

F.M. ALEXANDER AND EVOLUTION

By Jean M. O. Fischer



*Concluding this two part article,
bemusement may give way to disgust, as the author
explores the darker side of Alexander's theories.*

PART TWO: EVOLUTION OF RACES AND CIVILISATIONS

When *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (MSI) was reprinted in 1918 FM inserted a new chapter called "Evolutionary Standards and Their Influence on the Crises of 1914", in which he could expound his theory of the evolution of races and civilisations to its fullest in view of the war.

"...if we take a survey of the history, ideals, habits of life, mental outlook, and general tendencies of the German nation, it will show conclusively that these self-hypnotised people approximated too closely to the lower animals and savages in their mode and chief aims of life." (MSI, p.166)

Bemused? It is not just picturesque language. He is actually serious and bemusement may give way to disgust when reading about "savages": "Even the spheres of courage were limited, and when confronted with the unusual these peoples quaked like cowards, and fled panic stricken from the

unaccustomed, as in the case of the Negroes in the Southern States of America when the men of the Ku-Klux-Klan pursued them on horseback dressed in white." (MSI, p.161)

Apparently it didn't occur to FM that the blacks - knowing all too well what too expect - might have fled from the accustomed. He concludes "The controlling and guiding forces in savage four-footed animals and in the savage black races are practically the same; and this serves to show that from the evolutionary standpoint the mental progress of these races has not kept pace with their physical evolution from the plane of the savage animal to that of the savage human." (MSI, p.72)

If someone, someday has the guts to publish the revised edition of MSI, teachers of the Technique might be faced with some unpleasant questions about the theoretical implications of the evolutionary theory which FM uses to explain and support his claim for the necessity of conscious control. However, the answer is that his theory is not invalidated by the various misconceptions and prejudices which were



Figure 1-4: Originally appearing in, *Types of Mankind*, Nott and Gliddon, 1854, with the text: "The palpable analogies and dissimilitudes between an inferior type of mankind and a superior type of monkey require no comment."

common at his time. As it is unconstructive to judge FM's evolutionary theory according to modern knowledge about evolution and races, I suggest we try to understand his arguments by looking at MSI in an historical context. What was known and believed at the turn of the century about evolution of races and civilisations?

Intellectual racism became serious after the abolition of slavery. Typical was Comte de Gobineau who claimed in his famous work *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, (1855) that the fate of civilisations is determined by racial composition, so the more a civilisation's racial character is diluted through miscegenation the more likely it is to sink into corruption and immorality.

Although the concepts of evolution and progress had been applied to races and civilisations before 1859, the theory of natural selection provided the armament needed to justify cultural prejudices.

When evolution was equated with progress - progress being the development of art, science, industry and fine manners - the conclusion became irrefutable: white man had progressed more, therefore white man was more evolved. Q. E. D.

This is an underlying assumption in the work of the armchair anthropologist J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890). We know FM was familiar with the work since he opens MSI by quoting from it. Here Frazer propounded the theory that magic, religion and science represent stages in the evolution of the human mind [F1, p.711]. The work had a wide influence on the thinking of people of its day (e.g. Freud's *Totem and Tabu*). Many a scholarly work both before and after was devoted to the study of the differences in culture or anatomy and these differences were accepted as proof of innate differences between nations or ethnic groups¹.

The a priori conviction of the superiority of the white race was such a strong and common social attitude that it clouded the judgement of scientists

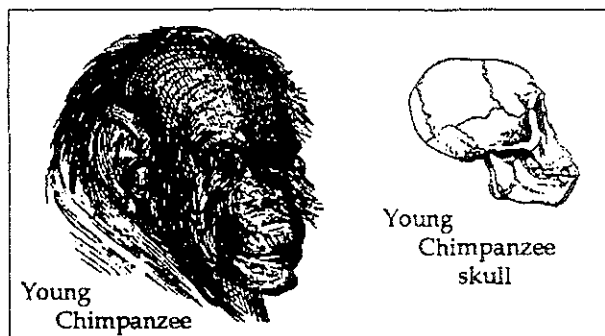
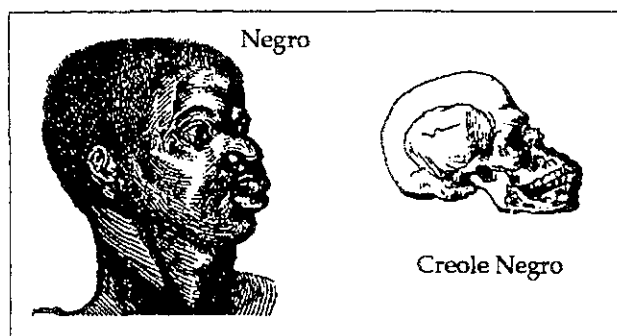
and directed their research along pre-established lines. Knowing what to prove, there remained only the problem of finding measurable differences between the groups of humans the researcher was dealing with. They measured everything from head to feet in order to find a correlation between a measurement and a discrepancy.

Craniometry and craniology were among the more popular as the circumference of the head or the weight of the brain were taken as indisputable evidence for intelligence, moral endowment or whatever ideals the researcher happened to cherish². Typical too was the discovery of 'apish traits' among those who didn't behave well (criminals, prostitutes etc.) so as to explain their 'apish behaviour.'

I do not say this to portray the period as a dark age of science, thereby indicating we are living in an enlightened age, as is so often believed. We must get away from the myth that science is an infallible accumulation of knowledge towards ultimate truth. Science is practised by humans and is embedded in a social context. When the amount of data is small in comparison with the strength of a tradition, science will tend to reflect the accepted biases. Science appealed to the educated middle-class as a substitute for religion, a substitute which was more in tune with a changing world. The Industrial Revolution had accelerated the pace of life, and science added to the general upheaval of old world views. However, there are limits to the amount of change which can be absorbed comfortably and it can be reduced by interpreting data in favour of the present world order.

White, middle-class, intellectual males (like scientists) therefore never doubted that they were the most evolved of all human beings (and of course of all life) and having thus set the criterion, they set about their task of assigning everyone else his proper status in the ascending line leading to themselves.

Since Linnaeus' grand classification system in 1735 there had been a tendency within science to



Commenting on these figures in his book, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen J. Gould wrote: "These grossly distorted illustrations were in 1854 presented as evidence of affinity between black and chimpanzees."

order the complex variation of the living world as a gradual ascending scale, but it culminated in the 19th century with the widespread idea of recapitulation; the idea that an organism passes through successive stages resembling the series of ancestral types from which it had descended.

Spencer, who had avidly seized on evolution to explain everything, was quick to see the consequences of recapitulation: since the adults of inferior groups must be like children of superior groups, it must follow that the "intellectual traits of the uncivilised...are traits recurring in the children of the civilized." (pp.117-118). The popularity of the idea affected the curriculum of many primary schools in the USA. For example, several schools proscribed Longfellow's poem "Song of Hiawatha" in early grades, reasoning that children, passing through the savage stage of their ancestral past, would identify with it. (p.114).

Such a widespread idea did not need an introduction, so we end up with a somewhat surprising comparison in MSI (p.126): "Savages and young children have not yet learnt to withhold that consent."

Recapitulation aside, different evolutionary pressures could explain all discrepancies. In a twisted anthropomorphic version of natural selection the fittest became the one who had struggled most. Since the white man is the fittest, he must have struggled most.

Primitive races had not been sufficiently challenged so they lagged behind the Caucasian race, whose brain grew gradually with the march of civilisation.

Theory propounded, science duly yielded the numbers to prove it. Famous at the end of the 19th century was a supposed demonstration of steady increase in brain size as European brains grew steadily from medieval to modern times³.

The British Empire crowned the world and

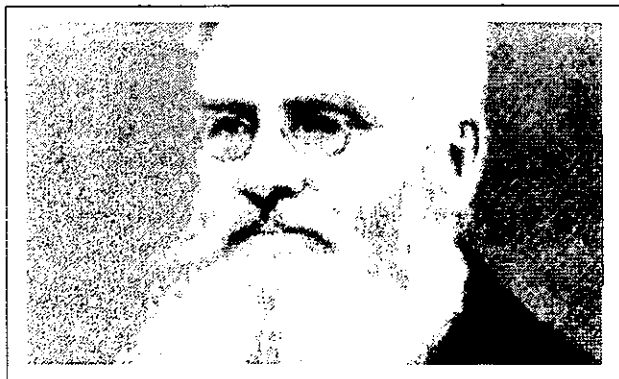
what a comfortable explanation natural selection provided: it was successful because it was fit because it had struggled. Other societies and cultures lacking science and industrial logic were lazy and emotional, behaved like children and had to be helped. The notion of "white man's burden" became a justification for imperialism.

It also explained the downfall of past civilisations: they had become extinct because they were not fit enough. FM is only propagating a widely held opinion when he writes: "In the past history of the world an intellectual civilisation such as that of Egypt, of Persia, of Greece, or of Rome, perished from internal causes, of which the chief was a certain moral and physical deterioration which rendered the nation unequal to a struggle with younger, more vigorous and - this is important - wilder, more natural peoples." (MSI, p.7).

So, since "this principle of evolution applies equally to a nation" (MSI, p.158) and the Germans are behaving barbarously, it is "surely proof positive that they have progressed but little on the upward evolutionary stage from the state occupied by the brute beast and the savage." (MSI, p.166) England and the USA - needless to say - have long since "reached a stage in their evolution which made the methods of Attila unthinkable." (MSI, p.167).

However, apart from a verbal bashing of the Germans, the purpose of the chapter is to "consider the different processes adopted by different nations, in order to gauge accurately their different stages of evolution and their possibilities of growth and development towards real individual and national progress." (MSI, p.158).

FM used "courage" as a standard of measuring evolutionary progress. Blacks lacked it, Germans lacked it (MSI, p.171) and Londoners possessed it since they were "not intimidated by Zeppelin raids by night" (MSI, p.171) The conclusion was obvious: Londoners had progressed further in evolution. This



A. R. Wallace in 1878.

fitted with the common view that city dwelling is a more civilised form of life and it followed that the rural population must be somewhat more backwards. Compare Frazer and FM: "The truth seems to be, that to this day the peasant remains a pagan and savage at heart: his civilisation is merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing the solid core of paganism and savagery below." (F2, p.60), "In some ways the physical type which represents the rural labouring population is, in my opinion, even more degenerate than the type we find in cities, and mentally there can be no comparison between the two." (MSI, p.6).

Degeneracy was the watchword of the eugenic movement whose popularity peaked in the beginning of the 20th century.

Eugenics, which was coined by Francis Galton (1822-1911), a cousin to Darwin and a pioneer of modern statistics through his obsession with measurement, was the 'science' of improving human stock by giving "the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable" (Galton in K, p.1). Natural selection allowed only the fit to survive, but could man not take charge of his own evolution by applying the laws of heredity to human matings in order to secure biologically desirable offspring? "What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly." (Galton, K, p.12). Eugenics would accelerate the process of breeding out the vestigial barbarism of the human race and manipulate evolution to bring his physique into consonance with his advanced moral ideals.

However, anxiety crept in with the thought that since civilisation had suspended natural selection and replaced it with "reproductive selection", which favoured the most fertile, not the most fit, the race was in imminent danger of degeneracy and degradation.

Spencer, the apostle of social Darwinism,

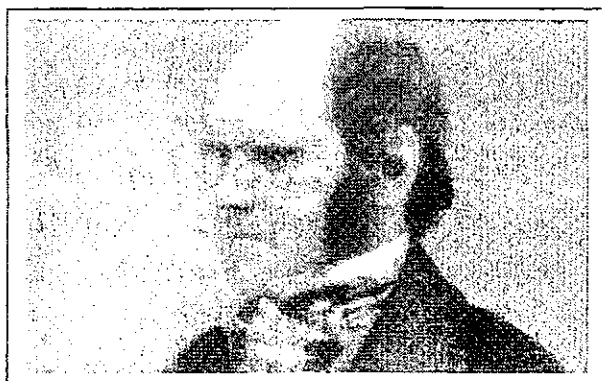
proclaimed that those who advocated social welfare measures were "blind to the fact that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members." (EB, pp.20-773).

Darwin, who accepted Galton's conclusions that genius is hereditary was apparently equally disturbed about the prospects. A. R. Wallace wrote in 1890: "In one of my last conversations with Darwin he expressed himself very gloomily on the future of humanity, on the ground that in our modern civilization natural selection had no play, and the fittest did not survive. Those who succeed in the race for wealth are by no means the best or the most intelligent, and it is notorious that our population is more largely renewed in each generation from the lower than from the middle and upper classes." (K, p.70).

Although Mendel's paper, which was to become the foundation of the science of genetics, was published in 1866, the study of genetics didn't start until 1900 and it wasn't until the mid-thirties that the complexity of gene interaction forming traits, slowly dawned on the scientific community. Until then it was generally assumed that all variation in anatomy and behaviour was due to single genes. Among traits believed to be exclusively determined by genes were epilepsy, alcoholism, 'pauperism', criminality and 'feeble-mindedness' (which was used indiscriminately for a wide range of mental deficiencies). Behavioural repertoire was atomized into traits; e.g. if people were promiscuous it was assumed they had a gene for promiscuity.

The simplicity made the message intelligible to the gullible and eugenics became popular. It was discussed without reserve in newspapers and magazines and became a standard topic in intellectual circles. It was strongly advocated by its adherents as the solution to mankind's problem (as FM says: "The solution of the problem which is commonly put forward..." (MSI, p.194)), and it was only natural that FM would need to comment on it when his arguments followed evolutionary principles.

The footnote on p.6 in MSI is clearly addressed to the eugenic suggestion of "intelligent mating". (People stormed to the lectures at the Bedford College for Women where they were told that some knowledge of eugenics would "in many cases prevent falling in love with the wrong people." (K, p.68).) FM does not support this idea and is in general not impressed with the eugenic solution, nor with the basic assumption that nature defies nature and behaviour is biologically determined. "Although the science of heredity is still tentative and indetermi-



Charles Darwin in 1854

nate, no reasoning person can doubt from this and other instances that in the vast majority of cases at least, the influence of heredity can be practically eradicated." [MSI, p.110].

When the popular view - propagated in journals - held that paupers spawned paupers and criminals bred criminals, FM obviously didn't believe there were many 'reasoning' persons about.

National physical degeneracy and deterioration was a main argument for eugenics. Statistics proved the point, forgetting, however, that the apparent increase in prostitution, crime, 'feeble-mindedness' etc. was in many instances due to different and improved methods of collecting data. In 1903 Parliament established a commission on "national deterioration" as it was generally held that moral and physical standards were declining.

FM did not disagree that there had been a "marked tendency toward physical degeneracy among the men and women of all civilised races," [MSI, p.193] and believed that the "standard of kinaesthetic potentiality has been lowered." [MSI, p.120] He is, however, far from clear when it comes to giving an explanation in evolutionary terms, sometimes exercising Lamarckian notions (that acquired characteristics are inherited), sometimes railing against the fad of blaming inheritance for physical decline when he sees the reason to be "the rigid rule of physical life and mental outlook" we pass on to our children, "either by precept, or by holding up our imperfections for imitation". He adds, "and then we wonder what is the cause of the prevailing physical degeneration!" [MSI, p.118].

MSI was written in view of the then prevailing debate about how mankind should deal with its ever-increasing problems. The war was a confirmation that humankind (some more than others) still worked on a subconscious plane. FM was confident that his technique for conscious control "is the only true fundamental upon which mankind in a

state of civilisation may progress and evolve to a condition commanding freedom for all time from those limiting, narrowing, and debasing qualities which belong to the animal spheres of existence." [MSI, p.157]. Unfortunately, the use of such language today makes MSI and CCC more confusing reading than necessary.

During the twenties and thirties enough knowledge about anthropology, evolution and genetics was acquired to warrant a revision of MSI and CCC for the 1940's editions. A revision could have weeded out the worst flaws of his treatise. It is a shame that FM did not keep his theory up to date, as I believe that the core of his evolutionary theory - man's transcendence to consciousness - is still valid and relevant.

FOOTNOTES

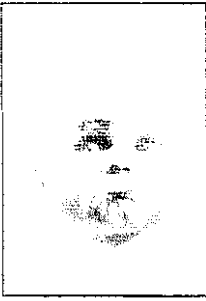
- 1) No anthropologist today wants to be associated with the method or theories of Frazer and other intellectual anthropologists who found 'origins' for behaviour by the method used by FM in CCC, p. 72. Here all rites and worshipping are a spin-off of witnessing a thunderstorm. It is "if-I-were-a-horse" reasoning: "If I were a savage, how would I react to lightning?" (See also MSI, p. 37 & 39). His explanation is similar to R. R. Marett (1909), who argued that it was feelings and actions that gave rise to ideas and not vice versa, and to A. E. Cawley (1909) whose general theme was that religion is ultimately only a product of primitive man's fear, [E].
- 2) In 1969 the anthropologist P. V. Tobias gave a courageous lecture in South Africa exposing the myth that group differences in brain size bear any relationship to intelligence. He enumerates the 14 biasing factors (like body size, age and nutrition) which affects brain size and the measurement of it and finally shows that group differences in brain size have never been demonstrated at all. [T]
- 3) The actual figures do not suggest anything like that, but creative interpretation saved the a priori conclusion [G, p.95].
- 4) The fallacy is the common one of reification, i.e. of converting abstract concepts into entities. As it was done with the primary control after Magnus' paper in 1928.
- 5) Although the commission concluded that there was no marked deterioration, the debate continued into the thirties.

REFERENCES

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 E: *Theories of Primitive Religion*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Oxford University Press, 1965. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1973 edition.
The Golden Bough, J. G. Frazer, Abridged version 1922, (reprinted 1987, Papermac).
 F2 *Frazer and the Golden Bough*, R. Angus Downie, Gollancz.
 G: *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould, Penguin, 1981.
 K: *In the Name of Eugenics*, Daniel J. Kevles, Penguin, 1985.
 MSI *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, F. Matthias Alexander, Chaterson, 1941 American edition (red binding).
 T: *Brain-size, Grey Matter and Race - Fact or Fiction?*, Phillip Tobias, American Journal of Physical Anthropology, Vol. 32, 1970.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Every Journal makes mistakes and this is one of ours - the illustrations on pp. 288-289 were supplied by the author for publication with this, the second part of his article. We apologise to our non-plussed readers (and author) who correctly wondered what these illustrations were also doing in the first part of the article from DIRECTION Vol. 1 (6). To compound our mistake, we also misnamed the article: It was *F. M. Alexander and Evolution*, not just F.M. Jean: can we ever be forgiven?



COUNTERPOINT

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHAT'S THE FUSS?

Dear Sir,

I do not in any way agree with the thesis or speculations of Jeroen Staring (CounterPoint, Vol. 1 (6) p.232); nor can I understand why he wants to pursue what seems to me to be a sterile line of research that has no bearing on the Technique. Whether you say that Alexander was a "racist" or a "eugenicist" must depend on the definitions you accept, but clearly his teaching could not be cited in support of any such views. He did not advocate either "racism" or "eugenics" but was concerned from first to last with the health and well-being of the individual.

As to the story concerning J.D. Beresford, I know that he helped with the early writing of at least the first part of *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. F.M. told me about it himself. In talking about it, I used the expression "ghost-writing" because his part in it was unacknowledged; but in no way could he be said to have written the book, and the suggestion that there was any formal contract between them is quite absurd. F.M. would never have allowed anybody to restrict his freedom with his own writings.

Walter Carrington,
London, England

WHO'S PERFECT?

Dear Sir,

I always look forward to *DIRECTION* appearing. I was especially excited to find this last issue was entitled 'Kids', as I am pregnant and was interested to see how others have coped with this as teachers & people. Much of the issue was interesting and thought-provoking, especially the articles concerning teaching and observing children, with so many practical ideas. However, I felt uneasy about the general tone of the issue, which I felt was somewhat quasi-religious or 'goody goody'.

It seems to me that Alexander teachers have the possibility of conveying an almost blind adherence to a principle which solves all life's problems. Let's be honest, it isn't like that. I think we can bring more contrast to the Alexander work, by being open about the difficult times, and how we

*"I have certainly not
experienced pregnancy
as just one happy
experience of
forward & up."*

cope with these. Sometimes the slump is too tempting, or having a bit more sleep is more important than trying to be the perfect human being.

We must be aware of how we can sound quasi-religious, making ourselves seem extra special, even better than others, because of our interest in the Technique, by only dwelling on the good moments or successful ones, the ones we feel we can 'pat ourselves on the back' for.

When we always talk of these results, and not the thinking behind them, there is a danger of becoming associated with therapy, as opposed to education. I personally don't find, even after many years of Alexander work, that life is just one happy experience of 'forward and up'. I have certainly not experienced pregnancy in this way: feeling sick, taut and very tired, especially in the early months. I did not feel it appropriate to have Alexander work, as it made me faint, and I certainly knew that it was unwise for me to teach. I felt far too unwell.

We don't have to feel guilty about this, or that we have failed the Technique - on the contrary we have the gift of choice, and sometimes it is OK to have a good old slump, or just go to bed.

Judith Kleinman,
London, England.

