characteristic of this particular context, in significant ways it remained a fringe player. Similar reformist movements of the period, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, were emblematic of a new generation of non-state groups which rose to prominence in the 1920s and which were characterized by a substantial membership base, strong financial resources and well-developed organizational structures. All of these characteristics remained elusive for the Pan-African Congress. Its biggest financial supporter, the US based National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), fearing that expensive overseas ventures diverted vital funds from the struggle at home, was always lukewarm on the project, and committed to ending support by 1921. Meanwhile attempts to develop a stable institutional structure, in the form of the Paris-based Pan-African Association, failed at the outset.²²

The chief challenge for the Pan-African Congress was that it lacked any official diplomatic capacity, even when judged against comparable non-state groups. For example, in 1919 President Woodrow Wilson received a deputation from the International Council of Women and women's delegations were permitted on some intergovernmental commissions at the Peace Conference. Likewise, the League collaborated closely with many non-state organizations which held a significant influence over the direction and delivery of its programmes. Conversely, the Pan-African Congress was viewed with indifference in Geneva and outright hostility elsewhere. Passports were denied for both US and UK delegates wishing to attend, the meetings were carefully surveilled and the press coverage was, at times, unapologetically damning.²³ So although the Congress sought to represent the interests of Africans and those of African descent in a state-like role, it

did so with no such status. Whilst the new international system was ostensibly open to a more diverse range of voices, in practice key decision-making power remained firmly with the so-called ‘Great Powers’ and only those representatives they deemed appropriate.

These circumstances explain the ambiguity which continues to shape our understanding of the movement. In the wake of the First World War race reformers faced a stark predicament. On the one hand they believed, like many other reformers of the period, that the new international system offered the most expedient route to achieving their goals. It bypassed ambivalent national and imperial governments and offered an unprecedented degree of participatory privilege to non-state actors. Yet on the other hand, it demanded a level of state recognition, organizational capacity and financial resources which many race reformers ultimately lacked. Conferencing presented a means to resolve this problem. It packaged the pursuit of racial equality in terms which were immediately recognizable to international organizations, it projected legitimacy on the world stage and most importantly, if carefully managed, it could achieve recognition on a shoestring budget. We might think of this, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, as a kind of ‘institutional mimicry’ where the realization of the Congress’ political ambitions rested on its ability to imitate the outward workings of formal, state-led diplomacy.²⁴ For those on the political margins, who had been systematically denied state representation both nationally and internationally, the very practice of conferencing constituted a powerful performative gesture and political claim, most notably challenging prominent racist ideas as to the varying ‘capacity’ of different groups for self-government. The remainder of this paper considers three key conferencing devices in turn: delegates, venues, and resolutions. In each case, I show how the Congress organizers strategically mobilized the framework of conferencing: the meetings were attended by leading political and intellectual figures; met in prestigious venues in major world cities; and adopted resolutions which were widely celebrated as models of statesmanship, including being personally presented to the League of Nations in Geneva. All the while, its limited resources required organizers to be skilfully evasive with some of the details of its meetings.

DELEGATES

The need to secure as much ‘official recognition from the Government as may be possible’ was the guiding principle in everything the conference organizers did.²⁵ The clearest example of this was in the lists of prestigious conference delegates, which included diplomats, politicians, lawyers, army officers, businesspeople, and the like. They were exemplary members of Du Bois’s ‘talented tenth’; educated black leaders in their fields who would spearhead the charge for racial uplift.²⁶ The respectability of delegates was a significant feature in virtually every news report and first-hand account. The press noted that they were ‘an imposing gathering of men and women’ all of whom ‘stood out for diplomacy, for scholarship and for intelligence’.²⁷

Delegates were, as the official report of the Second Pan-African Congress noted, the ‘intellectual efflorescence of the Negro race’.²⁸

In particular, those who held positions of public office were singled out for attention. The First Pan-African Congress included three black members of the French parliament, as well attendees from the French Colonial Office, American Peace Commission and Belgian Peace Commission.²⁹ The Congress hosted a dinner and reception in the honour of two delegates – Charles King, Foreign Minister and later President of Liberia, and Tertullien Guilbaud, Minister of Haiti in France – who were both official state representatives at the Paris Peace Conference.³⁰ The following meetings in 1921 continued and expanded this trend, with the report of the Congress citing that ‘officialdom was well represented’ throughout.³¹ It is notable that the chairman of the Congress, Blaise Diagne (1872–1934), was also the first black African elected to the French Chamber of Deputies, and the first to hold a position in the French government. The press noted that his opening remarks ‘were jewels of statesmanship’ and his participation opened significant doors within the French government up to, and including, discussions with the Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau.³² Even as the participation of state officials waned in the Third and Fourth Pan-African Congresses, the participation of colonial ministers and diplomats remained a dominant feature in reports.

Du Bois argued that the diplomatic credentials and statesmanlike temperament of delegates led to the 1921 Congress being ‘unofficially recognized’ by many state powers.³³ That attendance lists were arranged by national representation reinforced the impression that delegates came to the meetings as state representatives. In 1921, at the organization’s peak, the list of 110 Congress delegates in *The Crisis* (the NAACP magazine, founded and edited by Du Bois), was organized in order of the thirty-two countries they ‘represented’, and depicted alongside a world map. The delegate numbers were small beside the more than two thousand visitors who attended the sessions to see such an impressive line-up of speakers.³⁴ The early stipulation that delegates must act as official representatives of ‘race organizations’ further reinforced the impression that delegates held a legitimate mandate, if not a strictly state-accredited one. The *New York Times* reported that virtually ‘all the organizations interested in the welfare of African races’ were represented.³⁵

These points did little, however, to distract critics from the reality that ‘most of those in attendance, including Du Bois himself, possessed no constituencies or substantial political power’.³⁶ Du Bois had carefully curated the delegates, asking organizers to ‘secure eminent and well-known speakers’ who represented science, politics and colonial administration.³⁷ The elite make-up of delegates was a repeated target of mockery by more radical Pan-Africanists, most notably Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), whose Universal Negro Improvement Association offered the other great competing vision of Pan-Africanism in the early 1920s. Garvey’s mouthpiece, *Negro*

World, chastised the Congress for being a ‘select gathering of personally invited and self-appointed’ delegates which had been compiled akin to ‘an exclusive university function, to an assembly dance or a pink tea affair’. This staged performance of respectability, it noted of Du Bois, might ‘get him in the best hotels’ but does not make him a legitimate representative of black voices.³⁸ Similarly George Schuyler (1895–1977), who was to be a long-standing critic of the movement, in 1925 described the Congress as ‘merely a group of hand-picked delegates selected and invited by Dr. Du Bois; mostly job holders under imperialist governments, tourists, white liberals and such’.³⁹

An examination of the delegate lists paints a more nuanced picture. Few of those in attendance travelled specifically for the Congress. Organizers were adept at compiling delegate lists in an impromptu fashion, taking advantage of those on the continent for other reasons with an eye to producing as respectable, official and internationally diverse a group as possible. For example, the papers of social reformer Florence Kelley (1859–1932) show that she went to the Congress having recently attended the Third International Congress of Women in Vienna, organized by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.⁴⁰ In fact, the Pan-African Congress sessions were filled by people who were local contacts of pre-existing reform groups who played a key role in organizing the events. These groups included, for example, the Anti-Slavery and Aboriginal Protection Society whose papers in Oxford offer revealing insights into how the events were put together.⁴¹ Even the Congress chairman, Blaise Diagne, came to consider the meetings as little more than a congress of African Americans who were ‘passing thru Europe’.⁴²

In the press, articles moved ambiguously between reporting on those ‘in attendance’ (for which numbers ranged from hundreds to thousands) and those attending as ‘a delegate’. The latter came as official representatives of a ‘race organisation’, often made speeches and had the power to vote on resolutions.⁴³ The stipulation that delegates should be affiliated with a ‘race organization’ (a requirement which was later dropped), belied the fact that virtually anything counted as such; and the slippage between delegates and attendees made it difficult for contemporary readers to distinguish those who held an active role in the movement from those whose presence was more incidental. The latter often included prominent names whose participation organizers were keen to remark, including figures such as H. G. Wells or Harold Laski.

The presentation of delegates as ‘representatives’ of various countries was also a point of repeated concern. As one news report noted, attendees held ‘no official status whatsoever ... They are not in any sense “delegates” and have no such standing’.⁴⁴ This concern was shared even by those involved in organizing the events. Upon reading the report of the Third Pan-African Congress, Ida Gibbs Hunt (1862–1957) wrote to Du Bois that she was confused by his misleading presentation of herself and fellow Congress

committee member Rayford Logan as French representatives. Following heated disagreements between French and American delegates at the Second Pan-African Congress over the former's reluctance to criticize colonialism, French participants had actively refused to participate in the Third Congress. Gibbs Hunt and Logan were both long-time African American residents in France who, as she wrote to Du Bois, 'went independently and paid our own expenses. We represented no one but ourselves'.⁴⁵ These issues are indicative of the unreliability of source materials relating to the movement. Both supporters and critics alike sought to overemphasize the breadth and calibre of delegates, whilst underplaying the more improvised circumstances under which they met. A similar pattern can be found in the geography of the meetings.

VENUES

As with delegates, the choice of conference venues was an important way to demonstrate the movement's legitimacy. In Paris in 1919 the Congress sat in the opulent Grand Hôtel. At the same time, many of the city's largest hotels had been booked for official delegations attending the Paris Peace Conference. In 1921 in London they met in Westminster's Methodist Central Hall, a stone's throw from Parliament. Central Hall was one of London's newest and grandest conference venues which organizers chose for its ability to 'lend dignity and a solid air of respectability' to proceedings.⁴⁶ In Brussels, invited to meet in the equally grand Palais Mondial in the Cinquantenaire Park, organizers 'could not have asked for a better setting' (see Fig. 1).⁴⁷ Other venues were more modest. The Paris session in 1921 took place in the Salle des Ingénieurs in 'little Rue Blanche', and the meetings in 1923 were held in the Council Chamber of Denison House near Victoria Station in London.⁴⁸ In New York, the Congress met in a number of prominent Harlem churches, including the large Abyssinian Baptist Church on 138th Street led by Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and later his son, the Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. As members in the 1920s later recalled, it 'was the church of the classes . . . the doctors and lawyers and all those people'.⁴⁹

Crucially, all these venues offered liminal spaces which were close to sites of political power but had no official state function themselves.⁵⁰ That the First Pan-African Congress met not in the Palais de Justice but the Grand Hôtel is significant: the former indicates official state affairs whereas the latter, elegant as it still is, does not. Du Bois's request to hold the Paris session of the 1921 Congress in a public building, like the Hôtel de Ville or one of the parliament buildings, was flatly refused on the grounds of these being reserved for state business.⁵¹ The congenial Palais Mondial, where the main session of the Congress in Brussels was held, offered a 'semi-official' backdrop for proceedings.⁵² As the biographer of Du Bois notes, in Brussels the Congress came closest to his aspirations for the project: the prominent Belgian internationalist Paul Otlet, co-founder of the 'World Palace', pulled



Fig. 1. Second Pan-African Congress, at the Palais Mondial in Brussels in September 1921. Collection Mundaneum, Archives Center, French Community of Wallonia-Brussels, Belgium.

out all the stops for the event and welcomed delegates at a lavish reception in the fifteenth-century Hôtel de Ville.⁵³

In short, the locations of the meetings were not incidental. Key accounts of the Congress, such as Jessie Fauset's report for *The Crisis* magazine in 1921, read like travelogues. Fauset evocatively reported how the Congress toured Europe's grand, imperial capitals. She told readers how they met first in the shadow of Westminster Abbey, then: 'Down to Dover we flew, up the English Channel to Ostend, and thence to Brussels', where the centuries old buildings and public squares 'recalled the splendour and dignity of other days'. In Paris, they were met with 'its glow and its lights and its indefinable attraction!' and later they arrived in Geneva, where the 'city struck us dumb at first with its beauty'.⁵⁴ In the 1920s the rapid growth in conferencing was materially reshaping European cities. By virtue of their size and connections, large imperial centres like London or Paris developed as key nodes within an emergent circuitry of conferencing, whilst smaller self-proclaimed international cities like Brussels or Geneva became almost wholly synonymous with international organizations and the conferences through which they functioned. This distinctive geography was reflected in the dense hospitality infrastructure which Congress delegates utilized: an industry of new venues, hotels, bars, and restaurants.⁵⁵

For the Congress organizers, these venues denoted a seriousness of cause and drew strength from their proximity to centres of political power, both imperial and international. Yet the effect on conference proceedings was more mixed. The prominent location of the meetings offered visibility, but it also inhibited debate. It is no coincidence that it was in Belgium, where organizers came closest to official recognition of their project, that delegates' freedom of expression was most tightly policed, resulting in 'three days

pleasant generalities without a word of criticism of Colonial Governments'.⁵⁶ Courting state recognition undermined the possibility of genuine critique. For critics, the Congress 'junket to England, Belgium and "Gay Paree"'⁵⁷ exemplified how Du Bois and others had been lured by 'the empty glamor and glory of ambassadorial splendour'.⁵⁸

As with the case of Congress delegates, however, a closer look at the venues reveals a more complex story. The Congress convened in small rooms of outwardly prestigious venues, or cheaply (sometimes freely) available space in prominent cities. While the prestige of London's Central Hall was asserted repeatedly in reports, the room in which the delegates met was not described. As the rental agreement reveals, the small Committee Room D was hired at a modest cost of £8. 8s (c. £250 today).⁵⁹ The receipt for the following London meeting, in 1923, shows that even less was paid. That this venue had been booked less than a month before the Congress sat captures the improvisational nature of the meetings.⁶⁰

In reality the choice of venues was more opportunistic than accounts suggest. Most were organized by existing, local groups who chose venues with which they already had a standing relationship. Senator Henri La Fontaine and Paul Otlet offered the Palais Mondial, which also included the Otlet's Union of International Associations, in order to enhance the venue's reputation as a leading site for interwar internationalism.⁶¹ In Denison House, the Congress met in the Council chamber immediately after the annual meeting of the African Progress Union who also organized the Congress.⁶² And in New York, the churches reflected the networks of the local organizers – an energetic group of women called the Circle of Peace and Foreign Relations. The selective presentation of these venues, by supporters and critics alike, points toward the performative nature of conferencing which can be clearly discerned in the drafting and adoption of the Congress resolutions.

RESOLUTIONS

At each Pan-African Congress a series of wide-ranging resolutions were adopted. On one hand, these resolutions were models of statesmanship which were widely celebrated for their tone, temper and moderation. Du Bois won the 1920 Spingarn Medal, an annual award by the NAACP for outstanding achievement by an African American, in recognition of his part in drafting the 'wise and statesmanlike code of laws' laid down by the Congress.⁶³ Yet on the other hand, as critics were quick to attest, the delegates lacked 'the slightest power to put a single suggestion of these resolutions to practical effect'.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the demands made at the close of each Congress were comparable to those made by many progressive and reformist movements of the period. They called for more equitable development terms for Africans through restrictions on exploitative labour practices; tighter state regulation of private concessions; recognition of indigenous ownership claims; and modern systems of education, medical care and public

hygiene. In the political realm they called for African participation in government 'as fast as their development permits' (1st Congress), for limited 'self-government, for backward groups, deliberately rising as experience and knowledge grow' (2nd Congress) and for Africans to have 'a voice' in their own government (3rd and 4th Congresses). These sat alongside parallel demands, written with one eye on the United States, which called for deeper political inclusion through the 'recognition of civilized men as civilized despite their race'.⁶⁵

These resolutions, laced with paternalistic overtones, were designed to maintain a sharp distinction between 'primitive' indigenous Africans, on the one hand, and more-enlightened Congress delegates, on the other.⁶⁶ Unlike later Pan-African Congresses, the resolutions reflected a nineteenth-century tradition which viewed African liberation as a liberal humanitarian or philanthropic concern, rather than a political imperative.⁶⁷ They also reflected the political persuasions of the delegates, many of whom had a vested interest in advocating gradual reform within the existing political system. As such, the resolutions fuelled criticisms of the Congress, at the time and since, that they were essentially elite, bourgeois gatherings. However, as Weisser argues in the case of international legal documents, one of the most important misconceptions is to assume these resolutions are meant to be read and analysed for their meaning; rather, 'the document matters because it is the legitimization of the practice of negotiation itself'. The resolutions are what we might consider in Latourian terms as important actors or vehicles of discourse which pertain to broader regimes of knowledge.⁶⁸ It is striking, for example, that across the four very different Congresses, the content of the resolutions remained similar and, in some cases, identical. To understand the significance of the resolutions therefore requires not only a literal analysis of their content, but an interrogation of the broader performative and legitimizing functions which they served. While it is common to judge the Pan-African Congress on the realization (or not) of its resolutions, to do so risks missing these broader historical and discursive points. The conferences were designed, first and foremost, as public events and the resolutions aimed to shape public opinion through press coverage and publicity, as much as to achieve their stated goals.

The resolutions were carefully crafted and were the product of long, and at times heated, debate. One organizer later recalled that it was of utmost importance that the Congress resolutions were deemed to be 'realistic': independence was not part of the political equation in the 1920s for any group which sought to be taken seriously by state powers.⁶⁹ Instead, organizations like the League of Nations offered immediate opportunities for racial equality if they could be held accountable to their founding promise. Here, tone was everything. The League of Nations stressed to the organizers that the resolutions needed to be 'of the right character' if they were to be brought before them in Geneva.⁷⁰ They were continuously redrafted by committees in public and private, so that while 'the spirit of the resolutions remained, the

letter was greatly reshaped'.⁷¹ Fauset recalled how by the end of their week in Geneva, 'by dint of interviewing, of copying, of translating, of recopying', they were finally in a position to present to the League.⁷²

The outcome of these redrafts was a series of demands which mapped onto the Covenant of the League of Nations in their politics and tone. The invocation of 'civilized world' and 'backward groups' in the Pan-African Congress resolutions mirrored language in Article 22 of the Covenant which declared a 'sacred trust of civilization' for those 'peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world'.⁷³ Indeed, the resolutions of the First Pan-African Congress directly quote from the Covenant. Moreover, the resolutions made demands of the League of Nations explicitly, including for international protection of indigenous Africans, a new international institute for the study of race issues, and the appointment of a black representative ('properly fitted in character') to the League's Mandates Commission. When these demands were taken to Geneva in 1921, they were expressed in terms which were adeptly cognizant of the League's limited jurisdiction. In areas where the League of Nations had direct power, they called for immediate change, whereas in other areas, such as black political rights in the United States, they called for the League to deploy its 'vast moral power of public world opinion'.⁷⁴

The resolutions were, therefore, key to the broader role which the process of conferencing served. They welded black political aspirations into terms adjusted to the new system of international governance which had emerged after the First World War. As Fauset noted, 'It was especially arresting to notice that the Pan-African Congress and the Assembly of the League of Nations differed not a whit in essential methods'.⁷⁵ The adoption of resolutions legitimized the delegates as semi-official, state-like representatives. In a world where political participation was starkly demarcated by racial hierarchies, drafting resolutions which struck the right tone was a powerful performative gesture. Such resolutions by their mere existence upturned common racist tropes and demonstrated the capacity for self-government. They had the performative effect, therefore, of distilling what were increasingly ad hoc conference events into a cohesive and long-lasting political narrative. Even if the delegates' adoption of the resolutions bound 'nobody but themselves', they were widely circulated in the press and they have continued to be circulated within historical literature.⁷⁶ As in the case of the delegates and venues, then, the resolutions too reveal how the act of conferencing was a powerful political statement, which worked by exposing the racial fault lines of international politics of the 1920s.

CONCLUSION

In historical accounts, conferences often meet one of two fates. They are venerated as landmark events, celebrated by plaques and centenaries. Or they are dismissed as failures, often criticized as theatrical flourishes with no real outcomes. (Climate change summits offer a recent example.)⁷⁷ Yet

understanding the historical significance of conferences is rarely so straightforward. This paper has offered a critical history of conferencing, an approach which places individual events within the longer historical development of the international conference as a political instrument. To do so foregrounds the performative enactments of authority and legitimacy which so often gave conferencing its unique appeal.

As I have shown here, such an approach to a topic like the Pan-African Congress permits new historical interpretations. In this particular case, a critical history of conferencing requires us to avoid, or at least better contextualize, the narrative which the Congress organizers sought to promote through first-hand accounts. Take, for example, Du Bois's report of the Lisbon conference session in 1924. Characteristically, he tells of the beautiful hall in which the Congress sat; the audience of black physicians, lawyers, engineers, and merchants; as well as the attendance of current and former Portuguese Colonial Ministers. Although he recognized that it was not as large as previous meetings it was, he contended, 'more harmonious and more hopeful in spirit'.⁷⁸ Writing from the Portuguese perspective, however, Eduardo dos Santos claims that no 'congress' took place. He argues that the event described was little more than Du Bois visiting a meeting of Liga Africana on his way to Liberia.⁷⁹ According to Du Bois's biographer, David Levering Lewis, the Lisbon affair 'hardly qualified even as a rump assembly of pan-Africanists'.⁸⁰ The archive reveals that, despite resources having dried up by 1923 as a result of the NAACP's decision to suspend its funding of 'foreign enterprises', there were strong feelings that the credibility of the Congress demanded continuity of its biennial conferences. Just as conferencing had the power to refute racist stereotypes, organizers feared that the failure to maintain continuity would reinforce them.⁸¹ Writing to Lisbon beforehand, Du Bois noted that the 'conference' could simply involve him visiting a meeting of Liga Africana in a way that would 'entail no expense and practically no preparation'.⁸² Discrepancies like these reveal how the practice of conferencing itself was put to work by Du Bois and others. Their motivations for doing so, as I've argued above, reflect how the international system devised after the First World War offered new opportunities for race reformers to pursue their political programme. The conference emerged as the key instrument of this system in the 1920s and thereby offered an important entry route to participation. The organizers of the Pan-African Congress capitalized on these opportunities, even if limited resources required them to be strategically ambiguous as to some of the details of its meetings.

The tragedy of the movement, however, is clearer to see. The Pan-African Congress pegged its hopes to an international system which was itself fragile and struggling for state recognition. At the start of the 1920s, race reformers trusted the League of Nations to give rise to a new age of enlightened global governance, yet its inclusive language masked a new permanent reality of racial hierarchy, preserving what Paul Gilroy calls the 'raciological ordering

of the world'.⁸³ By the late 1920s even its keenest advocates were revising their position and, instead, some of the most powerful anti-colonial voices of the period emerged from outside the corridors of liberal internationalism. These included the Communist International (Comintern), founded in 1919, and the various movements it supported, such as the League Against Imperialism (1926) and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (1928). From its inception, the Comintern placed the race question at the heart of its programme by explicitly equating colonial emancipation with the emancipation of the working class. As one of the only international organizations of the period based on an explicitly anti-racist platform, communist internationalism offered solace to those disillusioned with the League, whilst others set their sights on race struggles closer to home and distanced themselves from the international scene.⁸⁴ It is telling that by the time of the Fourth Pan-African Congress in 1927, all references to the League of Nations had been removed from its resolutions.

Du Bois's biographers often reflect on the remarkable sense he had of the significance of his own historical legacy. He avidly self-archived, and arranged for the institutional deposit of his papers, amounting to over 100,000 items. In other words, as a classically trained historian Du Bois had a keen sense of how to historicize his own life and work, and the Pan-African Congress is one part of this. Du Bois knew more than most how quickly the specifics of the conferences would fall away, even as the events themselves would endure and grow in the historical imagination. As Sarah Dunstan has argued, Du Bois was careful to relay back to audiences at home a view of the Congress which obscured its actual nature, and this was especially true by 1923 when much of the optimism and financing of the immediate postwar years had dried up, demanding an ever greater gulf between reality and reportage.⁸⁵ 2021 marks the centenary of the Congress's most significant meeting in London, Brussels and Paris, and it offers us an opportunity to retrace its significance and its legacies. Such an undertaking requires a closer interrogation of how figures from across the political spectrum embraced liberal internationalism in the wake of the First World War. The international system devised in Paris, however flawed, nonetheless provided those on the political margins with new spaces, means and vocabularies to challenge racial hierarchies and hold colonial powers to account.

The inconsistencies in accounts of the Congress are not a scholarly failure, then, but an invitation to approach conventional histories with a more cautious eye. This paper has sought to reconfigure how we understand the Pan-African Congress by offering an explanation as to why such errors persist in the historical literature. Still more, however, it argues that these discrepancies offer a lens to open up our historical understandings. In the case of the Pan-African Congress, what is most interesting is the uncertainty which surrounds some of the basic facts of where and when it met. Taking these errors seriously allows us to engage with the historical record in ways which reject the tendency toward boosterism or dismissal. Instead, these

inconsistencies foreground the methodological challenges that recovering an event like the Pan-African Congress poses, where mistakes in historical reporting are not tangential or post-hoc error, but at the very core of what the Congress was and how it worked.

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