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Union Astronomique Internationale
Prof. Dr. Ewine F. van Dishoeck
President
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IAU Turns a Blind Eye on Racism

Dear Sir,

The «Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT)», in a letter of 4th November, 2020, asked the «International Astronomical Union (IAU)» to change the name of lunar «Agassiz Promontory», arguing that honouring a racist of the importance of Louis Agassiz (1807–1873) could by no means be justified. The «Swiss Academy of Natural Sciences» put their position like this: «We are convinced that continuing to honour Louis Agassiz with statues or place names on Earth or in space is no longer defensible nowadays in the light of current societal developments».

The IAU definitely rejected this request on 14th June, 2021. The substantiation provided by the IAU is neither valid nor acceptable, but a scandal. Here are the details.

1. In their letter of 4th October, 2020, the «Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT)» justified their demand for the renaming of the «Agassiz Promontory» in historical and ethical detail. The IAU's reply denies the Swiss Academy any relevant qualification and meets all their arguments with an ignorance of their own. We hereby protest against this insulting treatment of the «Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT)»!
2. The time that the IAU allowed to elapse between the submission of our original demand (September 2017) and their decision (June 2021) is outrageous.
3. The IAU wrongly sees in our submission and that of the SCNAT a kind of moral anachronism, i.e. the application of contemporary moral standards to persons who died before the 20th century. Such persons, the IAU says, should «be judged by *the moral standards of their time* rather than those of today».

Apart from the fact that the necessity of limiting moral judgements to the 20th century is not justified at all in the IAU's letter (see point 4), the IAU clearly lacks

the basic historical knowledge needed here. The racism of Louis Agassiz *was* condemned – according to the moral standards of his own time!

See e.g. the condemnation and illegalisation of slavery and/or the slave trade by: the Haitian people (1791/1804), the French National Convention (1794), the Congress of Vienna (1815), Great Britain (1833), France (1848), Holland (1863), USA (1864).

See e.g. the condemnation of slavery and racism by professors whom Agassiz had as teachers: Zurich medicine professor Heinrich Schinz (1777–1861), Heidelberg anatomy professor Friedrich Tiedemann (1781–1861), Agassiz mentor Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859).

See e.g. the most renowned Swiss jurist of the Agassiz era, Johann Caspar Bluntschli (1808–1881), who wrote in 1863: «Man is by nature a person, therefore he cannot be a thing, i.e. not a slave». Slavery in North America was, according to Bluntschli, an «outrage on the spirit of humanity», the enslavement of black people violated «the divine and human order in the deepest way».

See e.g. MP («Nationalrat») for Schaffhausen Wilhelm Joos (1821–1900), who in 1865 wrote in a local newspaper that «the buying and selling of slaves is to be numbered among the crimes against humanity».

See especially the millions of enslaved women, men, and children, whom the IAU completely ignores in a deeply racist manner.

Agassiz legitimised slavery through his ideology of racial hierarchy and thus participated, in a prominent position, in a crime against humanity. For the IAU, however, all this is easily compatible with continuing to honour Louis Agassiz by places in space (Moon and Mars). This puts the IAU itself under the urgent suspicion of trivialising crimes against humanity.

4. To justify its failure to address the racism of Louis Agassiz, the IAU invents an expiry date for moral judgements, writing: «In contrast with Agassiz (who lived and died <20'th century), the cases of Lenard and Stark [Nazi fascists and scientists who were also honoured with names on the moon, H.B., S.H., H.F.] and their association with the Nazi regime are recent enough that one can make an independent judgement of the morals of that time.» A moral judgement, according to the IAU, could therefore only be «independent» if it relates to the immediate present, to something no more than a hundred years old.

This ludicrous position turns against the IAU themselves, for it is precisely in this recent period that the IAU's moral judgement cannot be relied upon in the slightest:

=> 1970: Johannes Stark (1874–1957), Nobel Prize winner in physics (1919), was honoured by the IAU as the name-giver of a lunar formation. Fanatical Nazi Johannes Stark was classified as a main culprit (war criminal) in 1947 and sentenced to four years in labour camp. At his appeal hearing in 1949, he was classified as a

«fellow traveler» and sentenced to a fine. The IAU did not feel obliged to revoke his IAU honour until 2020.

=> 1976: Hans Eppinger (1879–1946), professor of medicine, was honoured by the IAU in 1976 as the name-giver of a lunar formation. It was not until 2002 that his name was removed by the IAU. Eppinger evaded conviction as a war criminal by committing suicide. Eppinger had carried out medical experiments on Romani people in the Dachau concentration camp, with fatal results.

=> 1994: Wernher von Braun (1912–1977), rocket engineer, was honoured by the IAU in 1994 as the name-giver of a lunar formation. The Buchenwald concentration camp memorial refers to Wernher von Braun, saying that he «...spent a large part of his professional life developing weapons of war» that killed thousands. Wernher von Braun was «jointly responsible», according to the memorial, «for the forced labour of thousands of concentration camp prisoners in Peenemünde and Mittelbau-Dora». SS-Sturmbannführer von Braun personally selected prisoners in the Buchenwald concentration camp in order to put them to work for his rocket programme.

=> 2008: Philipp Lenard (1862-1947), Nobel Prize winner in physics (1905), was honoured by the IAU in 2008 as the name giver of a lunar formation. The fanatical Nazi escaped conviction in 1945 because of his advanced age (83). In 2020, the IAU felt obliged to revoke the IAU honour.

And then, in 1936, it was Louis Agassiz's turn. All in all, it is not surprising that just three years after Hitler had come to power, Louis Agassiz, one of the fathers of the murderous racial ideology now at work, was also honoured by the IAU as the name-giver of a lunar formation.

5. Furthermore, and this is particularly scandalous, the IAU wants to balance these human rights crimes against scientific achievements: «We need to weigh the distasteful actions or opinions of these 'long-dead' people against their merits for which naming a feature is being considered».

The IAU completely discredits itself by seriously demanding that scientific merits be weighed against support for racist crimes. After the Nuremberg trials, no one should ever get away with such an absurd ethical and legal position again. In the case of the IAU, it is no longer surprising that even infamous Nazi criminals such as those mentioned in point 4 were honoured by the IAU.

In the case of Louis Agassiz, this «IAU outweighing» goes like this: On the one hand, Agassiz was a man of integrity (he was neither a «criminal» nor had he ever been accused of participating in the atrocities of a Nazi-like regime or of having committed war crimes). On the other hand, his scientific contributions were recognised: «Therefore, in the case of Agassiz, the IAU does not believe that a change of name is absolutely and demonstratively required».

That Louis Agassiz was not indicted by a regime whose criminal racial policies he supported should not surprise anyone. To turn this, as the IAU does, into proof of Louis Agassiz's respectability shows where in this case the IAU draws its moral standards from: from a society of slaveholders unable to this day to come to terms with their criminal and racist past in these disunited states of America.

The IAU ideology seems to stem from another world: It is historically illiterate and ethically blind and therefore a disgrace for any member country.

In view of the above, we are now considering the launch of an international campaign against the IAU's racist naming policy and we reiterate already now our call for the removal of racist name givers from the Planetary Nomenclature, most notably Louis Agassiz.

In particular, we will expose those responsible for the IAU's continued honouring of racists and Nazi criminals. These officials are not only you, Prof. Dr. Ewine F. van Dishoeck as President, and Dr. Rita Schulz as Chair of IAU WG Planetary System Nomenclature, but all eleven members of the executive committee (officers Prof. Teresa Lago, Prof. Debra Elmegreen, Prof. José Miguel Rodríguez Espinosa, Prof. Silvia Torres-Peimbert, Prof. Piero Benvenuti; vice-presidents Prof. John Hearnshaw, Prof. Ajit Kembhavi, Prof. Boris Shustov, Prof. Laura Ferrarese, Prof. Daniela Lazzaro, Prof. Junichi Watanabe).

Yours faithfully,



Hans Fässler

Co-authored and signed by e-mail by Sasha Huber and Hans Barth