



Date: March 31, 2021
To: WWU Legacy Review Task Force
From: Michael Reidy, Professor of History, Montana State University
Re: Huxley College of the Environment

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to convey my thoughts on T. H. Huxley as part of your review of the role of race in his life and work. You have asked me three groups of questions in particular:

- What role did Huxley's beliefs on race occupy in his intellectual works, his public statements, and his life as a whole? Were they remarkable in the context of the time and place in which he lived?
- Did Huxley's scientific work contribute, either in support or opposition, to the development of scientific racism and Social Darwinism, both during his lifetime and after? What portion of his total work did these contributions occupy, and how significant are those contributions in supporting or refuting the ideology of scientific racism?
- What harmful institutional practices, policies, or general practical consequences, if any, can be specifically traced to Huxley's views?

These are difficult questions, of course, made even more so by the changing definition of the concept of race itself. Prior to the eighteenth century, Europeans rarely defined race primarily in terms of physical appearance as much as they did in terms of cultural attainment, such as religious belief, customs, mode of dress, use of technology, and the like. The Enlightenment project to classify the living and nonliving world into groups, and then placing those groupings within hierarchies, also extended to humans, often focusing on physical features. The basis of modern-day racist thinking has its roots in this Enlightenment project. In the nineteenth century, a full-blown scientific racism developed, where specific biological and anatomical features determined a hierarchy of value. Huxley participated in the process to make race a biological characteristic, something that could be studied through anatomy. The concept of race is changing again today with a focus on genomics and DNA ancestry testing. It will continue to change in the future. Decisions on how to categorize people, and why, are always ideological and based on broader cultural assumptions; they also always have political and social consequences.

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In *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, Huxley extended Darwin's theory of evolution to humans, using a similar argument as Darwin had used for plants and animals in the first chapter of his *Origin*. Darwin had to break down clear distinctions between species, well-marked varieties, varieties, lesser varieties, and individual differences, in order to show that a continuum existed. A well-marked variety could then be designated an "incipient species." Huxley argued a similar point in *Man's Place in Nature*, highlighting the slight gradations between apes and humans. Primarily he compared and contrasted different apes with "man" (not different types of humans), to show the anatomical similarities. In the end, however, his most persuasive argument (what he thought most demonstrated a continuum or gradual gradation) was that a greater difference existed among different "races of man" than existed between "the lowest Man and the highest Ape." By "lowest Man" Huxley meant what he thought of as "primitive" man or "savages," and he often used aboriginal Australians as his example, a culture he had encountered during his voyage on HMS *Rattlesnake*. In the last chapter of *Man's Place in Nature*, for instance, he compared the recently discovered Neanderthal skull with the modern skull of an "Australian." The further jump, directly relating these physical attributes with specific behavioral traits, such as intelligence, is less pronounced in Huxley's work, than say Darwin's or Wallace's, but it is implicit and sometimes explicit. In essence, this is the definition of scientific racism: basing differences between races on biology, and then drawing out a hierarchy of value from those differences and linking them to mental and moral characteristics. Huxley participated in this mode of thinking.

Where does this scientific racism fit into Huxley's intellectual work more generally? Prior to Darwin's *Origin*, Huxley had already established himself as a first-rate comparative morphologist, focusing specifically on floating gelatinous marine life, stemming from his voyage on the *Rattlesnake* in the late 1840s. He extended that work throughout the 1850s to detailed anatomical and physiological studies, to broader questions of the geographical distribution of plants and animals, and to the study of paleontology. He also began to lecture publically at different venues, including the London Institution, the Royal Institution, and the Working Men's College. And, to make a living, he published extensively in periodicals. The publication of Darwin's (and Wallace's) theory gave Huxley's work more focus. He defended their theory in print, he linked his own research to it, and he focused his public lectures on subjects surrounding it. He became a staunch defender of evolutionary theory and science more generally, including its education and its influence in society. This led him to focus heavily on the importance of broader access to scientific education, specifically for women and the working classes. Huxley was an early evolutionist, but more importantly, he was a scientist intent on advancing the role and authority of science within broader culture. His work on "races of man" was only a part of this larger, lifelong focus.

Huxley was a public intellectual in his middle and later years, a sought after voice, someone who editors paid to write and people eagerly read. His writings were primarily geared toward defending evolutionary theory against its critics, especially its religious critics, which

occupied much of his intellectual work. As he grew in fame, so did the breadth of the topics on which he lectured and published. Much of that work was “remarkable” in the sense that people did remark on it, especially his discussion of what he termed “agnosticism” and his defense of an evolutionary naturalist worldview. They were not remarkable in the sense that most scientists believed in hierarchies within the human races, split them according to geography and biology, and then placed value on them based on their level of civilization within a ladder of progress. When Huxley did explicitly discuss race, it was often in the context of opposing the institution of slavery. He acknowledged that we would never completely escape the law of evolution based on competition and self-interest; we would never escape our base instincts. This is what worried Victorian intellectuals the most, and why many were against actions that lowered humans to the status of beasts, acts as different as slavery and vivisection, where the act itself, though harmful to the slaves and animals, was even more harmful to the dignity of humans. He also entered the monogenism-polygenism debate. It was the height of stupidity, Huxley thought, to conceive of different races as separate species, but he did view different races as having been molded by evolution through time. Thus, though he was a monogenist, his thoughts on race made room for polygenist arguments and those who would use supposedly innate differences between races in defense of slavery, against miscegenation, and ultimately, to undermine freedom for specific groups of people. His views on human evolution were also viewed as rational and forceful arguments against oppression of all types, as was his work as a successful educational reformer.

His relationship to Social Darwinism is a bit more complicated. Like many Social Darwinists, he viewed “savages” in competition with more civilized races in a natural struggle for existence. Huxley belongs within the tradition of the Enlightenment with its unabashed confidence in the heightened progress of European society. This ideological underpinning links Huxley directly to the views of Darwin, Wallace, Spencer and others. Huxley was informed by, at the same time that he informed, a European imperial worldview. In his later years, however, he often found himself in opposition to Spencer and other staunch Social Darwinists. Though Huxley always equated the advancement of civilization with progress, the process of evolution itself was free of any inherent correctness or moral righteousness. Humanity’s standards of right and wrong could not be justified by reference to the natural process of evolution, as Spencer and other Social Darwinists of the nineteenth century increasingly argued. For Huxley, our intellectual capacity, so highly evolved compared to the rest of creation, had made the struggle for existence irrelevant to the conduct of life. Our ethics must revolt against nature. We should direct our attention, Huxley believed, “not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive.”

This then leads to the question of what institutional practices and policies can be specifically traced to Huxley’s views. Again, a difficult question. We have to come to terms with the fact that biology, as it was formulated in the mid-nineteenth century, is implicated in producing classification systems and ideologies that we now view as racist. Huxley was a major force in these developments, because he was a major force in the advance of biology as a

discipline. While it is much easier to focus on specific achievements Huxley made in scientific pedagogy, in terms of incorporating the laboratory into the teaching of biology for instance, or in his insistence on broadening access to education, or in terms of his staunch defense of a naturalistic worldview, it is much more difficult to point to his views on race, racial science, and Social Darwinism as it directly changed specific institutional practices. Human diversity was one of the major challenges in the natural historical sciences at that time. His placing of humans into different categories of race is difficult to disentangle from the broadly held views of progress and entrenched views of colonialism, where humans were placed on a hierarchical ladder from “savage” and “primitive” to “enlightened” and “civilized.” The way this was done in the nineteenth century was ideologically loaded.

Huxley was committed to such an ideology, one that we now consider racist. It is not possible to disentangle such an ideology from the oppression of certain populations, as it was happening then or how it has occurred since, nor do I think it possible to point to a specific person as ultimately responsible. I think you can point to biology, and how it was formulated in the mid nineteenth century, as extremely important. You certainly can’t characterize Huxley’s work as in “opposition” to scientific racism or “refuting” the ideology of scientific racism. His scientific work contributed to scientific racism during his lifetime and after. But, his views on race were part of a much broader defense of evolutionary theory and scientific naturalism more generally. His work was used by monogenists and polygenists both to defend slavery and to promote abolition. It was used to suppress groups and to support equality. It was used to define different “races of man” and to bring us all together as a species. What strikes me as most salient about Huxley’s position is that we cannot and should not rely on biology to determine our ethical decisions and how we treat different groups. We can strive to understand science, and we should use its history, to construct our own views of how to act rightly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "MS Reidy". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with a large, sweeping flourish under the "y".

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