

Retrieving the 'eu' from eugenics

Can anything positive be rescued from the wreckage of the Nazi era?

The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea

by Elof Axel Carlson
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press: 2001.
451 pp. \$39

Eugenics: A Reassessment

by Richard Lynn
Praeger: 2001. 366 pp. \$85

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So what is to be done about eugenics? It is now almost universally reckoned to be a Bad Idea, as Elof Carlson's title makes plain. A book, a chapter, or even a seminar tut-tutting about all those famous supporters of eugenics who should have known better — from Beatrice Webb, H. G. Wells and Oliver Wendell Holmes to Julian Huxley, Peter Medawar and Francis Crick — is a sure step to success in today's politically correct academy. And those with the temerity to suggest that the large numbers of the Great and the Good who did support eugenics were not temporarily unhinged at the time should only do so from the safe haven of retirement (like Richard Lynn).

Nevertheless, the question of eugenics won't go away, as the arrival of yet two more books on the subject testifies. Both provide comprehensive histories of the eugenics movement from its founding in the 1870s by Francis Galton, motivated by lofty ideals for the improvement of mankind, to its horrific denouement in Nazi Germany. All this is well known, although Carlson unearths fascinating new material from the archives at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, where the Eugenics Record Office was established in 1910. The purpose of the books, however, is to consider what, if anything, should be retrieved from the disastrous wreckage of the 1940s. Carlson thinks we risk our humanity by even contemplating the idea of 'unfit', whereas Lynn opines that authoritarian states that pursue eugenic policies (such as China) will end up dominating democracies that don't, so we'd better wise up.

The problem is with the 'eu', because if some people are well born, it implies that others are not, and nothing could be more offensive to the contemporary ear than such naked judgementalism. Scientifically there is a problem too, because evolution is value-free. The high-school dropout with six children by the age of 25 is clearly more fit (or 'better' in darwinian terms) than the career woman pregnant for the first time in her late thirties. If we would wish to alter the relative reproductive success of these two women to favour the latter, make no mistake that it is because we want it, not because Darwin, or

God, or the teleological destiny of man demands it.

Those who would shy away from the value judgements entailed in such a decision might reflect that this is the stuff of politics. For what is politics but the process of distributing finite resources among competing interest groups? And Lynn cites plenty of recent empirical data showing that reproductive rates are highly responsive to the granting or withholding of such resources as tax breaks for having children, maternity leave, or subsidized child care. So every politician is a eugenicist — it's just that they all have a different idea of 'eu' and 'non-eu'.

Of course, this is positive eugenics, its more benign side, in which those judged to have more desirable genotypes are given incentives to reproduce. Left at that, eugenics might never have been much more controversial than welfare, private schools or the UK National Health Service. The real problem is with negative eugenics, in which those deemed by someone in authority to have undesirable genotypes are discouraged or forcibly prevented from reproducing by compulsory sterilization. This was widely adopted in the 1920s in the United States and Europe. However, it was most enthusiastically put into practice by the Nazis at the same time that they were preparing plans for the mass-murder of homosexuals, Jews and Gypsies, and the same vile means were used to dispose of those they deemed genetically unfit. These terrible events, of which every generation needs to be reminded, have inextricably conflated the ideas of eugenics with genocide, and have forced suspension of any rational debate about the former for the past two generations.

It is the coercive aspects of eugenics that have so alienated a generation brought up on the assertion that individual rights take precedence over social rights. Nevertheless, the virtual elimination of public smoking in the Western world during the same period shows that large social changes can be achieved with clever publicity and modest coercion. In fact, some of the goals of negative eugenics are now being achieved in a voluntary way through the widespread provision of clinical genetics services in response to public demand. Any clinical geneticist will tell you that no one should underestimate the depth of parents' love for a disabled child. But equally, no one should underestimate their determination to avoid having another. Remarkably, the dramatic reduction in the US crime rate in the early 1990s has been linked to the legalization of abortion 18 years earlier. Is violent crime or



Bodily perfection? Miss Pulchritude, 1936 New York's most perfect model, poses with Mr Muscles.

abortion on demand the worse social evil?

Given the importance of the topic, there should be good data on the reproductive patterns of contemporary human populations, but there are not. Most of the claims made by Lynn for dysgenic effects rely on differential family size with respect to educational or income levels. Yet reproductive fitness must be measured from zygote to zygote, and few have had the patience or resources to collect data on reproduction in the second generation. A study from the 1930s suggested that children from large families were less likely themselves to reproduce, all but cancelling out the effect of large family size, but this has never been properly replicated.

We know virtually nothing about the nature of fertility differentials in Western societies except that they exist to a striking degree — up to 28% of Australian women, for example, are now childless at menopause. Variation in reproductive fitness is surprisingly heritable — up to 40% in recent Australian and Danish studies. In 1929, R. A. Fisher showed that the additive genetic variance in reproductive fitness was a direct measure of the rate of evolution. This suggests that our populations are currently experiencing quite drastic natural selection. But for which traits? We have little idea, but the old eugenicists might not like the answer. ■

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