

Why scientific racism has not been confined to history

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By Deborah Gabriel



The comment by James Watson boldly displayed on the front page of the Independent newspaper last week that: *Africans Are Less Intelligent Than Westerners* should serve as a reminder that we need to challenge the legacies of the past.

It seems that nearly everyone – including people of African descent, are only too happy to bury their heads in the sand, to dismiss the notion that we are still affected by the legacies of chattel enslavement and colonization and to buy into the false notion that we live in an equitable world that is mostly free of racism and inequality, yet are the first to become outraged when views like the one expressed by James Watson make it into the public domain.

They jump up and down and complain that no other race would ever be subjected to such insult and ridicule and circulate stories and emails to friends and associates on the internet telling them to write a letter of complaint, sign a petition or something, demanding that the offending person, in this case, James Watson, be fired, ostracised, denounced, etc. But while these passionate protests are being directed at one individual, the systematic process that produced racist theories in the first place goes unchallenged and remains intact until the next time someone else decides to make a similar claim.

In other words, by failing to challenge and hold to account the historical processes that produced these theories, these protestors are complicit in the perpetuation of these theories and it is time that people recognised this. I am by no means suggesting that James Watson should not be challenged as an individual and held to account for his offensive and inaccurate statement – but take down the man and another will follow – we need to take down the system.

It is ironic that whilst the newspapers were busy preparing the story to emblazon the front pages last week – I was busy playing host and facilitator at a debate at the same venue that Watson was due to speak at. The event, *Scientific Racism: A History* was intended as a wake-up call, that scientific racism sowed the seeds of global white supremacy by using science to divide the human family into separate and *unequal* races, to institutionalize the concept of white superiority and black inferiority on a biological and intellectual level.

The myth of African inferiority serves as a justification for continued economic exploitation

Once Africans had been 'scientifically' categorized as less than human, it gave the green light to Europeans to enslave Africans and pillage the continent's resources. Scientific racism also ensured that long after the Abolition Act was passed making slavery illegal, that white supremacy would reign supreme, for as long as the belief was instilled that Africans were inferior to whites in every way, neo-colonialism could always be disguised under the cloak of 'civilizing missions' to reform the 'barbaric and savage ways of primitive Africans.'

That the most ardently racist thinkers of the 'Age of Enlightenment' such as Kant, Hegel and Hume are still revered as the great philosophers of the 18th century, rather than being exposed for the racist ideologies they implanted in the minds of Europeans; that the Enlightenment is taught in colleges and universities without reference to the impact that these racist ideologies have had on people of African descent, is what needs to be vigorously challenged.

For unless we challenge the structures, systems, processes and values that underpin these views, then these ideas will continue to be passed down the generations who will accept them as absolute truths. We also need to be mindful that this year's Bicentenary of the Parliamentary Abolition of the Slave Trade has done as much to distort history in a disingenuous attempt to absolve the British Government of its responsibility in the dehumanization, oppression and economic exploitation of people of African descent both during the *Maangamizi* (African Holocaust) and afterwards when it went on to colonize the African continent.

The Bicentenary has also relegated our heritage to the margins of history by focusing on the history of our enslavement, rather than the history that preceded this era during which black Africans established the great civilizations in ancient Egypt, created the disciplines of medical science, religion, astronomy, archaeology, mathematics and many other bodies of knowledge that have since been appropriated by Europeans in their quest to portray Africans as inferior to westerners.

But it is only when we begin to accept that in addition to the economic disparities that exist on a global scale today, that the racism that confronts people of African descent in every facet of their lives *must be addressed through reparations*, will voices like that of James Watson be truly silenced.

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