The Carrel Affaire a Decade After: Scientific Authority, Popular Eugenics and Fascism

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A decade ago the almost forgotten name of Alexis Carrel, Nobel Prize winner for medicine and advocate of eugenics, became the center of a bitter polemic after the Front National claimed him as "a man of the right and the founder of ecology." Thereafter, academics and intellectuals re-examined Carrel's racist and fascist views while human rights organizations demanded the removal of his name from all public places through symbolic *débaptisations* of streets and a medical school. Carrel was born in 1873 and after finishing his medical studies at the University of Lyon he emmigrated to America, where he became one of the first members of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research of New York. In 1912 he received the Nobel Prize for his work on vascular surgery and organ transplantation. He also performed fundamental research on wound healing and tissue and organ culture. In the mid-1930s he became a celebrity once again after he published L'Homme cet inconnu (1935), a book in which he combined the "holistic" critique of modern civilization with spiritualistic, technocratic and eugenic proposals to "regenerate" human kind. The book's huge success convinced him that his scientific and literary prestige could be used to carry out his sociobiological agenda. He grabbed the opportunity when in 1941 the Vichy regime appointed him head of the Fondation française pour l'étude des problèmes humains. The foundation was Carrel's great monument of institution building and a singular experiment of sociobiological engineering along multidisciplinary and technocratic lines. Stigmatized by his collaborationist record, he died in late 1944. However, in the early postwar years conservative and Catholic authors rehabilitated him by clearing his name from any association with scientific racism and fascism and reinventing him as a humanist and mystic.

I will suggest two possible genealogies for understanding Carrel's historical meaning as well as his present-day appeal. In the first of them the scientist emerges as a literary manifestation of the antimodern pessimism that spread among the western elites after World War I. This perspective helps us not only to understand the popularity of the "holistic" paradigm within the cultural history of the twentieth century, but also the editorial strategies that brought together science, culture and politics into a successfully commercial formula. The other genealogy links Carrel to the "new" scientific humanism and the fashionable technocratic sociobiology of the interwar years. This second reading contextualizes his proposals to regenerate mankind within the larger and more complex institutional framework of the Fondation française pour l'étude des problèmes humains and wartime sociobiological research and policies.

Marketing Cultural Despair

Carrel's career as a "thinker" built upon his prestige as a Nobel Prize winner. He began writing non-scientific works late in his life, after he turned sixty and when he had completed his scientific work—shortly before retirement from the Rockefeller Institute (July 1939). With the exception of his conference "The Future Progress of Medicine" (given at Johns Hopkins and published by the Scientific Monthly in 1925), he published nothing outside sience before L'Homme cet inconnu. Thereafter, the book's commercial success opened to him the door to what seemed a promising career as a cultural commentator and scientific vulgarizer. Between 1935 and 1941 his book went through various editions and translations. Likewise, he endorsed illiberal

eugenics and euthanasia before well-attended public meetings in The United States and Europe.[1] In 1939 he signed a contract with Reader's Digest for a series of four articles on popular science topics, which the magazine published in the two following years. Toward the end of his life his interests shifted to religious topics. He had addressed issues such as the relationship between reason and faith, first during his student days in Lyon, notably in his novel, "Le Voyage de Lourdes" (written in 1903 but published only in 1948), and again in L'Homme cet inconnu. During the occupation he became absorbed with the completion of two works that explored these subjects, La Prière (released and sold out in May 1944) and Réflections sur la conduite de la vie (which he left unfinished and was published in 1950). The "mystic" dimension of his thought became even more evident after the publication of his private diary (Journal, 1893-1944 [1956]).

Carrel's literary and public interests were anything but original and coincided with the overall intellectual atmosphere of the interwar years. Partly, they expressed the widespread sense of "cultural despair" prevalent among the western elites since the end of World War I. This apocaliptic mood found its literary manifestation in widely read authors, such as Oswald Spengler, Madison Grant, José Ortega y Gasset, and Aldous Huxley, among others.[2] France developed a particular brand of cultural pessimism that focused on the various manifestations of national decline and social and cultural "Americanization." These trends were illustrated by the pessimistic

[1] See for example the conferences at the New York Academy of Medicine ("The Mystery of Death," 1935), the Journées Médicales de Bruxelles ("Le rôle futur de la médecine," 1937) and Darmouth College ("The Construction of Civilized Men," 1937).

[2] Spengler, Der Untergang des Abenlandes (1918-1922); Grant, The Passing of the Great Race (1920); Ortega y Gasset La rebelión de las masas (1929); Huxley, Brave New World (1932).

message conveyed in the works of local writers, such as Albert Demangeon, Georges Duhamel, Robert Aron, André Dandieu, and Henri Decugis.[3]

Partly, too, Carrel's interest in addressing larger issues benefitted from marketing innovations in the publishing business. In the United States, the New York publisher Harper & Brothers accepted to run a few thousand copies of his manuscript once it became known that the scientist was working with Charles Lindbergh in a mysterious device to prolong life (the perfusion pump). Harper saw the aviator as a "hook" to get the public's attention on Carrel. Accordingly, the publishers timed the book's release to coincide it with the last episode of Lindbergh's personal tragedy, the trial and conviction of the kidnapper and murderer of his first-born child. Yet, what perhaps did most to bring Carrel to the attention of thousands of Americans was the publication of his book in condensed format by Reader's Digest (by the early 1940s the popular magazine was selling four million copies a month). Started in the early 1920s by the former Westinghouse employee, Dewitt Wallace, the magazine published condensed articles of topical interest and entertainment value taken from other periodicals. Reflecting a conservative outlook that emphasized traditional American ideals, the Digest's thematic index explored topics from science, nature, health, manners, and mores. Descriptions of unusual occurrences, heroic individuals and lurking dangers were inserted regularly, as were broadly inspirational essays and self-improvement instructions. Its monthly readership jumped from five thousand in 1922 to four million in 1941. In 1934 it began publishing condensed versions of

[3] Demangeon, Le Déclin de l'Europe (1920); Duhamel, Scènes de la vie future (1930); Aron, Décadence de la nation française (1930), and Le Cancer américain (1931); Henri Decugis Le Destin des races blanches (1935).

current books; eventually it commissioned articles of its own. Carrel was to benefit from both strategies.

Carrel's successful career as an author also epitomizes the rise of a new genre of scientific vulgarizer. As Benoît Lecoq observes in Histoire de l'édition française, early twentieth-century scientific vulgarizers were radically different from their predecessors.[4] To begin with, the scientists themselves were highly respected celebrities who, no longer satisfied with earning the appreciation of their peers, sought to publicize the importance and originality of their discoveries among the mass of educated readers. Unlike the nineteenth-century forerunners, who had aimed their work at the popular classes, the new vulgarizers addressed themselves, above all, to students, professors and the educated public. Authors and publishers alike joined forces to expand the traditional readership of science books by rendering accessible to large audiences disciplines and topics until them considered too complex for the non-expert.[5] Also, most of early twentieth-century scientific vulgarization had a distinctively humanistic and spiritualistic bent. Carrel's contemporaries, the physicists André Georges, Louis de Broglie (winner of the 1929 Nobel Prize), and the biologist Rémy Collin became popular names writing books in which they mixed scientific descriptions with philosophical speculations.[6] This trend was also part of a much broader intellectual phenomenon that under the generic concept of "holism" came to

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[4] Benoît Lecoq, "L'Edition et la science," in Histoire de l'édition française. Vol. 4: Le Livre concurrencé, ed. Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet (Paris, 1986).

[5] Good examples of this new trend are La Science, ses progrès, ses applications (1935), edited by the member of the Institut Français, Georges Urbain, and the scientist Marcel Boll, and the popular collection Que sais-je?, which began in 1941 publishing three science titles: Maurice Caullery, Les Etapes de la biologie; Pierre Rousseau, De l'Atome à l'étoile; and Marcel Boll, Les Certitudes du hasard.

Georges, Les Grands Appels de l'homme contemporain; Collin, Le Message social du savant.

[6] See for example, Biot , Au Service de la personne humaine (1934), Le Corps et l'âme (1938), Pour une Médecine du corps et de l'esprit (1938); Leriche, Souvenirs de ma vie morte (1956).

dominate the cultural mood of various medical subdisciplines in the 1920s and 1930s. Holists favored a patient-oriented clinical study of disease as well as a more "integral" or "synthetic" approach to healing that took into account the human person as a psychophysical, physiological and spiritual "whole" (as opposed to what they considered "reductionistic" therapies of laboratory-based biomedicine). They also shared a common body of concepts and metaphors that not only sought to redefine the relationship between medical knowledge, the human body and the environment but also restore a more intimate doctor-patient relationship and a lost professional or social unity. Many holists knew one another and were active in developing formal and informal networks that sustained and cross-fertilized their discussions. Carrel is one of the best examples of the convergence between scientific vulgarization and international biomedical holism. Constantly moving between the United States and France, his thinking expressed the eclectic mix of American constitutional medicine and French medical humanism. Raymond Fosdick, Simon Flexner, Samuel Meltzer and George Draper, all from the Rockefeller Institute, were known for espousing "anti-reductionistic" views. Similarly, Carrel's long annual visits to his home country brought him into contact with various trends within French holism, notably, René Biot's *Groupe lyonnais d'études médicales, philosophiques et biologiques*, as well as with Pierre Delore, Paul Desfosses, Pierre Lecomte du Noüy, and René Leriche.[7]

Human Problems, Technocracy and Eugenics

In the fall of 1941 Carrel was given the chance of putting his ideas into practice after Pétain appointed him regent of the Fondation française pour l'étude des

problèmes humains. It was a logical choice if we consider not only Carrel's international reputation and his connections to the United States, but also that most *pétainistes* saw him as the prophet of the country's misfortunes. The foundation was created with the purpose of studying "human problems" and "improving the French population." To achieve these vaguely-stated goals it was given a generous annual budget of forty million francs (roughly one franc per inhabitant). By way of comparison, the older CNRS received fifty millions while the recently created Institut national d'hygiène got fifteen millions. Despite its short lifespan (1941-1945) the foundation recruited some 400 fulltime and temporary administrative and scientific personel. Most of its research staff was made of young experts (their mean age was 30) from non-traditional or recently institutionalized disciplines (such as demography and industrial hygiene).

The efforts to find suitable credentials for the foundation reveal another possible genealogy for understanding Carrel. He and his closest associates conceived the foundation as a direct outcome of L'Homme cet inconnu and the Institute of Man. They made this connection explicit in a series of research monographs which portrayed the institution as an original project of applied sociobiology based on the analysis of specific problems and the comprehensive synthesis of their results through multidisciplinary, experimental and empirical methods. The recurrent use of key terms such as "synthesis," "human factor," "whole man," and "total human quality" illustrate the extent to which the foundation's architects, economists, engineers, physicians, pedagogues and sociologists shared, at least to a degre, a holistic conception of human affairs as the guiding principle of their technocratic problem-solving methods.

The foundation was to apply "the principle of scientific experimentation to all the disciplines involved in the study of human problems." It rejected all theoretical speculations as "sterile" and posited the "lessons of experience" as its only guiding principle. The term "experience" is used here as a synonym of an empirically grounded knowledge that was "free" from the distortions of abstract thinking and concerned exclusively with the study of the "real" person (that is, the "concrete" human being in its specific setting). As one of its document puts it, it is "the worker in the factory, the child in the school, the housewife in the kitchen, the sportsman in the field, the peasant in the farm, the alcoholic in the café" that, as concrete objects, must be studied according to rigorous experimental methods. The empiricist critique of "intellectualism" as a mental deformity that hinders the immediate (that is, accurate) apprehension of reality was a trademark of the foundation's self-definition. In the introductory remarks to a series of conferences on industrial relations given at the lycées of Paris in 1943, Carrel and the president of the Académie de Paris, Gilbert Gidel, deplored "the bookish world (monde livresque)" in which traditional pedagogy had locked students up for so many years, and warned them against "a certain bourgeois mentality, full of prejudice, that reasons in the abstract." They urged their young audience to "free themselves" from these pernicious "mental habits" and reminded them that "it is neither through logical analysis, nor through criticism or defamation that we solve human problems" but through sentiment as well as reason.

Carrel and his coworkers also emphasized the foundation's affinities with prestigious international centers, such as the Pasteur, Rockefeller, and Kaiser-Wilhelm institutes. The physician Jean-Jacques Gillon, co-director with Carrel of the foundation's research department of child and adoslescent biology, went further along

this line and defined the foundation's knowledge paradigm in terms of "scientific humanism." By this he meant a study of the human being that was both comprehensive (one that embraced all domains that were relevant to human life) and "scientific" (a coded term for "empirical"). He conceived the foundation as the achievement of the Renaissance's "unfinished" revolution ("unfinished" because the scientific breathroughs of the seventeenth century had been offset by speculative thinking and literary abstractions) through the development of a truly scientific human science. Gillon thought about the foundation as the twentieth-century embodiment of Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis." As it may be recalled, this was a civilization ruled by a higher council (King Salomon's House) made up of "technicians" (architects, astronomists, geologists, biologists, physicians, chemists, economists, sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers).

More significantly, Gillon linked the foundation to contemporary names that advocated the need of "synthesis," among them, Henri Berr, Jean Coutrot, Raymond Fosdick, André Georges and Julian Huxley.[8] From this perspective, the foundation was seen as following in the steps of novel undertakings, such as Fosdick's think tank concept of "Composite Aristotles," Berr's Centre internationale de synthèse, Coutrot's Centre d'étude des problèmes humains, and Huxley's journal, The Realist.[9] Finally, Gillon placed the foundation within recent developments in eugenics. Interestingly enough, however, neither he nor Carrel conceived their undertaking in connection with the French school of biomedical thought. Instead, they linked it to Anglo-

[8] Berr, L'Evolution de l'humanité (1920); Coutrot, L'Humanisme économique (1936); Fosdick, The Old Savage in the New Civilization (1928); Georges, Le Véritable Humanisme (1942); Huxley, Science and Social Needs (1935), Scientific Progress (1936); Jacques Maritain, L'Humanisme intégral (1936).

[9] The journal was edited by Aldous and Julian Huxley, Harold Laski, J. B. S. Haldane, and H. G. Wells, among others.

American race hygiene (we may recall that Carrel had served as surgical expert in the advisory committee on sterilization set up by the American Breeders' Association—the most powerful eugenics lobby of the United States--to advise the government on the best means to eliminate the "defective" plasm from the American population). Gillon's references to the American racist eugenicists Theodore L. Stoddard and Albert E. Wiggam are crucial for understanding the full extent of the concept of scientific humanism. Stoddard was one of the most popular advocates of Nordic racism and had a active participation in the white supremacy movement (he was a Ku Klux Klan officer in Massachusetts).[10] In 1925 he published Scientific Humanism, a book which Gillon ackowledged as a source of inspiration for his own ideas. Gillon also showed an unmitigated enthusiasm for Wiggam's characterization of eugenics as the “golden rule” of the new scientific humanism, and praised his tract, The New Decalogue of Science (1923), as a model of (pseudo)empiricist critique of the "defective mental processes" that "interfered" with the "purely scientific and analytic" study of human life.

The constraints imposed by the German occupation and the war forced the foundation to concentrate its work on finding solutions to the most pressing problems, thus postponing the implementation of some of it more ambitious and radical proposals of human regeneration. Under the supervision of Carrel, Félix-André Missenard, André Gros, Jacques Ménétrier and Jean-Jacques Gillon, the foundation's research units turrned France into a human laboratory. Headed by René Mande, pediatricians and psychologists monitored the impact of war shortages on childen. To

[10] Stoddard was the author of the widely read racist tracts, A Gallery of Jewish Types (1918), The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy (1920), The Revolt Against Civilization (1922).

rationalize the eating habits of the population and increase the output of alternative food resources, Jean Sutter and Louis Winter's biologists and agricultural experts developed special diets, school canteens and collective gardens as well as new methods for recycling food waste. André Gros's industrial experts both studied means to protect the labor force from wartime deprivations and drew up plans for a comprehensive overhaul of factory relations to curb class conflict and improve productivity. The sociologist and opinion poll expert Jean Stoetzel carried out statistical surveys on a wide range of topics, from housing conditions and family income to women's reproductive behavior. A team of pedagogical experts supervised by Henri Decugis and Georges Huyer implemented an ambitious program that investigated the special educational needs of schoolchildren. Jean Bourgeois and André Vincent measured wartime quantitative population trends while the anthropologists Robert Gessain and René Martial inquired into the qualitative and ethnic features of immigrants and peasants. During four years the foundation's experts gathered a vast amount of empirical information. This knowledge furnished Vichy's policymakers with a sociobiological profile of the country's population that helped them identify the most urgent needs.

The highly technical and technocratic language with which the foundation's experts framed most of their work enabled them to survive the liberation purges and, in some cases, continue their wartime work at prestigeous institutions. None of them was accused formally of collaboration. Carrel's early death (November 1944) may have spared him a final humiliation. Yet, despite the widespread allegations about his Nazi sympathies, the resistance was ambivalent about what to do with him. The former member of the *Comité médical de la résistance*, Paul Milliez, admitted that

there had never been a formal acussation against Carrel, and that his boss, Louis-Joseph Pasteur Valery-Radot, had only relieved the Nobel laureate from his public duties. Another member of the medical resistance, the pediatrician Robert Debré, openly praised both Carrel and the foundation for their singular approach to the study of human problems and as forerunners of the INED (in whose creation Debré had played a crucial role). Carrel's vice-regent, Missenard, was the only foundation member to be investigated (but not tried) by a *tribunal d'épuration*. The presiding judge, Bernard Lafay, however, cleared him right away and acknowledged the "good work" done by him and Carrel (ironically, during the occupation Lafay had applied for admission into the foundation, and had been rejected). The case of Robert Gessain is even more significant. As a reputed expert on Greenland's Eskimo population and a disciple of the collaborationist anthropologist, Georges Montandon (editor of the review L'Ethnie française), Gessain was the foundation's most outspoken proponent of racist anthropological research. Nonetheless, as Claude Singer rightly observes in his study of the purges of academics and scientists, not only did Gessain survive the liberation unscathed, but he also moved into infuential positions in the public administration, first as head of a research department in the INED, and later as underdiretor and director of the *Musée de l'homme* (1958-1979).[11]

Postwar policies and institutions found in the foundation much to build upon. In the 1960s, the Trade Union Congress acknowledged the initiatives taken by French industrial technocrats during the war as precedents of the regulations adopted by the International Labor Organization after 1945. These measures also formed the basis for the proposals on occupational health issued by the Common Market's Commission to

[11] Claude Singer, L'Université libéreé, l'université dépurée (1943-1947) (Paris, 1997).

all member countries. In France, the INED took up and completed the foundation's survey on handicapped children, thus providing much of the empirical data and methods that were later used in the sociology of education. Even eugenics found a niche within the institute's experts. In the late 1940s Sutter became an advocate of a milder form of biopolitics and authored the first French-language, comprehensive study on eugenics (prefaced by the INED's director, Alfred Sauvy). The institute also published Gessain's wartime anthropological studies of immigrants and kept alive the foundation's interest in ethnic "homogeneity." One of the most important projects of this kind, known as *actions concertées*, was the study of the rural commune of Plozevet, in the Finistère. The survey was commissioned by the *Délégation générale à la recherche scientifique et technique* and supervised by Gessain and Stoetzel, and phrased its goals as the study of human problems "as Carrel understood them."[12]

The genealogies sketched above help us explain Carrel's enduring appeal to both scientists and lay people. Given the tendency of many disciplines to see themselves as non-ideological and value-free, it is hardly surprising that the British biologists who cloned the first piglets in March 2000 chose to name them "Alexis" and "Carrel."[13] Among biomedical experts Carrel still retains an aura of legitimacy based on his surgical achievements and imaginative problem-solving methods. Thus, he lives on in educational and scientific organizations, such as the Institut Alexis Carrel d'orientation et formation professionnelle (Lyon), the Alexis Carrel Foundation for Thoracic and Cardiovascular Research (Pavia), the Alexis Carrel Association for

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[12] André Burguière, Bretons de Plozevet (1975).

[13] Nigel Hawkes, "Clones Raises Transplant Hopes," The Times, 15 Mar. 2000,1 and 13; "Dolly et les cinq petits cochons," www.humanite.presse.fr, 15 Mar. 2000, and Jean-Yves Nau, "Le passé encombrant d'Alexis Carrel," Le Monde, 18 Aug. 2000.

Integral Medicine (Verona), and the Alexis Carrel Conferences on Chronic Transplant Dysfunction and Arteriosclerosis (Sweden). In Montréal, the shopping mall and theme Parc Alexis Carrel commemorates the scientist's first destination after he expatriated himself in 1904. Surprisingly too, Carrel has been reappropriated for radical political purposes by those who reject western civilization as a dangerous alien import. The discovery in the 1990s that he was being not only rehabilitated by the Front National, but also read with enthusiasm by radical Islamic intellectuals reveals the topicality and paradoxical plasticity of Carrel's holistic and spiritualistic antimodernism. L'Homme cet inconnu is still in print in France and abroad, but its current readership has become much more diversified than the traditional conservative and Catholic following. As European journalists and writers have warned, since the 1960s Islamic scholars, such as Sayyid Qutb, have been using the mystic scientist to attack what they see as modernity's disruptive effects on non-western societies and cultures.[14]

[14] See for example, Catherine Simon, "Algérie, d'une violence à l'autre," Le Monde, 25 Nov. 1993; Tariq Ali, The Clash of Fundamentalisms (New York, 2002); Rudolf Walther, "Die seltsamen Lehren des Doktor Carrel, Die Zeit 32 (2003).