

Summary and reflections on the "Linnaeus debate" in Sweden 2020/2021

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In May 2020 a worldwide debate on racism started. The main reason was the death of George Floyd who died in Minneapolis, USA, while the police were arresting him using far too much force. Floyd's death was one of many examples of police brutality against black persons and this time it sparked actions. The Black Lives Matter movement acted and critique and debate spread worldwide. Both racism today and the history of racism have been, and are still, in focus for this debate. Soon there were demands to take down statues of men connected to the history of colonialism and racism. A number of statues were also thrown over or taken down, the following are a few examples: a statue in USA of Columbus lost its head, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was thrown into the harbour in Bristol, UK, and a number of statues of king Leopold II were removed in Belgium.

In Sweden the debate first took place on various social media. On 8 June Lovette Jallow live-streamed a talk on Carl Linnaeus on her Instagram-account *action4humanity_se*. The heading was "Origins of racebiology. Carl von Linné – Sweden". In the talk she connected Linnaeus to the starting point of racial biology and argued that he was the "founder" or "father" of "scientific racism". Lovette Jallow is best described as an activist on social media, and she was awarded the Raoul Wallenberg Prize in 2019 for her work on the account *Action4humanity*.¹ One result of the live-stream was demands that statues of Linnaeus should be taken down, with about 1900 persons signing a petition in support of those demands (February 2021). Another result was that the debate also reached national media,

¹ <https://raoulwallenberg.se/raoul-wallenbergpriset/> accessed 14 April 2021.

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and major newspapers, radio and television news all focused on various aspects of the theme. At the same time debates on social media also peaked.

Both *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* had debate articles on the topic. In *Aftonbladet* (17 June 2020) the journalist Henrik Arnstad argued that modern racism was indeed born with Linnaeus.² Arnstad has previously published books on the history of fascism. Professor Gunnar Broberg replied (22 June) that it is much too simplified to label Linnaeus “racist” and even if there is a line from Linnaeus to modern racism it is not a straight one.³ Gunnar Broberg is one of Sweden’s senior experts on Linnaeus and former professor of history of ideas at Lund University. He has recently (2019) published a biography of Linnaeus. Hynek Pallas wrote in *Expressen* that Arnstad’s way of arguing and his way of making Linnaeus responsible for things that happened after his lifetime is problematic.⁴ Pallas holds a PhD in cinema studies, his thesis is a study of whiteness in modern Swedish film. Linda Andersson Burnett was interviewed on radio and heard locally both in Linnaeus’s birth region Småland and in Uppsala.⁵ She also contextualized the debate and argued that there are elements in Linnaeus theories that are problematic but also that the development from Linnaeus to the racial biology of later times is complex. Linda Andersson Burnett currently has two research projects at Uppsala University connected to Linnaeus, Linnaean natural history and colonialism, and she has published on similar themes earlier, including her PhD thesis from 2012. Most of the debate was focused on Linnaeus, racism and racial biology and only sometimes the period when the statues actually were erected was discussed. Swedish Television News picked up that theme and interviewed Magnus Rodell, who said it was expected that the statues became a target for these protests.⁶ It has happened before in similar situations. He suggested that one way to handle these situations is to add information texts or signs explaining problems connected to them. Magnus Rodell is associate professor at Södertörns högskola and he has studied monuments, symbols and statues during different periods.

It is more difficult to summarize the debate on social media. I followed it mainly on Instagram and Facebook, most of the time without taking part so much. Here

² <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/WbwrBK/med-carl-von-linne-foddes-den-moderna-rasismen>, *Aftonbladet* 17 June 2020, accessed 14 April 2021.

³ <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/mROBdv/linne-var-besk-mot-manniskan-inte-rasist>, *Aftonbladet* 20 June 2020, accessed 14 April 2021.

⁴ <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/hynek-pallas/kan-linne-lastas-for-hur-hans-tankar-anvandes/>, *Expressen*, 17 June 2020, accessed 14 April 2021.

⁵ <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=114&artikel=7498937>, *Sveriges Radio*, 18 June 2020, accessed 14 April 2021.

⁶ <https://www.svt.se/kultur/louis-de-geer>, *Sveriges Television*, 18 June 2020, accessed 14 April 2021.

I will mostly reflect on the tendencies I saw. In my opinion the debate quickly became very polarized, with the two main poles “Linnaeus is to be blamed” and “Linnaeus is innocent” (henceforth called the “blame-pole” and the “innocent-pole”). The “blame-pole” was characterized by arguments along the line that Linnaeus is the origin of scientific racism and racial biology, he was a racist and Linnaean theories of humans led to colonialism with all the negative consequences. The “innocent-pole” on the other hand argued that Linnaeus was not racist, he did not have any agenda of that kind, and he did not mean any harm (often paired with quite a lot of admiration and respect for Linnaeus). Neither of these positions is in my opinion likely, or true if you wish. The few times I did engage in threads on Facebook, for example, I realized that I had to argue against both of these positions, sometimes in the same thread. Only a few times was the debate climate fruitful and it was possible to discuss with the level of complexity it actually takes to understand matters such as this. I must say that in general the climate and tone I met was respectful. I know this was not always the case. The situation was used by some extremists to spread hate and threaten participants in the debate in a totally unacceptable way. Of course social media is a difficult platform to debate on, but it seems also to be a platform where more and more debates like this take place. For that reason I would say that it is important to think of how these media can be used also to contextualize and complicate topics if that is necessary.

Most of the threads I did participate in started by linking one of the major debate articles and argued either that Linnaeus was “the founder of scientific racism” or that he was “innocent”. My own standpoint is (as mentioned above) that neither of these positions is reasonable. Racism is an older phenomena than Linnaeus and it did not start with him. The question of whether Linnaeus was “racist” or not is not so easy to answer. Some people on the “innocent-pole” said he cannot be since he does not use the word “race”. That is of course making it much too easy. It is not the word as such but the contents of the texts and ideas that determine whether it is reasonable to say he was racist or not. There are very stereotyped descriptions in Linnaeus’s texts, some are pejorative and phrased in a way that I definitely would label as racist and impossible to use today. These pejorative assessments concern people from different parts of the world. As Gunnar Broberg and others have pointed out, Linnaeus is not only pejorative and critical towards people in Africa or Asia, he is like that towards all humans. The classification and description of humans was problematic to Linnaeus and he seems to have struggled with the classifications all his life. Another aspect that almost never came up in the debate on social media is how many times he changed his classification and taxonomy of the human varieties. Usually the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae* was cited as the only source, when in fact it was changed from edition to edition. This

also relates to the wider topic of borders in nature in general, and that was a difficult and complex problem both for Linnaeus and for other contemporaries. The way Linnaean taxonomy and classification actually were used in a colonial context is another aspect that was seldom mentioned. The Linnaean texts and ideas were spread by naturalists who were parts of the colonial system.

A very common argument on the “innocent-pole” is that Linnaeus was “a child of his time”. In fact the most recent debate article in local media in Uppsala was published in February and had the heading “Carl Linnaeus was a child of his time” (Carl von Linné var ett barn av sin tid).⁷ It was written by three neurologists associated with Uppsala University. According to their line of argument we should in a way overlook things said or written by eighteenth-century persons as parts of a different mentality, and they did not really mean to be “racist” or “bad”. These types of arguments are very problematic to me. Of course each time needs to be understood in a reasonable context, for example: to understand eighteenth-century medical theories requires a lot of knowledge about the time, the context and other specific aspects. That does not mean that we as twenty-first century persons need to accept every idea or thought they had. In the eighteenth century there were systematic inequalities and injustices that we should not accept today under any circumstances. The effect of colonialism is one such example but there are many more. Eighteenth-century society was different from ours, we can understand and interpret it, but we can only study history through the lens that is our own time. Having said this, there are also certain expressions or ways to describe things that would have been acceptable and non-racist in the eighteenth century, and even if we considered them differently today the use of them by an eighteenth-century person does not necessarily mean that person was a racist.

As far as I know, not much happened to the Linnaeus statues in Sweden. The vice-chancellor of Linnaeus University in Växjö, Peter Aronsson, needed to explain that they intended to keep the name of the university. The base of the bust of Linnaeus in Gothenburg Botanical Garden was given a sign with a message saying that Linnaeus paved the way for today’s racism. The statues still stand and the debate has peaked. It is not the first time this debate has surfaced, it happened to some extent during the Linnaeus tercentenary in 2007 and it will most likely happen again. I think it is good that it is discussed, but I do wish there was room for a more balanced, complex and initiated debate. One thing that I find interesting, for example, is that the “blame-pole” is so keen to find a “father” of racism, racial biology or scientific racism. As a colleague at the Department of History of Ideas

⁷ Söderfeldt, Birgitta, Ghaderi Berntsson, Shala and Landtblom, Anne-Marie, ‘Carl von Linné var ett barn av sin tid’, *UNT*, February 20th, 2021 (locked article), <https://unt.se/artikel/17m6k1wl>, accessed 14 April 2021.

and Sciences in Uppsala, Petter Hellström, pointed out: much of the debate has some kind of strange inverted “genius-cult” attached to it. And I agree with him: Linnaeus is not the “father” of any these isms, simply because they don’t have any “fathers”. They are results of historical processes where Linnaeus sometimes is one ingredient or factor, but not the sole explanation. I think that we can keep the Linnaeus statues, and I agree with what Magnus Rodell said in the interview: bad things or things gone wrong in history will not disappear if we remove statues. I do think that there are situations when the removal of a statue is the best solution and in other cases clarifying or commenting on texts are useful. In the case of Linnaeus perhaps signs with text are not good solutions either, since the text would have to be a very long and rather complicated one. I think a good solution is to keep on discussing these issues, and when there is an opportunity to put up a new statue or artwork; think of what that represents and what it comments on in terms of historical processes and history. It is of course no coincidence that we have more statues of slave traders than abolitionists or of more white men than of black women. Statues are placed in our shared outdoor spaces, it is important what they are symbols of and what they represent. For me a Linnaeus statue can be left standing, as it can represent the eternal question of who we are as human beings and how we should be. A Linnaean concept of a human being, who and what that is, is complex but also dynamic. It can be used in all sorts of contexts, both good and bad. I think it is our responsibility to continue a critical discussion and make good use of the Linnaean legacy and of Linnaeus in history.