

Creationists and advocates of social justice unite to take down T.H. Huxley, a leader in educational inclusion

WWU's Huxley College of the Environment may be renamed after a bizarre report uncritically plagiarising far-right creationist & conspiracist materials gets Thomas Henry Huxley exactly backwards on racism

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Text:

Western Washington University's [Huxley College of the Environment](#) was founded in 1969, the year of the Santa Barbara oil spill, when the Cuyahoga River caught on fire, and when Earth Day was proposed. It is now one of the oldest and most prestigious environmental colleges in the country. It was named for Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), famed not only as "Darwin's Bulldog" after the 1859 publication of the *Origin of Species*, but also for his remarkable career, rising from a family too poor to pay for school to becoming a leading anatomist (proposing the kinship of humans with the great apes, and birds with dinosaurs), geologist, ethnologist, and philosopher (coiner of the word "agnostic," foe of Social Darwinism). Above all he was a leading figure in making science a profession (rather than a hobby for priests and the landed gentry), and making a liberal science education available to all.

Despite accomplishing more than most could ever dream for science and public science education, Huxley is now in the dock at WWU. The main charge is racism, with many at WWU calling for Huxley College to be renamed. WWU's president commissioned a [Legacy Review Task Force](#) which issued a [Report](#) making the rather elliptical claim that Huxley's "ethnological accomplishments were grounded in white supremacist values that dehumanize and harm many members of the Western community." More directly, the Report indicts him for advocating polygenism (the idea that different human races are separate species) and "many negative generalizations on the basis of race." Another charge was that Huxley's "Huxley's claims about the inexhaustibility of fisheries has contributed to the decline of the salmon runs that are central to Coast Salish cultures."

Are the accusations correct? A large debate could be had about the substantial difficulties of fully understanding the views of historical figures, let alone judging them. But clearly universities should not ignore major relevant evidence, nor rely on badly biased and one-sided presentations of the evidence.

The idea that Huxley claimed salmon stocks were inexhaustible – which gets Huxley's actual view exactly backwards – stems from a [2009 Institute for Creation Research article](#). The false idea that Huxley was a polygenist traces to an [article](#) from the conspiracist [Lyndon LaRouche organization](#); the citation is present in the Task Force's [notes](#), but the LaRouche citation was

dropped from the Report, while the outrageous claim was kept. The notes and Report also cite [anti-Huxley material](#) from a [Fellow of the Discovery Institute](#), the infamous Seattle home of “intelligent design” creationism, also known for advocating [climate denialism](#), [Covid denialism](#), and [anti-critical race theory hysteria](#). The other major source the Task Force relies on is historian Nicholaas Rupke, himself a former young-earth creationist, and now a lonely apostle for Richard Owen (1804-1892), Huxley’s bitter scientific rival, who tried to keep a place for divine intervention in evolution. The Task Force essentially ignored the positive [evaluations](#) of Huxley provided by three other historians that WWU commissioned.

But what about the racism accusation? While admitting Huxley’s anti-slavery position, the Task Force says that “opposition to slavery and belief in the basic humanity of people of African descent was not uncommon, exceptional, or, in the context of Huxley’s many negative generalizations on the basis of race, laudable.” The cited “negative generalizations” come entirely from Huxley’s 1865 essay “[Emancipation—Black and White](#),” which has some cringeworthy passages, although made while endorsing “equal natural rights” of Black people and arguing to “give women the same civil and political rights as men,” some 53 years before British women attained the vote.

Huxley’s anti-racist activities

Creationists have [quote-mined this essay for decades](#), shorn of context, to portray Huxley as racist. The Legacy Review Task Force does the same. But relying on a single source for Huxley’s views is hazardous. Huxley’s style was “[vigorously paradoxical](#)” and he loved to use hyperbole and superficial self-contradiction to make his points, which were often about separating factual claims from value claims. In addition, his public statements on race were actively evolving in the 1860s. A proper historical review would at least consider the major episodes. Three important episodes give a much clearer view on where Huxley stood on race: his battle with the leading scientific racist of the day, [James Hunt](#); his participation in the [Jamaica Committee](#); and Huxley’s [1867](#) Birmingham lectures on race.

T.H. Huxley vs. James Hunt

According to historian [Douglas Lorimer](#), in 1863, James Hunt broke away from the older Ethnological Society of London to form the Anthropological Society, in part so that Hunt could promote “the racist speculations of Robert Knox.” Knox was “the outstanding British advocate of...revived polygenesis and of the place of race in determining man's past [...Knox's 1850] *The Races of Man*, [was] the fullest statement of his racist theory.” The Anthropological Society received donations from a Confederate agent who “apparently viewed the Society as a useful outlet for pro-Southern propaganda, for he included his donations to the anthropologists in his Secret Service Accounts for the Richmond Government.” Hunt “became the leading British exponent of scientific racism in the 1860s.”

But Huxley was a leading critic of Hunt. Lorimer says, “Huxley severely criticized Hunt for his paper, ‘On the Negro's Place in Nature’”. (Hunt’s title was a dig at Huxley’s 1863 book *Man’s Place in Nature*, which apparently offended Hunt with its monogenism and lack of racist vitriol. Hunt’s paper was largely an collection of quotes of older authorities “[carefully](#) select[ing] authorities to represent the most negative scientific expressions of racial evaluation available.”) According to Lorimer, Huxley “ridiculed, in particular, the comparison between the Negro and the ape. In Huxley’s view, Hunt’s study of the Negro was ‘the most remarkable result of a modification of anatomical structure I had ever heard of. And the faculty for evolving nonsense displayed by its author....I forbear to characterize, because the

only appropriate phraseology would not be for me to utter or for you to hear.” Huxley worried the Anthropological Society could do “a good deal of harm if it went wrong,” and advised colleagues to avoid “the quacks who are at the head of the ‘Anthropological Society’.” Huxley was “thoroughly disgusted” with the split-off Anthropological Society, and he resigned his membership, calling the Society a “nest of imposters.” Hunt, for his part, accused Huxley of “negromania” and printed in 1868 that Huxley was “[our most deadly, and sometimes even our most bitter, foe.](#)” After Hunt died in 1869, Huxley and others in 1871 engineered a merger of the Ethnological and Anthropological societies into the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, fulfilling Hunt’s earlier worry that Huxley would “[crush us.](#)” In 1873, some of Hunt’s followers again split off so they could “study the laws of race”, forming the London Anthropological Society, which only lasted for two years. Those who condemn Huxley as a racist should consider what history of science and evolutionary biology would have looked like if someone of Huxley’s talents and prestige had promoted the views of James Hunt, instead of opposing them.

Huxley on the Jamaica Committee

Huxley not only opposed Britain’s leading scientific racist, he engaged in political activism. In late 1865, in the wake of the Civil War, the British colonial governor of Jamaica, Edward Eyre, killed hundreds of Black protestors who were marching for justice, land reform, and enfranchisement. A massive multiyear controversy broke out in Britain over the carnage. But the government refused to prosecute Eyre, so the Jamaica Committee, led by philosopher, parliamentarian, Radical, and feminist John Stuart Mill, decided to privately prosecute Eyre for murder. Mill was joined by Huxley, himself a Radical, along with most other prominent evolutionists, including Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Lyell, and Herbert Spencer, and about 800 others. It would take rose-coloured glasses to pretend that the Jamaica Committee’s actions were popular. The Eyre Defense Fund was supported by [many leading lights](#) of British society, including Thomas Carlyle (who was Huxley’s own scientific mentor), Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, John Tyndall, 40 generals, 26 admirals, 400 clergy and 6 bishops, 71 peers and 20 MPs, and 30,000 others.

The link between being an evolutionist and having progressive views on race was noticed by [racists of the day](#), for example when the *Pall Mall Gazette* said, “It would be curious also to know how far Sir Charles Lyell’s and Mr. Huxley’s peculiar views on the development of species have influenced them in bestowing on the negro that sympathetic recognition which they are willing to extend even to the ape as ‘a man and a brother’.” James Hunt, for his part, wrote that “[ignorant, prejudiced Stupid](#) and bigoted Humbugs of the Jamaica Committee who were hunting to the gallows...the brave Heroic Man who had saved Jamaica”, and Governor Eyre was explored as a replacement for Hunt when he resigned as leader of the Anthropological Society. In 1867, Hunt gave a particularly nasty address to his Society, targeting Huxley [yet again](#):

Even scientific men were sometimes afflicted with the disorder [of negromania]. He heard, only on passing through London, that a very eminent anatomist had had another attack, and actually gone and joined the Jamaica committee (laughter). This was Professor Huxley; and it was said that he intended to propose that they should prosecute M. du Chaillu for shooting gorillas (laughter).

Huxley’s 1867 Birmingham speech

It is true that early in these debates, Huxley sometimes disclaimed support for egalitarianism, although as we have seen above, he had a longstanding [rhetorical strategy](#) of separating claimed facts and values. However, his statements seem to shift later in the 1860s, probably because of a combination of his continuing anatomical and evolutionary work, his battles with James Hunt, and the changing political context after slavery was outlawed and radicals moved to obtaining the vote for disenfranchised groups like American Blacks or British working-class Whites (battles fought and won in 1867-1868). In October 1867, Huxley gave a lecture to the Birmingham and Midland Institute. This was a region populated by his people, [working class](#) artisans who were not granted the vote until 1868 (for men) and 1918 (women); they saw [common cause with nonwhites](#) in the colonies who were also being oppressed by the British ruling classes. In the [lecture](#), Huxley strongly denied polygenism, noting that all races could interbreed successfully, saying, “no sound argument had been brought forward on the side of the distinct origination of the modifications of mankind.” He also denied the idea that any extant races were intermediate with apes, stating “there was no shade of justification for the assertion that any existing modification of mankind now known was to be considered as an intermediate form between man and the animals next below him in the scale of the fauna of the world.” He also states clearly that all existing races (Huxley prefers the word “[modifications](#)”) are closer to each other than any are to the recently-discovered Neanderthal, which itself is vastly more similar to modern humans than it is to apes. This explodes the WWU Legacy Review Task Force’s claim, stemming from Rupke, that there was a “Huxley’s Rule” stating that Africans were intermediate between whites and apes.

In this lecture, Huxley even challenged the very idea that “so-called higher” and “lower” races were meaningful categories. Undermining the idea that Africans are closer to apes, Huxley notes that “beyond everything”, human hair varies across the races, “[b]ut the apes were all straight-haired, like the respectable assemblage in that lecture theatre, and in that respect the white people were a great deal more like the lower animals than the negro was.”

Huxley also pillories Hunt’s absurd claim that Black people had projecting heels, a common enough topic for Huxley that [Thomas Wentworth Higginson](#), an American militant abolitionist who helped arm John Brown’s slave rebellion and who led the Union’s first Black regiment through 2 years of combat duty, specifically [wrote Huxley](#) in June 1867 to confirm that his soldiers wore the same boots as White soldiers. And anyway, says Huxley in his lecture, if the absurd claim were true, it would be more evidence that Whites were more apelike, as apes have short heels.

Turning to cultural attributes, Huxley points out how the technology and organization of societies is historically and culturally contingent, rather than some innate feature of races, noting that the Romans thought Britons and Germans were barbarians, but now these were technological leaders, and the Roman Empire was gone. He concludes by denying that “any of those differences observed among mankind were such as to justify the higher races in dealing with the lower differently from the manner in which the higher races thought themselves justified in dealing with each other.” By an [1870](#) lecture on geographic distribution of humans, Huxley abandons the usage of the terms “race,” “higher”, and “lower” (despite these terms still being utterly conventional at the time); by [1878](#) he emphasizes “social conditions which exercise an enormous influence” on the economic and political status of races. (Huxley is here commenting on Irish – Celts – towards whom there was a [tremendous amount of racism in the Victorian era](#); Huxley opposed this consistently,

again fighting James Hunt, [writing](#) “the arguments about the differences between Anglo-Saxons and Celts are a mere sham and delusion.”)

Radicals and Race in 1865

We have seen the dangers in considering Huxley’s 1865 essay in isolation from Huxley’s other anti-racist activities. Yet another danger is ignoring historical context. To search for context, we have to consider the political issues of the day; because Huxley was staunchly antislavery and a political Radical, we should look to other antislavery Radicals. The U.S. Civil War was ending in 1865, and the Radicals were striving to solidify the Union’s victory with lawmaking achievements. Huxley’s 1865 statements should be compared to the 1865 comments of Thaddeus Stevens, the U.S. Congressman and Radical Republican. As surprising as it might be to modern readers, in the 1860s the Republicans were the “left-wing” party, insofar as modern categories are meaningful in the 1800s, and the Radical Republicans were [the most extreme](#), championing not just the abolition of slavery (13th Amendment) but, after Lincoln’s assassination, giving Black people equal rights and the vote (the 14th and 15th Amendments), impeaching Democrat Andrew Johnson (who opposed all of these measures), and leading the Radical Reconstruction, which included military occupation of the South, suppression of the KKK, the election of hundreds of Black state legislators, and redistribution of land confiscated from secessionists to Black people.

Thaddeus Stevens was one of the leaders of the Radical Republicans. For his efforts, he was hated by racist Southerners for generations, for example when pilloried as Austin Stoneman in the infamous 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which inspired the second rise of the KKK. Given all of this, we might expect Stevens, of anyone, to have views acceptable to modern ears. But what did Stevens actually say in 1865? [He said](#) “I never held to that doctrine of negro equality...not equality in all things -- simply before the laws, nothing else.” Another historian [calls this](#) “part of a concerted radical strategy during this period to avoid inflammatory questions about racial equality” in order to accomplish the most important goal, passage of amendments and legislation. (The episode was dramatized, perhaps [overly so](#), in [a famous Tommy Lee Jones scene](#) in the 2012 Spielberg movie *Lincoln*.)

Judging historical figures is therefore not so simple as mining historical material for sentence fragments that sound bad to modern ears, and evaluating them as if they were 2020s posts on Twitter. Returning to Huxley, several points deserve consideration. Huxley loved to use hyperbole and apparent self-contradiction and to make his points; his style was once described as “[vigorously paradoxical](#).” Throughout his career Huxley made a point to distinguish claims about facts from claims about values. In [1854](#), Huxley wrote something more “offensive” (out of context) than anything he said in 1865: “Grant that the negro is a distinct species, or even a metamorphosed orang...” However, Huxley never actually believed either of these positions; his point was that it didn’t matter for the ethical argument. He went on to say “the most complete demonstration of the specific diversity of the types of mankind [i.e. polygenism, the racist position that different human races are different species] will nowise constrain science to spread her ægis over their [slaveholders’] atrocities,” and “Ethnology had better perish as a science than be swamped” by Southern sympathizers arguing for polygenism to support slavery.

Thirty-nine years later, in his famous 1893 essay [Evolution and Ethics](#), Huxley, a strong an evolutionist as any, affirmed that humans were subject to Darwin’s process of natural selection. But he departed radically from the “social Darwinism” and eugenics which were increasingly popular in the late 1800s, writing, “what we call godness or virtue – involves a

course of conduct which, in all respects, is *opposed* to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence... the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in *combating* it.” (emphasis added) Again and again, Huxley makes his ethical points by saying that, even if his opponents’ claimed facts are admitted, they do not support the value judgments made. Modern readers are, of course, free to disagree with Huxley’s rhetorical strategy, but they should at least acknowledge that it exists.

Other errors

All of the above information is easily accessible with a little scholarly due diligence, and these episodes are referenced in the [online Huxley File](#); yet none of it appears in the Task Force Report, despite nearly a year of controversy at WWU. While this shockingly poor form for an official report that is supposed to provide authoritative guidance for university decision making, it is perhaps not surprising, considering that the makeup of the Task Force failed to include any evolutionary biologists or historians of evolution.

Other Task Force errors flow from the lack of scientific input. Misunderstandings of the relevant science and history are rife. For example, the Task Force Report attempted to make the [accurate statement](#) that in humans, within-group genetic variance exceeds between-group variance, but the Report text actually states the opposite. The Report says that “Genetic scientists have since disproved the notions of a ‘Black gene’ or ‘White gene’ and have disproven the idea that intragroup difference exceeds intergroup difference— establishing that race is a social, not biological, system.” But the word “gene” was not coined until the early 1900s, and Huxley died in 1895. “Gene” was not part of the conceptual framework of Huxley or any other evolutionists in the 1800s, who had to work with vaguer notions of heredity. The concept of a “Black gene” and “White gene” therefore could not have even been raised in the 1800s, and in fact was probably never a view held by any scientist. In fact, part of the difficulty in accurately understanding Victorian-era comments on “race” is that cultural and biological inheritance [were very blurred in this era](#). After all, Darwin and others believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics through use and disuse, and this opens up the possibility that cultural change could rapidly cause biological change. Taking the primarily 20th-century concept of “race” as genetic categorization and uncritically reading it back into Victorian discussions of race commits the historian’s fallacy of anachronism.

Finally, the Task Force sidetracks into an irrelevant attack on Julian Huxley, grandson of T.H. Huxley (along with Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*). Julian was invited to speak at Huxley College (he declined due to advanced age). The Report notes Julian’s eugenics advocacy, but makes the absurd claim that this “suggests that the racist pseudoscience of ‘better breeding’ was seen as a legitimate aspect of [T.H.] Huxley’s legacy even after eugenics had been widely critiqued as unethical and potentially genocidal.” This is made up out of whole cloth. Julian Huxley was a famous zoologist and popular science writer in his own right, one of the leaders of the “Modern Synthesis” in twentieth-century evolutionary biology. Julian’s legacy cannot be described as a racist eugenicist. He was actually known as a “reform” eugenicist, a [group known](#) for [strongly and publicly opposing](#) the Nazis [and their racist eugenics](#) in the 1930s, well before World War 2. As a result this group did not associate their relatively restrained and anti-racist eugenic views with the Nazis after the war. On anti-racism, Julian Huxley was actually probably the most important anti-racist biologist of the mid-20th century. He coauthored the 1935 [We Europeans: A Survey of](#)

[‘Racial’ Problems](#), according to [historians](#) “a popular and influential anti-racist statement,” “[a]mong the most important of this genre which helped undermine the scientific basis for racism.” Julian was also the founding director of UNESCO in 1946, and helped draft UNESCO’s famous anti-racism declarations in [1950](#) and [1952](#). The [Encyclopedia of Evolution](#) says, “largely due to his efforts, the UNESCO statement on race reported that race was a cultural, not a scientific, concept, and that any attempts to find scientific evidence of the superiority of one race over another were invalid.”

T.H. Huxley and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Science

Of all the Task Force Report’s scholarly flaws, the most concerning is its claim that “Huxley contributed to upholding values that have made education less inclusive.” The reality is that Huxley promoted [scientific education](#) of [women](#) and the [working class](#), including his 14 months on the London School Board which set the course of public education in the UK for decades after. This work included 170 committee meetings and extensive travel, after which Huxley suffered “total collapse” and required extensive convalescence. Late in life he wrote, “I am glad to think that, after all these years, I can look back upon that period of my life as perhaps the part of it least wasted.”

For example, in 1868 Huxley “[inaugurated and became head](#) of the South London Working Men’s College, which, along with its educational opportunities for working class men, held evening classes for women and kindergarten classes for the children of working class families.” His famous lectures ‘[On a piece of chalk](#)’ and ‘[What is to be learned from a piece of coal](#)’ were designed in this period, serving as the basis for his 1877 book *Physiography*, [which](#) “defined for a generation the way in which the earth’s physical features were studied in Britain; it defined also the nature of school education”, and “was the first thoroughly scientific presentation of elementary ‘[environmental studies](#)’”.

In 1869, at the request of a “[committee of ladies](#)” he gave a course of 12 science lectures, with notes, to an audience of 300 women. He supported “Emily Davies in the establishment of Girton College for female university education, as he later did Maria Grey with her Girls’ Public Day School Company and her Bishopsgate Training College for Women,” opened his classes to women, hired a woman as a Physiology demonstrator, and backed the founding of London School of Medicine for Women. He said, “I am at a loss to understand on what grounds of justice or public policy a career which is open to the weakest and most foolish of the male sex should be forcibly closed to women of vigour and capacity”. Huxley was instrumental in addressing “the greatest need of all, a system of schooling for the children of the ordinary people, [which] had always been held up by the conflicting interests of the competing religious sects.” He gave another course of a dozen lectures to schoolchildren to illustrate his approach basing science education on local observation and applied common sense. Huxley ran for and won a position on the newly-established London School Board, and chaired the “all-important Scheme of Education Committee,” which established “the pattern of infant, junior and senior schools which spread right across the land and lasted until the Act of 1944”, mandated standards for hygiene, restricted corporal punishment, and protected teachers’ authority from political interference. The inclusion of practical lab exercises in biology and earth science classes can be traced to his influence.

Is WWU shooting its anti-racism goals in the foot?

In a [2014 retrospective](#) on the key founder of Huxley College of the Environment, Jerry Flora, the *Bellingham Herald* explored origins of the name. Flora chose the name “Huxley” in the

1960s because he feared that the new environmental college “might stress ‘green’ consciousness over tested truth. ‘I wanted science, man,’ he recalled. ‘I wanted hard science.’” T.H. Huxley, as we have seen, was a leader in science and science education, spanning biological and earth sciences, a leader in distinguishing claimed facts and values, an important ethical thinker, a leader in promoting inclusion in science, and a leading opponent of the most prominent scientific racist of his day, the latter because Huxley’s science indicated the unity of the human species, and advocated for the common ancestry of humans with apes without claiming different races were transitional forms. Confronted with Huxley’s actual record, we should all ask ourselves: What have I done lately? Can any reader say they have accomplished as much as T.H. Huxley? The names put on buildings and institutions are often arbitrary – the product of donor money or historical accidents. There ought to be a little space in the world for naming institutions after inspirational figures who changed the world for the better, even though such figures, as humans, are never perfect.

The Legacy Review Task Force, unfortunately, has so far failed to do its due diligence on Huxley’s legacy. The many flaws in the Task Force Report on Huxley show that moral outrage against racism and social injustice, while laudable, does not by itself supply reliable facts upon which to base decisions. The facts need to be determined by careful research, particularly in the case of historical figures with a record of activities and accomplishments so massive that even assembling a decent survey of them is challenging. Racial equality and equity, social justice, and diversity and inclusion are all crucial goals for any modern university, but by relying on badly flawed depictions of Huxley, WWU may end up shooting itself in the foot with respect to these goals.

How does it serve justice to treat T.H. Huxley as if he were James Hunt or Governor Eyre, when he actually was their vehement opponent? Removing Huxley’s name from the College would in fact be removing the name of a pioneer for educational inclusion, a key figure in scientifically establishing that all humans are one species, and undermining the concept of biological “race.” Doing so while relying on propaganda deriving from fundamentalist creationists and other right-wing provocateurs would be falling into the exact trap arranged by these provocateurs: namely, to drive a wedge between science and the causes of social and racial justice. Helping to drive this wedge deeper cannot help increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in science. Imagine creationists, for the next several decades, going to legislatures and state school boards with a line like: “Evolution is a racist theory. After all, Western Washington University acknowledged this when they removed the name ‘Huxley’ from their College of the Environment.”

Finally, there are wider implications for the credibility of academic institutions if renamings are premised on inaccurate, poorly-researched historical claims. First, far more important than the name of any university entity is the basic purpose of universities, namely, to promote truth and good scholarship. Renaming a building by accepting warmed-over creationist propaganda would only spread the propaganda further. Creationists would surely use a victory at the university level to push their evolution-is-racist material, which is [voluminous and pre-prepared](#), into the public schools. Second, establishing such a precedent could very easily backfire against social justice goals. Consider that the initial demand to the administration [submitted](#) by WWU’s Black Student Organizations was to “Rename Huxley College, and rename campus buildings to honor important figures in Black History.” Surely it is worthwhile and important to memorialize important figures in Black History by naming buildings after them. But renaming Huxley College based on sloppy history derived from tendentiously selective portrayals of Huxley, assembled by his worst enemies, would create a precedent that could easily be turned against any other historical figure. All people are

complex, and no historical figure who is memorialized for significant achievements that improved society will be unassailable if absolute perfection according to modern lights is the standard. This is particularly so if depictions by those motivated to portray them in an unfavorable light are adopted uncritically.