

Mary Carmichael, The Boston Globe  
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Dear Mrs. Carmichael,

As a member of the exhibition team, I would like to thank you for your important article "*Louis Agassiz exhibit divides Harvard, Swiss group*" (The Boston Globe, June 27, 2012). At the same time, I allow myself to add a few personal remarks.

The Swiss exhibition in Grindelwald (July to September 2012) on "*Glaciologist, Racist: Louis Agassiz (1807-2012)*" is educational and well researched. The exhibition makers are not, as you write, "*a loose, unnamed confederation*". They are well qualified and named: an artist, historian, philologist, journalist and graphic artist.

The issue under debate is Harvard University not allowing the exhibition makers to reproduce some of the racist photos (Afro-American slaves, in 1850, and Brazilian natives, in 1865-66) commissioned by Harvard's Louis Agassiz and used by him in public lectures to prove that Africans were inferior to Whites and had been created by God separately from Whites.

#### **The photos.**

You write: "*A Swiss group will show silhouettes of slaves*" because "*Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography will not allow*" the reproduction of some of those images. The Museum's curators say: "*Peabody's blanket policy against the display of exploitative images of naked people*" doesn't allow the permission of reproduction.

The exhibition makers have informed Harvard's Peabody Museum that not only the silhouettes of the censored photos will be shown, but also these photos themselves. The absurdity of Harvard's position is double: on the one hand Harvard didn't do anything against Agassiz when he studied Africans imprisoned in the U.S. slave gulag and when he insulted them in public. On the contrary, Harvard supported Agassiz in any possible way and made him influential. On the other hand, all the photos, which we planned to reproduce for the exposition, can be seen, day after day, by millions of people. They are all published in books and/or on the Internet. The exhibition will display those books and those photos. Censorship belongs to another galaxy.

#### **Agassiz's moral and scientific stature.**

You write: "*Instead of being condemned, Agassiz became famous, and at the time of his death in 1873 was considered America's leading scientist.*" Here, you address three different issues simultaneously.

"*Instead of being condemned ...*" But who could have condemned Louis Agassiz? The Euro-Americans who had stolen every single inch of the country and slaughtered the First Nations and who kept the survivors of the Indian Holocaust in humiliating misery? Could they condemn Louis Agassiz who told the world: "*The case of the American Indians who gradually disappear before the white race should not mislead us; as it is readily accounted for by the peculiar character of that race.*"<sup>1</sup>? Can one expect the Euro-Americans who held millions of Africans in slavery to condemn a man who tells the world, that those Blacks do not have the same biological origin and will be forever inferior to Whites? So, who could have condemned Louis Agassiz? Only those few, particularly courageous individuals, like his neighbor and famous abolitionist Theodore Parker, and the many of Agassiz's victims.

"*Agassiz became famous ...*" This sounds like a natural process, a transformation that can only be observed. '*To become famous*' is a linguistic juggling trick that spirits away all the political and ideological string-pullers who **made** Louis Agassiz famous. Those people for whom Louis Agassiz

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<sup>1</sup> MS Am 1419 (150) : Agassiz Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

was the right man at the right time for the right job. Agassiz was able to dress up in scientific and even religious clothing the basis of U.S.-policy at that time: the massive land robbing, the genocide committed on the First Nations and the immensely profitable racial exploitation of millions of Africans. Agassiz offered the ideological justification the ruling perpetrators of those crimes and their active and passive collaborators needed. Hence, he had to be made famous.

You say: Agassiz "**at the time of his death in 1873 was considered America's leading scientist.**" "**Leading scientist**"? At the time of Agassiz, American scientists clearly saw the enormous danger Agassiz represented to science in general and to American science in particular. And Cornell's Howard M. Feinstein could write in 1984 about Agassiz's famous colleague and Harvard botanist Asa Gray: "*He criticized Agassiz's penchant for "always writing and talking ad populum." Increasingly he and Wyman [Harvard anatomist and Peabody's first curator] saw Agassiz as **an obstacle to the development of science at Harvard.**"*<sup>2</sup> Renowned Vice-President of the "*Comité Français d'Histoire de la Géologie*", Prof. Goulven Laurent, writes about Agassiz: "*Today, his approach to Nature is foreign to us and it is, to my understanding, **anti-scientific. As it was already in his time.**"*<sup>3</sup> And Mary Pickard Winsor (University of Toronto), speaking about Agassiz's *Essay on Classification* says: "*Agassiz frequent reference to the One God, the Divine Intellect, and the plan of the Creator make it hard for us to read the "Essay" as part of the history of science. In fact, the standards of Agassiz's own day allowed only brief references to the Creator at the beginning or the end of a proper contribution to science. Natural **theology** was regarded as a separate discipline, and Agassiz was conscious that his treatment would seem **improper to many of his peers.**"*<sup>4</sup>

At the end of his life and having struggled from 1859 (Darwin, *On the origin of species*) to his last day in 1873 against the real genius Charles Darwin, "*leading scientist*" Louis Agassiz was still unable to correct his many and fundamental scientific errors (polygenism, successive creationism, catastrophism, pseudo-scientific racism).

### **The character of the photos.**

You are absolutely right to draw attention to the contradictory opinions of Harvard historian John Stauffer who says that "*Agassiz was trying to dehumanize*" the enslaved Africans while Christoph Irmscher, professor of modern literature at Indiana University, finds that these images "*were meant to denigrate people*". The difference is huge and Mr. Irmscher's belittling is shocking. The photos document slavery as a U.S. crime against humanity, committed during centuries. And racism, the ideology propagated by people like Louis Agassiz, served as its main ideological justification.

### **Showing or hiding those photos?**

Here again, Professor John Stauffer is right when he "*plans to mount his own exhibit on the images within the next year*". It would be interesting to see if his American exhibition will suffer the same fate as our Swiss one.

Mr. Irmscher, by contrast, has a very particular understanding of documenting racism: "*I am deeply appreciative of the efforts to expose Agassiz' motives, but there's a thin line between documenting the extent of his racism and perpetuating it by making these photographs public again.*" To begin with, the issue is not at all about "*Agassiz' motives*", but about Agassiz's racist activities: his writings, his public lectures, his friendship with slaveholders, his visits to slave camps, his studies on slaves, his way of treating and stripping native women (a way which young William James found simply

<sup>2</sup> FEINSTEIN, Howard M. (1984) : *Becoming William James*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca and London, 1984. p. 153. With reference to A. Hunter Duprée, Asa Gray, 1810-1888. Cambridge, Mass., 1959. (My emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> LAURENT, Goulven (1979) : Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) : Fixisme et Idéologie, ou les raisons de croire au Fixisme quand on en a soi-même ruiné les fondements. In : *Travaux du Comité français d'Histoire de la Géologie - Première série* - (1979) (<http://www.annales.org/archives/cofrhigeo/agassiz-fixisme.html>). (My translation and emphasis.)

<sup>4</sup> WINSOR, Mary Pickard (1979) : Louis Agassiz and the Species Question. In: William Coleman and Camille Limoges (eds.), *Studies in the History of Biology*, vol. 3, Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 1979. p. 103. (My emphasis.)

disgusting), his editorial support for slavery defenders, his deeply racist and terrifying advice to the U.S. government including genocidal plans to eradicate "half breeds" (to make it clear: people like President Obama) by using "all kinds of means".

And there is Mr. Irmscher's extraordinary idea that documenting Agassiz's racist photos should be done without publishing the evidence, i.e. Agassiz's racist photos. Publishing this evidence of racism would be equal to "*perpetuating it*". Is that serious? Then we should close the "*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*" and argue that it perpetuates racism by showing the photographic evidence of the holocaust ...

### ***Agassiz's racism.***

Allow me to come back to what I wrote about Agassiz's racist activities that include the eradication of "half breeds" and an Apartheid-like geographical segregation of all 'pure' Africans in the hottest areas of the Southern States. As an alternative, Agassiz took into consideration another crime: the total ethnic cleansing of the U.S.A., i.e. the forced deportation of all Afro-Americans to Africa.

At this point you quote the usual trivialization that comes along as allegedly 'putting things in their historical context'. Prof. Irmscher uses a tricky three-step system that needs to be untangled. First, he quietly reduces Louis Agassiz's racism to nothing but "*views*" which are "*displayed*". The historic truth is different: Agassiz's racism contains brutal activities like stripping naked slaves and natives, pressuring U.S. government to adopt extreme racist measures, etc. In a second step, Irmscher decides that Louis Agassiz was not the "*extreme*" racist, the Swiss Government called him in 2007. According to Irmscher, Agassiz could be called "*extreme*" only "*in the sense that he used his public stature as a scientist to propagate*" what he thought to be settled science (in this case the inferiority of Blacks). In other words, Agassiz did what a scientist has to do: "*he used his public stature as a scientist to propagate*" what he thought to be the truth. Nothing "*extreme*" in that. Just normal. Third step: "*But his views were not extraordinarily different from the racism many of his contemporaries displayed at the time.*" Who are the "*contemporaries*"? How much is "*many*"? How different is "*extraordinarily different*"? Agassiz's racism disappears into the fog of Irmscher's vague words. Here again, the historic facts are different. Louis Agassiz was Swiss, trained in Germany, France and Switzerland and arrived in the U.S.A. at the age of almost 40 years. His extreme racism contrasted sharply with his European moral standards and evoked harsh criticism from intellectuals in France and Germany. Yes, Agassiz's racism was "*extraordinarily different*" from the racist ideas of his European contemporaries. Irmscher's strategy of trivialization goes like quoting Goebbels insulting Jews and then adding: "*But his views were not extraordinarily different from the racism many of his contemporaries displayed at the time.*" If Agassiz had denounced slavery or racism or the genocide committed on the American First Nations as American Crimes against humanity, Harvard would not have offered him a teaching opportunity, and American society would not have welcomed him inside the inner circle of powerful people. Agassiz's extreme racism was his entry ticket to the influential cultural milieu in the U.S., an entry ticket that Agassiz saw quickly replaced by a permanent card.

You say Agassiz's racist statements are "***shocking to read today, but less so in his day***". How do we know? And less shocking for **whom**? For the Euro-American slaveholders or for the millions of Afro-Americans at the time? The millions of people from parents of different ethnic origin? The First Nations slaughtered by the Whites? The victims of U.S. crimes must have felt threatened and dehumanized by Agassiz and the people you call "*his admirers*". Louis Agassiz's racism is shocking to read today, but much more so in his day!

Let me thank you once again for your article that will stimulate people's interest in historic truth and its lessons.

Yours sincerely, Hans Barth