

Louis Agassiz: A Wider Context for a Scientific Legacy

Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz (1807-1873) was a medical doctor, a geologist, a glaciologist, a biologist, a paleontologist, and a polygenist—but he was most especially a prolific observer of and writer about the natural world. Born in Switzerland, he spent the last two and a half decades of his life in the United States, where he taught zoology and geology at Harvard University and founded Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology.

Among natural-history buffs, Agassiz may be best remembered for his five-volume *Recherche sur les Poisson Fossiles*, issued between 1833 and 1845, and especially for the detailed and exquisite colored plates published with them. Those drawings and engravings were the work of Joseph Dinkel, an Austrian artist, who was Agassiz's scientific partner for twenty years, even as Dinkel continued to illustrate specimens for museums, private collections, and other benefactors.

As small as the world of professional natural historians seemed to be in that Victorian era of upheavals in paradigms, cabinets of curiosities, the founding of great museums, and gentlemen and lady scientists, it may be no surprise that Dinkel was also commissioned by Sir Richard Owen, the author of the 1849 *On the Nature of Limbs*, to create a lithograph of a specimen found in East Sussex, England (three articulated dinosaur vertebrae with tall spines), which Owen called *Megalosaurus bucklandii*. (*Megalosaurus bucklandii* is today considered a “nomen dubium”—that is, a scientific name that is of doubtful validity or utility.)

Agassiz was a fervent creationist who remained opposed to Darwinism from the moment *On the Origin of Species* appeared in 1859. He was also a polygenist—a believer in the philosophy that groups of humans arose from different “stocks” or origins rather than from a common ancestor and, therefore, that they represented separate races. The line between polygenism and scientific racism—the claim that a scientific basis existed for considering some races “superior” to others—was a small one, however, and Agassiz crossed it more than once.

Perhaps most notably, in 1854 he contributed an introductory chapter, “Sketch of the Natural Provinces of the Natural World and Their Relation to the Different Types of Man,” to a volume that, despite its unwieldy title, became enormously popular and was reissued in several editions: *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races and upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History*, edited and largely written by Josiah Clark Nott and George Robbins Gliddon.

It wasn't long before *Types of Mankind* became a kind of handbook for pro-slavery and white-supremacist movements in the U.S. and elsewhere. Nott was himself a slaveholder who defended enslavement as the state in which “the negro achieves his greatest perfection, physical and moral,” and Gliddon was a craniometrist who collected human skulls from around the world in an attempt to demonstrate that the intellectual superiority

of a race could be ascertained from the size of the brain case; he famously argued that ancient Egyptians must have been Caucasian because of their large skulls.

Perhaps Agassiz's most extended commentary on the question came in the series of three long essays that he contributed to the *Christian Monitor* in 1850. In one of these, Agassiz defined (as the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould put it in 1981) the "moral imperative" of scientists to distinguish among the races:

There are upon the earth different races of men, inhabiting different parts of its surface, which have different physical characters; and this fact ... presses upon us the obligation to settle the relative rank among these races, the relative value of the characters peculiar to each, in a scientific point of view. (Quoted in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 78.)

At the same time, Agassiz vigorously maintained that he was neither a racist nor in favor of slavery and that his adherence to polygenism was completely unrelated to questions of politics. It might just be possible to concede the last two points without conceding the first: There seems to be no record that Agassiz ever defended slavery or took part in political discussions about the topic, even as the Civil War raged in the United States. In his 1850 *Christian Monitor* essays, for example, he wrote:

We disclaim, however, all connection with any question involving political matters. It is simply with reference to the possibility of appreciating the differences existing between different men, and of eventually determining whether they have originated all over the world and under what circumstances, that we have tried to trace some facts representing the human races. (Quoted in Wallis, 1995, p. 44)

That may be as it is, but Agassiz did not object to being associated with the defenders of slavery and with white supremacists or to lending his scientific credibility, his writing, and his influence to their causes nor, when his research was expressly used to support slave-holding and segregation, did he express reservations. Even granting that Agassiz would not have gone so far as to argue that enslavement was the appropriate response to what he called the "submissive, obsequious, imitative negro" (quoted in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 78), he clearly did believe that the "colored races" were on a lower level of nature than white Europeans:

It seems to us to be mock-philanthropy and mock-philosophy to assume that all races have the same abilities, enjoy the same powers, and show the same natural dispositions, and that in consequence of this equality they are entitled to the same position in human society.... [H]uman affairs with reference to the colored races would be far more judiciously conducted if ... we were guided by a full consciousness of the real difference existing between us and them, and a desire to foster those dispositions that are eminently marked in them, rather than by treating them on terms of equality. (Quoted in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 79.)

“Let us beware,” he wrote in a letter from August 1863, almost literally in the middle of the American Civil War, “of granting too much to the negro race in the beginning, lest it become necessary to recall violently some of the privileges which they may use to our detriment and their own injury.” (Quoted in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 79.)

In part because of positions such as these, Agassiz’s name has been removed, in more recent times, from landmarks, schools, and other institutions in both the U.S. and abroad. In early 2019, moreover, Tamara Lanier, a retired probation officer from Connecticut, filed a lawsuit against Harvard University over daguerreotypes of two enslaved people, named Renty and Delia, whom she believes to be her direct ancestors. Lanier argues that her family and not the university should control the daguerreotypes, which were taken in South Carolina in 1850 by studio photographer J. T. Zealy. The man who commissioned the photos from Zealy was Louis Agassiz.

Bruce Wallis, writing in *American Art* in 1995, analyzed in detail both the fashion of “anthropological photography” in Agassiz’s day and Agassiz’s specific personal projects. In Wallis’s view, the “slave daguerreotypes”

had two purposes, one nominally scientific, the other frankly political. They were designed to analyze the physical differences between European whites and African blacks, but at the same time they were meant to prove the superiority of the white race. Agassiz hoped to use the photographs as evidence to prove his theory of “separate creation,” the idea that the various races of mankind were in fact separate species. (40)

Two of Agassiz’s descendants, meanwhile, Marian Shaw Moore and Susanna McKean Moore, condemned and apologized for their great-great-grandfather’s actions, teaming up with Tamara Lanier’s family to urge Harvard to relinquish the photographs (Garrison, 2019).

But Agassiz’s intertwining of science and white supremacy continued. In 1865, he commissioned Walter Hunnewell, an amateur photographer, to take more than a hundred photos of nude African-descended Brazilians in Manaus. Agassiz apparently continued to hope the images would help him discredit Darwin’s theories and, because Brazilians were so racially mixed, provide evidence of “racial degeneration” and of the dangers of miscegenation.

Historian Lorelai Kury, a researcher at the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz foundation and a professor at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, observed that

[i]n the Amazon Region, Agassiz dedicated his time to looking for evidence of a recent ice age that had allegedly provoked a rupture between existing species and extinct ones ..., in line with the theory that natural catastrophes had been responsible for generating new isolated species with no connection to other species” (quoted in Haag, 2010).

In the end, the photographs were never shown in public, though engravings made from a few of them ended up in the travel diary, *A Journey in Brazil*, that Louis and Elizabeth Cabot Agassiz wrote and which appeared in 1868.

One hundred and ten years later, in 1978, no less a figure than Gould himself thoughtfully and meticulously presented the case for Agassiz's white supremacy in an essay for *New Scientist* magazine, "Flaws in the Victorian Veil" (later included in his collection of essays, *The Panda's Thumb*). Gould published, for the first time, the unexpurgated texts of several letters by Agassiz that make his private beliefs clear. (Agassiz's family had previously deleted passages from some of the letters before they were published as a collection.)

One letter in particular, which Agassiz sent to his mother in 1846, seems difficult to misinterpret. Agassiz wrote:

It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the sentiment that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type....But truth before all.... I experienced pity at the site of this degraded and degenerate race, and their lot inspired compassion in me in thinking that they are really men. Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us....[W]hen they advanced ... in order to serve me, I wished I were able to depart in order to eat a piece of bread elsewhere, rather than to dine with such service. What unhappiness for the white race—to have tied their existence so closely with that of negroes in certain countries! (633)

Gould went on to discuss Agassiz's revulsion at the idea of race mixing and "hybrid humans"—questions that continued to preoccupy Agassiz during his trip to Brazil—concluding that "[r]acism has often been buttressed by scientists who present a public facade of objectivity to mask their guiding prejudices. Agassiz's case may be distant, but its message rings through our century as well" (633).

Perhaps it does ring, and yet, in our century, an unsigned online biographical sketch, "The Life and Work of Louis Agassiz," apparently written by a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is worth quoting solely because it is a fair representation of a common disclaimer:

It is of great importance to note that Agassiz rejected racism and believed in human unity. However, there are notable moments where he has been quoted in favor of racial prejudice. In fact, the Swiss government itself has acknowledged Agassiz's racist tendencies. This accusation of racism has led to the renaming of landmarks and institutions that bear his name. Reception of this is often mixed due to the fact that Agassiz's contribution to the totality of human knowledge is undeniable. ("Controversy," 2020)

Just as in this excerpt, the emphasis in discussions of this important aspect of Agassiz's life often seems to bend toward ensuring that Agassiz's inconvenient beliefs about the supremacy of the Caucasian "race" do not detract from recognition of his scientific contributions: the issue is only that "he has been *quoted* in favor of racial prejudice," not that he bore any. In other words, Agassiz's "racist tendencies" and the "accusations about racism" (euphemisms that avoid calling Agassiz a "racist" directly) should not be allowed to tarnish his work. Tellingly, it is almost never the reverse: an admonition against minimizing the significance of Agassiz's unjustifiable beliefs about race as we contemplate his scientific accomplishments.

— *Wendell Ricketts*

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