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FOLHA DE TEXTO

IT'S TIME TO TAKE THE 'GREAT' WHITE MEN OF SCIENCE OFF THEIR PEDESTALS

Science's most elite magazine, *Nature*, published an editorial recently arguing that calling for monuments to figures such as J Marion Sims – often called the “father of gynaecology” – to be removed amounts to “whitewashing” history. Sims is widely praised for developing techniques in gynaecological surgery and founding a women's hospital in New York in the mid-1800s. But Sims experimented on enslaved black women and infants, operating up to 30 times on one woman to perfect his method. Last month, women wearing bloodied hospital gowns staged a protest by Sims's statue outside the New York Academy of Medicine. *Nature's* editorial sparked outrage and the magazine has now backpedalled.

As this latest controversy shows, science also has its monuments to white supremacy. These monuments should be removed. They are daggers to the open wounds of communities that have long known that white supremacy reaches far beyond the sphere of conventional politics into medicine and science. But removing these monuments won't be sufficient on its own. The row about Sims reminds us how hard the scientific establishment works to present an image of science as “apolitical”. What is needed is an honest re-examination of science's history and politics – an examination of the kind that scientists have often tried to silence.

There are also institutional monuments within science to be revisited. Britain's prestigious biomedical research institute, the Crick, is named after Francis Crick, famous for his Nobel-prizewinning work on the double helix structure of DNA with James Watson. Both were proponents of eugenics. In the early 1970s, Crick defended other prominent racist scientists who proposed a plan where individuals deemed unfit would be paid to undergo sterilisation. Crick wrote in one letter that “more than half of the difference between the average IQ of American whites and Negroes is due to genetic reasons”, which “will not be eliminated by any foreseeable change in the environment”. He urged that steps be taken to avoid the “serious” consequences. Crick is nonetheless presented as a scientific hero known for his “intelligence and openness to new ideas”.

So how should the scientific community come to terms with its history? One critic of *Nature's* editorial suggested that since science is a “self-correcting discipline”, scientists' decisions about who among them deserves to be honoured might self-correct too. But this appeal only sustains the myth of value-free, apolitical science. There's no magical feature of the scientific enterprise that insulates it from society and endows it with “self-correcting” powers. Even now, the new fascination with CRISPR – a system that can be used to edit the genomes of human embryos – has revived old visions of genetic determinism of the sort that fuels eugenics. Science is made up of many diverse and fragmented disciplines and, as in any other area of knowledge, it takes work to keep old demons such as racism at bay. Changes to the scientific enterprise come through constant struggle. It's often said that figures such as J Marion Sims simply conformed to the norms of their time. But fresh looks at history can revise conceptions of past norms. African-Americans of Sims' time, as Britt Rusert has shown, boldly challenged the racist science of their day by drawing on Charles Darwin's new evidence that all humans share a common ancestor. There were more options available at the time than is conventionally admitted. The movement to topple monuments to racist scientists offers an opportunity to rewrite the histories of science.