

Genetics' shaky history with racism contrary to what science says

As someone who writes about evolution and genetics – both of which involve the study of inheritance, and both of which rely on making quantitative comparisons between living things – I often receive letters from people associating Darwin with racism, usually citing the use of the words “favoured races” in the lengthy subtitle to his masterpiece, *On the Origin of Species*. Of course, Darwin doesn't discuss humans in that great book, and “races” was used to describe groups within non-human species. Contemporary use of language must be taken into account.

Darwin was not a racist. He did not, unlike many of his contemporaries, think human “races” might be separate creations or subspecies. He was a staunch abolitionist, impressed and influenced by his friend and taxidermy tutor John Edmonstone at Edinburgh, who was a freed black slave. However, Darwin's half-cousin Francis Galton, most certainly was a racist. He wrote that the Chinese were a race of geniuses, that “Negroes” were vastly inferior, that “Hindoos” were inferior in “strength and business habits” and that the “Arab is little more than an eater up of other men's produce; he is a destroyer”.

Even today, important figures from genetics' history – notably James Watson, co-discoverer of the double helix – express unsupportable racist views. The irony is that while Galton spawned a field with the intention of revealing essential racial differences between the peoples of the Earth, his legacy – human genetics – has shown he was wrong. Most modern geneticists are much less like Galton and more like Darwin. A dreadful book published last year by former New York Times science writer Nicholas Wade espoused views about racial differences seemingly backed by genetics. As with Watson, the reaction from geneticists was uniformly dismissive, that he had failed to understand the field, and misrepresented their work.

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