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April 2, 2021

Dear President,

This is in response to your letter of April 12, 2021 seeking insights on 'T.H. Huxley and race,' and in connection with a possible name change of the Huxley College of the Environment. I understand your concerns and am happy to answer the points you raise. For the purpose of clarity, I repeat your bullet points and add relevant commentary, to the best of my expertise.

- 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?

Huxley's most influential and best remembered work is *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863). The book went through many editions and translations. Darwin, in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), had not dealt with the highly contentious issue of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, but Huxley showed youthful daring by tackling the issue. In the process, however, he made racism an essential component of the Darwinian theory of human evolution, interpreting races as reflecting different levels of evolutionary development, from taxonomically low (aboriginal 'savages') to high (white Europeans). More particularly, he formulated what became known as 'Huxley's Law' or 'Huxley's Rule,' which stated that the distance in biological, evolutionary development between the highest and lowest humans is greater than the distance between the lowest humans and the highest apes (chimpanzee, gorilla), thus degrading native peoples across the British Empire.

One could argue that Huxley's racism was unremarkable, in the sense that he simply was a man of his time and that many scientists, especially those who promoted the theory of evolution,

were racists. This, however, would do no justice to the facts. There were evolutionary biologists/scientists, among whom such eminent figures as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Alexander von Humboldt and Richard Owen, who were anti-racists (Stephen Jay Gould, in the second edition of his *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996) falsely charges Blumenbach with scientific racism). A special mention should go to Friedrich Tiedemann, the most brilliant and explicitly anti-racist physical anthropologist of the early nineteenth century. *Man's Place in Nature* and 'Huxley's Rule' were the outcome of Huxley's participation in the so-called 'hippocampus controversy,' one of the most sensational public fights ever staged at successive meetings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1860, 1861, 1862). It pitched Huxley against Owen who held that the differences between human races are minor or negligible in comparison to those between humans of any variety and the apes. Huxley countered by animalizing 'savages' and, using skull evidence, asserting their greater biological proximity to the apes than to the English.

- Did Huxley's scientific work contribute, either in support of, 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?

Huxley's work, in particular his *Man's Place in Nature*, influenced a generation of physical anthropologists and evolutionary biologists. Two great names of Huxley followers/imitators stand out, Carl Vogt and Ernst Haeckel, each as nationally and internationally influential as Huxley himself. Vogt, in his *Vorlesungen über den Menschen, seine Stellung in der Schöpfung und in der Geschichte der Erde* (1863) (Lectures on Man's Place in Nature and in Earth History) extended Huxley's Rule from skulls to brains, using the brain of the great mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss as the highest, and the brain of the 'Hottentot' (Khoikhoi) woman Saartje Baartman as the lowest, bracketing her with chimp and gorilla, while Haeckel, in his *Natürliche*

*Schöpfungsgeschichte* (1868) (Natural History of Creation) and *Anthropogenie* (1874) reformulated and scurrilously graphically illustrated Huxley's scientific racism.

Moreover, Huxley contributed to the popularity and spread of Social Darwinism, not least in the context of the X Club, a group of eminent, liberal, Darwinian scientists at the Athenaeum Club, which included John Lubbock, the later Lord Avebury, (in)famous for his *Pre-Historic Times* (1865) and its deeply racist ethnography of 'modern savages'. Largely led by Huxley, the Club became known for rolling back the cultural authority of church and clergy while promoting eugenicist thought in science and society (although Huxley, in his old-age Romanes Lecture 'Evolution and Ethics' (1893), somewhat retreated from his earlier 'Darwin's bulldog' stance). Among those who came under the membership's influence was Madison Grant, famous for his friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, his leadership role in the Boone and Crockett Club and his support for nature conservation; Grant also was instrumental in the founding of the Bronx Zoo. Infamous, however, have become his Social Darwinism and eugenicist politics/policies as well as his authorship of *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), a book that influenced Hitler in developing his Aryan supremacism.

- What harmful institutional practices, policies, or general practical consequences, if any, can be specifically traced to Huxley's views?

Among the harmful institutional practices are educational display practices in museums of natural history and zoos. I am not enough of an expert to answer the question about direct, specific links, but I do feel confident in saying that Huxley, as well as Grant, contributed to a climate of scientific legitimacy that facilitated the staging of animalizing museum and zoo enactments of so-called savages. Perhaps the most infamous instance took place in 1906, at the Bronx Zoo, under Grant's watch, when a Mbuti (Congo pygmy) man, was displayed in the enclosure for apes and monkeys. I would have no hesitation in placing on the cover of a brochure or book on 'Huxley's Rule,' in illustration of its scientific racism, the distressing picture

of Ota Benga in the Monkey House of the Bronx Zoo.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/06/nyregion/thecity/06zoo.html>>.

Let me end by reflecting that Huxley was an eminent scientist and that the Huxley family has attained great social prestige in English society; yet the stain of scientific racism as promoted by the family patriarch is indelible. For many years, the name T.H. Huxley has stood for the advancement of modern science. In that context, Huxley deservedly has been an inspiration to many. However, given our current concern with issues of racial diversity and equity, Huxley no longer can serve as an inspiring role model, if only because he was a foundational figure in scientific racism to whom native peoples in the colonies were little more than part of the fauna.

I should like to add a *caveat*. Creationists have tried to use the scientific racism and its social consequences as formulated and carried out by Huxley and other Darwinians to discredit evolution theory. I do not mean to contribute to this. As alluded to above, evolution theory need not be racist and can go hand in hand with anti-racist anthropology.

All good wishes,

Nicolaas Rupke.

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Some relevant literature:

Nicolaas Rupke, 'The origins of scientific racism and Huxley's Rule', in Nicolaas Rupke and Gerhard Lauer (eds), *Johann Friedrich Blumenbach: Race and Natural History, 1750-1850*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 233-247. A copy is attached.

See also Nicolaas Rupke, 'Cerebral Constructs,' chapters 5, 6, 7 in *Richard Owen: Victorian Naturalist*. London and New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1994; revised paperback edn: *Richard Owen: Biology without Darwin*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. I shall be happy to provide further documentation, if needed.