

Appendix 10: Thomas Henry Huxley

Introduction to Adrian Desmond's notes on T.H. Huxley and Racism Anne Barrett, College Archivist

Adrian Desmond was invited to comment on the matter of Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) and racism in response to his essay *Emancipation Black and White* 1865.

Adrian is Huxley's biographer, and an historian of 19th century science, keynote speaker at Imperial College Huxley centenary events 1995.

His writing style is fast paced, dense in information, and broadly contextualising of his biographical subject.

Adrian provides a balanced historical assessment of Huxley's complex character. Huxley's essay *Emancipation – Black and White* espouses views that are clearly unacceptable and abhorrant today. Adrian also notes that Huxley's views evolved over his lifetime to the point where they would be considered progressive based on generally held views in the population at the time.

This is one essay out of the literally hundreds of essays, lectures, notes, reviews, that Huxley wrote, gave or had published.

Huxley and Racism Adrian Desmond ⁱ

Author of *Huxley The Devil's Disciple* 1994; *Huxley Evolution's High Priest* 1997.

[Annotations in red text, and End Notes, by Anne Barrett Imperial College Archivist & Corporate Records Manager]

First, a caveat. I think we have to beware of judging the past by the present. Assessing past actors by present criteria is fraught with danger, when the only reasonable way of critiquing them is to weigh them up against the standards of their own time: that is, to be sensitive to the contemporary context, in T. H. Huxley's case society from 1830s-1890s.

Modern accusations of "racism" applied to historical figures are a pretty blunt instrument. Even ignoring the anachronism, they generally take no account of a person's changing views through life, and Huxley – like society itself – saw tremendous changes from the 1840s to 1880s. The odd thing is that British society actually hardened in its racial attitudes during the century (as Douglas Lorimer's *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* ⁱⁱ showed so well) while it looks to me as though Huxley's attitudes were actually softening. Lorimer showed that black people were treated quite casually and were plainly accepted in the early decades of the nineteenth century, despite the often xenophobic attitudes of many Britons. By high Victorian times, however, racial stereotyping and ranking had become the norm, even in scientific society. To some extent Huxley's case bucked the trend, as we will see.

Nor is the term "scientific racism" useful in Huxley's case. This term was initially used by historians to characterise the American ultra-racists in the Confederacy and after, that is, those who depicted black people as not only anatomically 'lower' and intellectually 'inferior', but who then used that to justify slavery. If that is the definition used, it cannot be applied to Huxley. He hated slavery and deplored the white supremacists (a contemporary term) running London's Anthropological Society ⁱⁱⁱ, who were in league with the Confederates in America (indeed Richmond [Richmond Virginia, USA prominent place of the Confederacy] had its spies inside the society). He effectively ousted them from the Society and publicly denounced their pernicious views. This despite his favourite sister's husband being a surgeon with the Confederate army during the Civil War: not even family ties could persuade him to weaken his support for the anti-slavery Union.

While up to the 1860s Huxley conventionally considered black people as 'inferior' (the standard view in society), he still insisted on their being given every opportunity to advance with no impediment being placed in their way. He advocated, in short, unfettered freedom. ["Emancipation – Black and White", 1865 See the article at [End Note iv](#)] In the same way, he, like the rest of male society, viewed women at the time as biologically and intellectually inferior. But he still insisted on advanced educations for his own daughters; moreover, in his first class for school teachers at South Kensington in 1871, the single school marm came top of the large class, which put the writing on the wall^v. By the end of Huxley's career, women and men sat in equal numbers in his classes and on an equal footing. So he was himself changing.

In a similar sort of way his attitude to race softened over the years. In "Emancipation – Black and White" [[see End Note iv](#)] (written in the wake of the American Civil War and explaining effectively that

abolition would change nothing in nature) Huxley, though an abolitionist, made what today would be considered his most defamatory off-hand remarks:

It may be quite true that some negroes are better than some white men; but no rational man, cognisant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the average white man. And, if this be true, it is simply incredible that, when all his disabilities are removed, and our prognathous relative has a fair field and no favour, as well as no oppressor, he will be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival, in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts and not by bites. The highest places in the hierarchy of civilisation will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins, though it is by no means necessary that they should be restricted to the lowest. But whatever the position of stable equilibrium into which the laws of social gravitation may bring the negro, all responsibility for the result will henceforward lie between Nature and him.

But taking on the slavery-supporting white supremacists in the Anthropological Society was also forcing him to dive deep into ethnological studies, and it had an effect. Among the key documents on human 'race' were Huxley's 1867 lectures to the Birmingham and Midland Institute, "On the Character, Distribution, and Origin of the Principal Modifications of Mankind". The old doyen of Huxley studies, Cyril Bibby in the 1950s, was probably the first to identify the reports of these talks by Huxley in the *Birmingham Daily Post*. But Bibby's one-sided summary of their contents was avowedly designed to exonerate Huxley from any charge of racism. Bibby was rather over-zealous in his cherry-picking when he wrote : "By this time his (Huxley's) studies had quite convinced him that there were no grounds for believing that Europeans were biologically superior to Africans or that primitive peoples were constitutionally incapable of cultural advancement, and he went straight to the sexual centre of racial prejudice by arguing that miscegenation was harmful only where social conditions made it so." (Bibby, *Scientist Extraordinary*, 61^{vi}) These newspaper reports are little known; indeed, no one else to my knowledge has subsequently read them: Huxley studies tend to be largely derivative, and Bibby's account has been accepted uncritically; one can still find online efforts to exonerate Huxley using Bibby's summary without examining his source ("Emancipation: Gender and Race", <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/guide18.html>),^{vii} leaving the impression that Huxley had suddenly leapt forward a century-and-a-half in his liberated views. In truth Huxley's partial emancipation was a far more complex, conflicted and time-worn affair. These crucial *Birmingham Daily Post* sources actually show that Huxley was primarily countering the "audacity of ignorance" of the pro-slavery Anthropologicals (with whom he was engaged in a furious battle at this time). He trashed their views that the black man's hands and feet were peculiar, indeed that he "could not hold himself properly upright". He scorched their "ridiculous" views that blacks were a separate species, making hybridism with whites impossible, or that they were 'unimprovable' (in terms of civilization), and concluded that the "higher races in dealing with the lower" should act no differently than with their own kind, damning slavery (which drew the audience's applause). But notice he is still talking of "higher" and "lower" races: there is none of the egalitarianism tacitly implied by Bibby, who seems to have been misled by such statements as:

what conclusion might or might not be drawn from the fact that some men were of lower organisation than others? There were not many of much interest in the way of positive conclusions; but there were some conclusions which must not be drawn, and these were quite as important. In the first place there was no shade of justification for the assertion that any existing modification of mankind now known was to be considered as an intermediate form between man and the animals next below him in the scale of the fauna of the world [as the pro-slavers insisted]. The negro was by no means the lowest type of mankind. The Australian was considerably lower in all respects. The negro was distinguished beyond everything by the crisp woolly hair. But the apes were all straight-haired, like the respectable assemblage in that lecture theatre, and in that respect the white people were a great deal more like the lower animals than the negro was. It was said that the negro had a heel which projected very much further beyond the articulation of the leg than it did in the white man, and this was often said to be one of the most common marks of his degradation. He doubted the statement; but if it was true; if there was one thing in the world that distinguished the foot of an ape from that of a man, it was that the ape had a very short heel; so that the more strenuously the white man succeeded in proving that the negro had a very long heel, the more determinedly the white man put himself below the negro. [*Birmingham Daily Post*, 7 Aug. 1867 p3, 12 Aug. 1867, p4.]^{viii}

This encapsulates the tenor of Huxley's approach, and you would be hard-pressed to square it with Bibby's

'paraphrase'. Huxley was simply damning the extreme slavery ideology which made black men another species, more ape-like. But set against this, you have to appreciate that one of Huxley's principal aims in these speeches was to examine the "higher and lower organisations of particular stocks". He continually talks of "lower" human stocks or modifications. He put "Englishmen" on the highest rung with the largest brains, while in the Aborigine and "negro" "the whole organisation was lower and more brutal". The reason, of course, was that 'civilised' whites were still his evaluative yardstick, all other races falling away. This racial stereotyping was the norm of the age: every Briton accepted it (in fact in Britain I can only think of the Owenite socialists^x in earlier decades who adopted a more egalitarian cultural relativism – no one else did). Huxley used emotive language, as was also common at the time, appealing to aesthetics, comparing, for example, the "negro" "with his dark skin, prognathous or 'snouty' face, and woolly hair," with the "beautiful fair flaxen hair" of a white maiden (notice the gender jump, which he was not the only one to resort to in comparisons). He would switch from 'other' races in the round to "the fair white, existing in the most beautiful forms, in English, Scandinavian, and German women". If the eye of the beholder saw beauty in his own 'race' (and Huxley was always partial to 'flaxen' hair), then so it was in every popular writer and scientific man of his generation.

So we have to beware of traditional Huxley literature, which has an inbuilt whitewashing tendency, almost an unconscious one. There is no egalitarianism here. And if current critiques make us look with new eyes at this old literature they have served a useful purpose. Nor does the traditional literature do justice to Huxley's motives: he was not standing up *for* the "negro", but standing up *to* the white supremacists, which was a different thing. And only a study of his political ideology – of liberalism, meritocracy, and free-market economics – can explain why, but that is another matter.

None of this is to deny, though, that he was moving. He was now overridingly using the term "stocks" rather than "races": the former because he was now thinking more in evolutionary terms rather than of static essences, and the latter partly because the discourse risked being hijacked by the white supremacists.

Three years later, in his most influential paper (1870, *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*) "On the Geographical Distribution of the Chief Modifications of Mankind", ^x Huxley simply characterised the human groups spacially by their anatomical distinctions, hoping to use this to get evolutionary clues as to their origin. In this paper there was no talk of inferiority or ranking of geographical groups. So one senses him changing through the years, becoming more sensitive and reacting to the reactionaries. By 1878 he actually thought, at least in terms of the European races, that social and political distinctions were as much responsible for racial designations as any biological difference. In the end, he admitted in *Nature*, "we knew so little about the races that it was impossible to disentangle what any particular nation was. We did on the other hand, know that there was a great deal of human nature in all kinds of men, and of social conditions which exercise an enormous influence." (*Nature*, August 1878, pp 479-80.^{xi})

Conclusion. My take above is still the view of an old white male, and I have no doubt that different tacit assumptions would induce a young black female historian to see Huxley quite differently, and with equal justification. Be that as it may, from my perspective, if Huxley was guilty of something today that is popularly labelled 'racism' (defined in his case as undervaluing black people, the more so at the start of his career) it was of a less pernicious sort than that held by many of those around him. And he lost some of what we would now term racial prejudice as he advanced in years, despite many of his confrères stiffening their racial resolve.

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ⁱⁱ *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* **Lorimer, Douglas** A. University of Leicester press 1978

ⁱⁱⁱ The Anthropological Society was founded in 1863 as a breakaway group from the Ethnological Society founded 1843. In 1871 the two societies merged to form the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Became Royal Anthropological Institute of GB and Ireland in 1907.

^{iv} **Full article below: EMANCIPATION--BLACK AND WHITE Author T.H. Huxley (1865.)**

Quashie's plaintive inquiry, "Am I not a man and a brother?" seems at last to have received its final reply--the recent decision of the fierce trial by battle on the other side of the Atlantic fully concurring with that long since delivered here in a more peaceful way.

The question is settled; but even those who are most thoroughly convinced that the doom is just, must see good grounds for repudiating half the arguments which have been employed by the winning side; and for doubting whether its ultimate results will embody the hopes of the victors, though they may more than realise the fears of the vanquished. It may be quite true that some negroes are better than some white men; but no rational man, cognisant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the average white man. And, if this be true, it is simply incredible that, when all his disabilities are removed, and our prognathous relative has a fair field and no favour, as well as no oppressor, he will be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival, in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts and not by bites. The highest places in the hierarchy of civilisation will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins, though it is by no means necessary that they should be restricted to the lowest. But whatever the position of stable equilibrium into which the laws of social gravitation may bring the negro, all responsibility for the result will henceforward lie between Nature and him. The white man may wash his hands of it, and the Caucasian conscience be void of reproach for evermore. And this, if we look to the bottom of the matter, is the real justification for the abolition policy.

The doctrine of equal natural rights may be an illogical delusion; emancipation may convert the slave from a well-fed animal into a pauperised man; mankind may even have to do without cotton shirts; but all these evils must be faced if the moral law, that no human being can arbitrarily dominate over another without grievous damage to his own nature, be, as many think, as readily demonstrable by experiment as any physical truth. If this be true, no slavery can be abolished without a double emancipation, and the master will benefit by freedom more than the freed-man.

The like considerations apply to all the other questions of emancipation which are at present stirring the world--the multifarious demands that classes of mankind shall be relieved from restrictions imposed by the artifice of man, and not by the necessities of Nature. One of the most important, if not the most important, of all these, is that which daily threatens to become the "irrepressible" woman question. What social and political rights have women? What ought they to be allowed, or not allowed, to do, be, and suffer? And, as involved in, and underlying all these questions, how ought they to be educated?

There are philogynists as fanatical as any "misogynists" who, reversing our antiquated notions, bid the man look upon the woman as the higher type of humanity; who ask us to regard the female intellect as the clearer and the quicker, if not the stronger; who desire us to look up to the feminine moral sense as the purer and the nobler; and bid man abdicate his usurped sovereignty over Nature in favour of the female line. On the other hand, there are persons not to be outdone in all loyalty and just respect for womankind, but by nature hard of head and haters of delusion, however charming, who not only repudiate the new woman-worship which so many sentimentalists and some philosophers are desirous of setting up, but, carrying their audacity further, deny even the natural equality of the sexes. They assert, on the contrary, that in every excellent character, whether mental or physical, the average woman is inferior to the average man, in the sense of having that character less in quantity and lower in quality. Tell these persons of the rapid perceptions and the instinctive intellectual insight of women, and they reply that the feminine mental peculiarities, which pass under these names, are merely the outcome of a greater impressibility to the superficial aspects of things, and of the absence of that restraint upon expression which, in men, is imposed by reflection and a sense of responsibility. Talk of the passive endurance of the weaker sex, and opponents of this kind remind you that Job was a man, and that, until quite recent times, patience and long-suffering were not counted among the specially feminine virtues. Claim passionate tenderness as especially feminine, and the inquiry is made whether all the best love-poetry in existence (except, perhaps, the "Sonnets from the Portuguese") has not been written by men; whether the song which embodies the ideal of pure and tender passion--"Adelaida"--was written by *Frau* Beethoven; whether it was the Fornarina, or Raphael, who painted the Sistine Madonna. Nay, we have known one such heretic go so far as to lay his hands upon the ark itself, so to speak, and to defend the startling paradox that, even in physical beauty, man is the superior. He admitted, indeed, that there was a brief period of early youth when it might be hard to say whether the prize should be awarded to the graceful undulations of the female figure, or the perfect balance and supple vigour of the male frame. But while our new Paris might hesitate between the youthful Bacchus and the Venus emerging from the foam, he averred that, when Venus and Bacchus had reached thirty, the point no longer admitted of a doubt; the male form having then attained its greatest nobility, while the female is far gone in decadence; and that, at this epoch, womanly beauty, so far as it is independent of grace or expression, is a question of drapery and accessories.

Supposing, however, that all these arguments have a certain foundation; admitting, for a moment, that they are comparable to those by which the inferiority of the negro to the white man may be demonstrated, are they of any value as against woman-emancipation? Do they afford us the smallest ground for refusing to educate women as well as men--to give women the same civil and political rights as men? No mistake is so

commonly made by clever people as that of assuming a cause to be bad because the arguments of its supporters are, to a great extent, non-sensical. And we conceive that those who may laugh at the arguments of the extreme philogynists, may yet feel bound to work heart and soul towards the attainment of their practical ends.

As regards education, for example. Granting the alleged defects of women, is it not somewhat absurd to sanction and maintain a system of education which would seem to have been specially contrived to exaggerate all these defects?

Naturally not so firmly strung, nor so well balanced as boys, girls are in great measure debarred from the sports and physical exercises which are justly thought absolutely necessary for the full development of the vigour of the more favoured sex. Women are, by nature, more excitable than men--prone to be swept by tides of emotion, proceeding from hidden and inward, as well as from obvious and external causes; and female education does its best to weaken every physical counterpoise to this nervous mobility--tends in all ways to stimulate the emotional part of the mind and stunt the rest. We find girls naturally timid, inclined to dependence, born conservatives; and we teach them that independence is unladylike; that blind faith is the right frame of mind; and that whatever we may be permitted, and indeed encouraged, to do to our brother, our sister is to be left to the tyranny of authority and tradition. With few insignificant exceptions, girls have been educated either to be drudges, or toys, beneath man; or a sort of angels above him; the highest ideal aimed at oscillating between Clärchen and Beatrice. The possibility that the ideal of womanhood lies neither in the fair saint, nor in the fair sinner; that the female type of character is neither better nor worse than the male, but only weaker; that women are meant neither to be men's guides nor their play-things, but their comrades, their fellows, and their equals, so far as Nature puts no bar to that equality, does not seem to have entered into the minds of those who have had the conduct of the education of girls.

If the present system of female education stands self-condemned, as inherently absurd; and if that which we have just indicated is the true position of woman, what is the first step towards a better state of things? We reply, emancipate girls. Recognise the fact that they share the senses, perceptions, feelings, reasoning powers, emotions, of boys, and that the mind of the average girl is less different from that of the average boy, than the mind of one boy is from that of another; so that whatever argument justifies a given education for all boys, justifies its application to girls as well. So far from imposing artificial restrictions upon the acquirement of knowledge by women, throw every facility in their way. Let our Faustinas, if they will, toil through the whole round of

"Juristerei und Medizin,
Und leider! auch Philosophie."

Let us have "sweet girl graduates" by all means. They will be none the less sweet for a little wisdom; and the "golden hair" will not curl less gracefully outside the head by reason of there being brains within. Nay, if obvious practical difficulties can be overcome, let those women who feel inclined to do so descend into the gladiatorial arena of life, not merely in the guise of *retiariae*, as heretofore, but as bold *sicariae*, breasting the open fray. Let them, if they so please, become merchants, barristers, politicians. Let them have a fair field, but let them understand, as the necessary correlative, that they are to have no favour. Let Nature alone sit high above the lists, "rain influence and judge the prize."

And the result? For our parts, though loth to prophesy, we believe it will be that of other emancipations. Women will find their place, and it will neither be that in which they have been held, nor that to which some of them aspire. Nature's old salique law will not be repealed, and no change of dynasty will be effected. The big chests, the massive brains, the vigorous muscles and stout frames of the best men will carry the day, whenever it is worth their while to contest the prizes of life with the best women. And the hardship of it is, that the very improvement of the women will lessen their chances. Better mothers will bring forth better sons, and the impetus gained by the one sex will be transmitted, in the next generation, to the other. The most Darwinian of theorists will not venture to propound the doctrine, that the physical disabilities under which women have hitherto laboured in the struggle for existence with men are likely to be removed by even the most skilfully conducted process of educational selection.

We are, indeed, fully prepared to believe that the bearing of children may, and ought, to become as free from danger and long disability to the civilised woman as it is to the savage; nor is it improbable that, as society advances towards its right organisation, motherhood will occupy a less space of woman's life than it has hitherto done. But still, unless the human species is to come to an end altogether--a consummation which can hardly be desired by even the most ardent advocate of "women's rights"--somebody must be good

enough to take the trouble and responsibility of annually adding to the world exactly as many people as die out of it. In consequence of some domestic difficulties, Sydney Smith is said to have suggested that it would have been good for the human race had the model offered by the hive been followed, and had all the working part of the female community been neuters. Failing any thorough-going reform of this kind, we see nothing for it but the old division of humanity into men potentially, or actually, fathers, and women potentially, if not actually, mothers. And we fear that so long as this potential motherhood is her lot, woman will be found to be fearfully weighted in the race of life.

The duty of man is to see that not a grain is piled upon that load beyond what Nature imposes; that injustice is not added to inequality.

^v Miss McConnish who became Huxley's class Demonstrator in physiology in 1874, having been the only woman in Huxley's first practical class at South Kensington in which she took top marks

^{vi} *Scientist Extraordinary: the life and work of Thomas Henry Huxley 1825–1895*. Bibby, Cyril Oxford: Pergamon (1972)

^{vii} [This material was put up on this website, using much Huxley archival material unauthorised by the College Archives, by a Charles Blinderman, (deceased 2002 aged 71), past researcher who used Huxley material in the College Archives pre 1988.]

^{viii} Birmingham Daily Post part of British Newspaper Archive, which is online behind a pay wall, but can have a free trial:

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search/results/1857-01-01/1895-12-31?basicsearch=12%20august%201867&exactsearch=true&retrievecountrycounts=false&newspapertitle=birmingham%20daily%20post>

^{ix} Owenism is the utopian socialist philosophy of 19th-century social reformer Robert Owen and his followers and successors, who are known as Owenites. ... The Owenite movement undertook several experiments in the establishment of utopian communities organized according to communitarian and cooperative principles 1820s to c.1830s. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owenism>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Owen

^x https://www.jstor.org/stable/3014371?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

^{xi} <https://www.nature.com/articles/018467a0.pdf?origin=ppub> p.480.lines 50-56