

## EUGENICS AND SOCIAL POLICY BETWEEN THE WARS

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In a recent article Michael Freeden produced a 'revisionist' interpretation of the eugenics movement.<sup>1</sup> His contention was that although eugenics has been largely identified with a right-wing and conservative approach to social problems there was, in fact, an identifiable 'left wing' or radical eugenics in the 1920s and 1930s. He adduces in support of this the involvement of a number of 'progressive' social thinkers in the eugenics movement;<sup>2</sup> the interest of eugenics in several aspects of social reform;<sup>3</sup> and elements in the eugenic philosophy which were compatible with 'progressive' social democratic and even socialist politics and ideals. The philosophical elements in eugenics which are said to be compatible with a reformist mentality are the belief in planned social engineering and a rational or scientific attitude to social institutions. These beliefs can be contrasted, one supposes, with an attitude of *laissez faire* towards the status quo coupled with a mystical reverence for existing social institutions and emotional attachment to them. Freeden goes even further than this. First, he suggests that the eugenics movement tried to 'emphasise that it was sympathetic towards the working classes, associated with social reform and not necessarily biased in favour of conservatism'.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, he goes on to claim – in reference to the period between the wars – 'Within the mainstream of eugenics itself – the Eugenics Society – there was a perceptible shift towards the outlook that the hitherto minority of progressive eugenisists had espoused.'<sup>5</sup>

A major weakness of Freeden's article is his reliance on a retrospective view of how social policy developed between the wars. This view, very similar to that which became popular in the 1950s, emphasizes a gradual consensus emerging in social policy, treats social reform as though it had become by 1939 a technical rather than a political question, and, consequently, emphasizes the role of the 'mandarin' or technical expert in the formulation of solutions to social problems.<sup>6</sup> The eugenics

<sup>1</sup> Michael Freeden, 'Eugenics and progressive thought', *Historical Journal*, xxii, 3 (1979), 645–71.

<sup>2</sup> Among the names he cites are Richard Titmuss, Julian Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane and Lancelot Hogben.

<sup>3</sup> Freeden, 'Eugenics and progressive thought', p. 666: 'All the while the Eugenics Society itself had been moving into areas that concerned progressive social reformers – Family Allowances, Family planning and population research...'

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 666.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 661.

<sup>6</sup> See John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The slump* (London, 1977), p. 29 'The conclusions of the social investigators of the 1930s were to have profound consequences for postwar Britain. They highlighted the need for greater state intervention, more rational planning of the social services and the ending of mass unemployment. These inquiries played vital part in the emergence of what has been called 'a consensus on social responsibility' in the years leading up to the Second World War.'

movement, in an effort to join the post-war consensus and to escape from the imputation of the ultra-conservatism which clung to it after 1945, frequently represented their involvement in social policy between the wars in this way.<sup>7</sup> But both the 'Whiggish' view of the development of inter-war social policy and the attempt to assimilate the eugenics movement to it are mistaken.<sup>8</sup> Discussion over social policy among intellectuals between the wars is better seen as a number of frequently irreconcilable controversies about the role and aim of state intervention and social welfare, with the Eugenics Society playing a highly conservative role, one rather unsympathetic to the working class. Moreover the relationship between the progressives mentioned by Freeden and the eugenics movement as a whole was far more tense and complex than he would lead us to believe.

A great deal of illusion about the 'radical' character of eugenics has been generated because of the involvement of some eugenisists – notably R. A. Fisher – in the movement for family allowances in the 1920s and 1930s. The demand for family allowances (or Family Endowment as it was generally called at that time) originated in an attempt to alleviate poverty by subsidizing the income of larger families. Eleanor Rathbone saw poorer families as the chief beneficiary of family endowment. In 1945 a flat rate scheme was adopted which was more beneficial in percentage terms to the poorest families. But this was not the objective which the Eugenics Society, and in particular R. A. Fisher, saw family endowment fulfilling. They were much more concerned with using family endowment for redistribution of income in favour of the larger, middle-class family. They saw three main ways in which this could be done – through income tax relief, family endowment and help with educational fees.<sup>9</sup>

The demand which Fisher and the Eugenics Society made in the 1920s for greater tax exemption for families with children was, in the circumstances of that time when far fewer working-class families fell into the income tax bracket, not a particularly radical demand. Fisher claimed that substantial concessions had been secured by the Eugenics Society in the two Finance Acts of 1918 and 1928, when the level of exemption for children had been raised.<sup>10</sup> Fisher in the twenties toyed with further schemes for lowering the middle-class tax burden. One involved a redistribution of the taxation burden among the middle-class itself in favour of those with children. Another was exemption of school fees from taxation. The Eugenics Society clearly saw family endowment as a support for the poorer professional classes. They were very much in favour of the professions providing their own child bonus and were

<sup>7</sup> This retrospective justification reached its heights in C. P. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and after* (London, 1952), p. 145. 'In Galton's time there was much ignorance of how the under-privileged classes lived, and it was easier than it is today to overlook the effects of bad feeding, insanitary homes, over-crowding and poor education opportunities.'

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Addison, *The road to 1945* (London, 1975), on the impact of the Second World War. Also José Harris, *William Beveridge, a biography* (Oxford, 1977), p. 414: 'One of the most striking features of the evidence submitted to the Beveridge Committee was the very widespread expectation among witnesses that the enquiry was going to lead to radical even "Utopian" social change.' See also P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *The state in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1979), on the adjustments forced upon the Stormont government by the changes in welfare policy in the 1940s, especially chs. III and IV.

<sup>9</sup> The three proposals are outlined in R. A. Fisher's review of Leonard Darwin, 'The need for eugenic reform', *Eugenics Review*, xviii (1926), 231–6, esp. 236.

<sup>10</sup> See G. R. Searle, 'Eugenics and politics in Britain, 1900–1914', *Science in History*, no. 3 (Leyden, 1976), pp. 89–90.

particularly fond of the child allowance which the London School of Economics paid to its lecturers.

This desire for the encouragement of the middle-class birth rate was the keystone of eugenic population policy throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Eugenics Society stated this belief emphatically in its annual report of 1937. The Eugenics Society 'favours the provision of Family Allowances by the establishment of graded equalisation pools and other systems calculated to have a eugenic effect. It regards as wholly dysgenic the provision of allowances through flat rate payments by the State.'<sup>11</sup>

In fact the scheme of flat rate payments by the state was eventually adopted. However, the Eugenics Society continued to press for its own proposals. The royal commission on population which reported in 1949 had several prominent eugenicists on it.<sup>12</sup> The commission believed:

It is clearly undesirable for the welfare and cultural standards of the nation that our social arrangements should be such as to induce these in the higher income groups and the better educated and more intelligent within each income group to keep their families not only below replacement level but below the level of others.<sup>13</sup>

To rectify this the commission asked for a system which (whilst increasing benefits and services in general) would pay special attention to the professional classes. They considered and rejected a scheme (similar to that of R. A. Fisher) for a redistribution of the taxation burden among the middle classes and instead called for greater tax relief for 'median' income levels and the exemption of family allowances from taxation. They asked for the revival of special family bonuses in the professions and in particular in government occupations of the higher professional type. Finally although the commission – with a dissension – rejected help with school fees, they asked for increased attention to be given to the reform of the public education system of a kind which would allow its greater use by the middle classes. This they believed would relieve the middle classes of the school fee burden.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporaries of the Eugenics Society in the 1930s were well aware that their aim in advocating family endowment was not redistributive. An unpublished report of Political and Economic Planning in 1938 set out the various groupings involved in the family allowance movement.<sup>15</sup> The eugenics movement, said the report, had become involved in the 1920s with family endowment as 'a possible social policy which might, under certain conditions, diminish lower class fertility and possibly stimulate upper and especially upper middle-class fertility'.<sup>16</sup> Their interest had flagged in the period 1929–34 but revived under the impact of the scares about

<sup>11</sup> *Annual report of the Eugenics Society* (1936–7), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Its section on intelligence was written by Sir Godfrey H. Thomson (who quoted R. B. Cattell, *The fight for our national intelligence* (London, 1937). R. A. Fisher, Cyril Burt, Dr J. A. Fraser Roberts and Dr E. O. Lewis (the chief researcher on the Wood Report) all gave evidence. See *Papers of the royal commission on population* (1950), v, H.M.S.O.

<sup>13</sup> See *Report of the royal commission on population* (Parl. Papers 1948–9, xix, Cmd. 7695), p. 156.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* ch. xvi. (The dissenting voice, Mrs M. C. Jay, believed the state should take on itself the burden of school fees although public school entrance should be decided by merit, *ibid.* pp. 234–7.)

<sup>15</sup> *Family allowances as a population policy* (17 Oct. 1938), Political and Economic Planning Paper (P.E.P. Papers), British Library of Political Science, 4021/38/Population. BWS 1/1-1/3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

population decline in the mid-thirties.<sup>17</sup> The eugenics movement retained objectives distinct from those of other groups:

Thus, today, several different schools of thought are supporting the idea of family allowances without much agreement as to methods or motives. The greatest disagreement is between those, on the one hand, who advocate family allowances as a welfare measure... the other is not concerned primarily with the welfare of the poorer classes but with redressing the economic balance between parents and non-parents in all classes.<sup>18</sup>

As the memorandum stated, the eugenics movement did not see the object of state intervention as the alleviation of poverty. This can also be seen in their attitude to the relationship between poverty, nutrition and ill health between the wars. In the 1920s and 1930s a considerable amount of investigation on ill health, nutrition and poverty was done through the reports of local medical officers of health and also through investigations initiated by the Medical Research Council. Evidence of a connexion between bad and inadequate diet and ill health was firmly established by the end of the thirties and so was the connexion between poverty and an inadequate diet.<sup>19</sup> Information on this formed part of the argument for measures to be taken to raise unemployment and sickness benefits and to help the larger working-class family.<sup>20</sup> But the general agreement on the relationship between poverty and ill health achieved by the outbreak of the Second World War disguises a battle which continued on the character of the relationship between social class and ill health. Several investigations into poverty and nutrition in the 1920s were undertaken because of accusations made in parliament and the press of malnutrition in mining districts as a result of wage cutting.<sup>21</sup> Where eugenic suppositions influenced these reports it was largely to encourage the suggestion that the close relationship between poverty and ill health was a result of the fecklessness and feeble-mindedness of the poor.

One group from which interpretations of this sort emerged was that around Professor Noel Paton and Professor Leonard Findlay.<sup>22</sup> These researchers were of

<sup>17</sup> See Enid Charles, *The twilight of parenthood* (London, 1934) and D. V. Glass, *The struggle for population* (Oxford, 1936). The Eugenics Society was involved in research into population between the wars, but they still retained the conviction that the major population problem facing the nation was differential fertility between the middle and working classes.

<sup>18</sup> *Family allowances as a population policy*. P.E.P. Papers (see above n. 15), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> See especially the use made of the work of G. C. M. McGonigle and J. Kirby, *Poverty and public health* (London, 1936). This was published by Gollancz and distributed by the Left Book Club. Similarly John Boyd Orr, *Food, health and income* (London, 1936) and Arthur Newsholme, *The last thirty years in public health* (London, 1936). Works such as these were influential on opinion in supporting the belief that poverty itself was a major cause of ill health.

<sup>20</sup> See 'The scale of social insurance benefits and the problems of poverty', by W. H. Beveridge, *Inter-departmental committee on social insurance and allied services* (16 January 1942), Beveridge papers, British Library of Political Science, S.I.C. (42) 3, file VIII 28, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> See the introduction to the *Report on the nutrition of miners and their families*, Medical Research Council, special report series (M.R.C. spec. rep. ser.) 87 (1924), H.M.S.O.

<sup>22</sup> D. Noel Paton, professor of Physiology at Glasgow University and Leonard Findlay, professor of Paediatrics, University of Glasgow, were particularly associated with the view that a major cause of poverty was inferior heredity. This conclusion was set out in Paton and Findlay, *Poverty, nutrition and growth, studies of child life in the cities and rural districts of Scotland*, M.R.C. spec. rep. ser. 101 (1926), H.M.S.O.

They sponsored other reports which reached similar conclusions. See E. P. Cathcart and A. M. T. Murray, *A study in nutrition*, M.R.C. spec. rep. ser. 151 (1931), H.M.S.O. Shepherd Dawson and J. C. McConn, *Intelligence and disease*, M.R.C. spec. rep. ser. 162 (1931), H.M.S.O. E. P. Cathcart and A. M. T. Murray, *Studies in nutrition*, M. R. C. spec. rep. ser. 165 (1935), H.M.S.O.

the opinion that the higher infant mortality and rate of disease among working-class children was due to child neglect and ignorance – the result of hereditary feeble-mindedness. Thus it was not working-class wages which were inadequate but the standard of maternal care. In addition much of the stunted growth, rickets and other diseases of childhood among sections of the working class were due, they suggested, to the fact that poor physical types inevitably gravitated into the lower social strata.

What is not demonstrated is that simple increase of income would be followed by improvement in the condition of the children. Bad parents irrespective of their income tend to select bad houses, as the money is often spent on other things. The saying that 'what is the matter with the poor is poverty' is not substantiated by these investigations; indecisive as many of them appear, they indicate that a position must be taken up removed from that of the sociological or political theorist, on the one hand, who believes that a simple increase of income would remedy all evils, and from that of a thorough going eugenicist on the other. The evidence seems to indicate that current teaching gives too much rather than too little weight to environmental factors, which theoretically at least it might be possible to remedy by economic adjustments.<sup>23</sup>

The Medical Research Council investigations conducted by Paton and Findlay and their followers attempted to prove that although existing nutritional values might be inadequate for working-class families, this fact was not sufficient to account for their ill health. Much of this ill health was, the reports suggested, the product of the poor physical constitutions of the hereditary types who drifted to the bottom of the social scale. Secondly, out of these reports emerged the notion of 'maternal inefficiency'. Maternal inefficiency was responsible, the reports suggested, for the greater part of the poor health and physique of working-class children in urban areas, and maternal inefficiency was a product of feeble-mindedness.

The *Lancet* in an obituary of Professor Noel Paton in 1928 described the character of the investigations he undertook.

In Glasgow he had every opportunity of studying rickets among the poorer classes and, in course of time, he was involved in somewhat controversial issues for though he had admitted that unhygienic surroundings and defective feeding predisposed to the disease he strongly disputed the view that rickets was caused by the absence of an antirachitic factor in foodstuffs, being more impressed with the association of the disease with defective care, neglect of the home and overcrowding. . . They [Paton and colleagues] came to the conclusion that too much was being said about the ill effects of the environment and too little about the inadequacy of the slum dweller themselves.<sup>24</sup>

Noel Paton's views were not necessarily representative of the opinions of public health officials and researchers among whom there was often an ethos of social reform. To take one example, Dr Corry Mann in his study of rickets in a London dock area came to quite different conclusions about the relationship between ill health and poverty.<sup>25</sup> Corry Mann argued that the incidence of rickets was related

<sup>23</sup> Paton and Findlay, *Poverty, nutrition and growth*, p. 305.

<sup>24</sup> *The Lancet* (13 October 1928), p. 785.

<sup>25</sup> Dr Harold Charles Corry Mann, O.B.E., M.D., M.R.C.P. was one of the group of investigators who contributed to an understanding of the relationship between diet and disease between the wars. He also showed considerable flair for social as well as scientific investigation. Corry Mann did two investigations for the M.R.C. The first, begun independently 1906–15, was resumed in 1919 under the direction of the M.R.C. This investigation was *Rickets, the relative importance of environment and diet*, M.R.C. spec. rep. ser. 68 (1922), H.M.S.O. The second more famous, *Diets for boys during school age*, published in 1926, established the precise nutritional value of milk. According to his obituary, 'Corry Mann was truly a pioneer, for he set the pattern for the conduct of investigations designed to test the practical value of foods or single nutrients, and few of the reports published since his appeared in 1926 have failed to quote the Corry

to the level of income. He believed the standard of maternal care was high among the working-class families of the area, most of whom lived by casual dock labour, that their income was spent with care and forethought and that an increase in family income went directly into providing a better diet.

There has been little evidence of deliberate waste of money among the poor. On the contrary there was every indication that a rise of wages from three days to five... was immediately followed by better food for the family.<sup>26</sup>

There could not have been two more starkly contrasted views about the causes of working-class ill health than those of Corry Mann and Noel Paton. On the whole the Eugenics Society tended to favour the latter. A leading article in the *Eugenics Review* of 1929 attacked Dr Milligan of the Council of National Baby Week for his views on the importance of the provision of infant welfare and quoted the Paton/Findlay report.

One must indeed wonder whether Dr Milligan is correct in saying that indiscriminate infant welfare does not result in the survival of the less fit... The indications – especially in the light of the ‘Report on Poverty, Nutrition and Growth’ of the Medical Research Council – are that those Reading children have little prospect of even developing into as fine a group as their parents and grandparents.<sup>27</sup>

Controversy over the nutritional standards of the unemployed remained an important part of the debate on poverty in the mid-thirties. The eugenic view of poverty was largely to discount explanations of it in terms of economic or social structure but to suggest that poverty was the natural consequence of the existence of a stratum of low mental endowment. By the 1930s this view had led to a considerable body of eugenic literature which attempted to produce a medical or hereditarian explanation of social problems.<sup>28</sup> This was done by marrying two concepts. Eugenics used the mental test to identify a stratum of society they considered to be of low intellectual endowment. They attached the term ‘feeble-minded’ to describe it. Since this stratum was at the bottom of the social pyramid they took this as evidence that social inequalities were largely natural inequalities. Secondly, they argued that most social problems (unemployment, crime, maternal inefficiency, etc.) were a product of this stratum. Out of the marriage of these two

Mann experiments,’ *BMJ* (29 April 1961), pp. 1257–8. Corry Mann was subsequently consultant to the Ministry of Health and further unpublished investigations he made contributed to the planning of wartime food policy 1939–45. Corry Mann’s work was widely quoted in policy documents on nutrition between the wars. See *Report of the consultative committee of the board of education*. The primary school (1931), appendix II, and memorandum on food policy (P.E.P. Papers), 4383/34/Res. (11 October 1934).

<sup>26</sup> Corry Mann, *Rickets*, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Note of the quarter’, *Eugenics Review*, xx (April 1929), 76–7.

<sup>28</sup> The Eugenics Society referred to work sponsored by them by E. J. Lidbetter on pauperism and heredity. See E. J. Lidbetter, ‘Pauperism and heredity’, *Eugenics Review*, xiv (Apr. 1922), 152–63; also E. J. Lidbetter, *Heredity and the social problem group* (London, 1933). They claimed through this and other work to have anticipated the Wood Report’s analysis of the social problem group. They also used the Wood Report as a stimulus to further study. For details of their projects in this area see B. Mallet, ‘The social problem group’, *Eugenics Review*, xxiii (Oct. 1931), 203–6. Among these studies were those leading to D. Caradog Jones’s studies of Merseyside. See D. Caradog Jones, ‘Differential class fertility’, *Eugenics Review*, xxiv (1932), 175–90. D. Caradog Jones, ‘Eugenic aspects of the Merseyside survey’, *Eugenics Review*, xxviii (July 1936), 103–13. R. B. Cattell, *The fight for national intelligence* (London, 1938). C. P. Blacker (ed.), *A social problem group?* (Oxford, 1937).

concepts came a term 'the social problem group', ubiquitous in the eugenic literature of the period. It was, in effect, a 'medicalization' of the 'residuum', the concept used widely at the end of the nineteenth century. The influence of these views can be seen in the Wood Report on mental deficiency in 1929.<sup>29</sup> The report warmly commended eugenics.<sup>30</sup> In addition it made use of the concept of the 'social problem group'. The Wood Report linked this group to the higher grades of mental defective and it attributed considerable social significance to the role of mental deficiency as a cause of social problems.

If, as there is reason to think, mental deficiency, much physical inefficiency, chronic pauperism, recidivism are all parts of a single problem, can it be that poor mental endowment manifesting itself in an incapacity for social adjustment and inability to manage one's own affairs, may not be merely a symptom but rather the chief contributory cause of these kindred social evils? If so, then the problem of mental inefficiency of which mental deficiency is an important part assumes a yet wider and deeper significance and must indeed be one of the major problems which a civilised community may be called to solve.<sup>31</sup>

The use of 'the social problem group' by the committee had several effects favourable to eugenic social philosophy. First, it sparked off alarms about the apparent increase in mental deficiency recorded in the report. This increased pressure for a policy of sterilization as a treatment for mental defect.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, it was a factor towards maintaining the practice of institutionalization of defectives.<sup>33</sup> This was already under way but it was not irreversible. For example, the *British Medical Journal*,<sup>34</sup> before the publication of the Wood Report, took the opinion that 'a considerable proportion of mentally defective persons are not in fact socially defective and may be safely left in the general community with only a small amount of supervision'.<sup>35</sup> However, the effect of the report with its alarming implications of an almost twofold increase in mental deficiency since 1908 helped stem the pressure for the mentally deficient to be treated within the community. In addition

<sup>29</sup> *Report of the mental deficiency committee*, 1929 (Wood Report), H.M.S.O.

<sup>30</sup> 'The science of eugenics is doing invaluable service in focussing scientific thought and public opinion upon the racial, social and economic problems that the subnormal group presents to every civilised nation. The prevention of mental deficiency is a problem where solution depends largely on the progress made by this science.' Wood Report, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

<sup>32</sup> The Eugenics Society campaigned vigorously for sterilization both before and after the Wood Report. *The departmental committee on sterilisation* (Parl. Papers, xv, 1934, Cmd. 4485), p. 611, which was appointed by the Ministry of Health on 9 June 1932 and which reported in 1934 (Brock Report) was something of a compromise. The society, before the final report, helped sponsor a sterilization bill put before parliament by A. G. Church, 21 July 1931 which failed. On 5 July 1932 a committee of 20 M.P.s to draft a further sterilization bill was headed by Sir Basil Peto and Wing-Commander James. James and Church were members of the Eugenics Society.

<sup>33</sup> A. F. Tredgold in *Mental deficiency* (London, 1937, 6th edn), p. 515 made these estimates of the increase in institutionalization of mental defectives between (1 Jan. 1926) and 1 Jan. 1936: in institutions (20,297), 40,256; under guardianship or notified (785), 3,645; under statutory supervision (15,733), 34,840; totals (38,815), 78,741. Tredgold (op. cit. p. 154) believed that one reason for the increase was that the mental deficiency acts had 'been administered with increasing vigour'.

<sup>34</sup> The *British Medical Journal* (*BMJ*) clashed with the Eugenics Society over sterilization in 1928 before the Wood Report came out. See *BMJ* (21 Apr. 1928), p. 680. The *BMJ* was attacked for its remarks in the *Eugenics Review*, xx (April 1928), 76.

<sup>35</sup> *BMJ* (5 July 1930), p. 26.

segregation in institutions seemed to the *BMJ* a better alternative to sterilization. The *BMJ* had been doubtful of the value of sterilization as a treatment for mental deficiency before the Wood Report was published and it remained so after. But the Wood Report forced the *BMJ* to accept that a Royal Commission on the subject was 'even more urgently needed than had before been generally realised'.<sup>36</sup>

None the less, doubts remained about the medical suppositions on which the Wood Report and the campaign for sterilization, which grew in force after its publication, were based and, in addition, about its moral and social philosophy. The Report divided mental defect into two sorts: primary and secondary amentia. Primary amentia covered the term 'feble-mindedness' and was regarded largely as the characteristic mental defect of the lower social orders and as hereditary and innate. In this case 'no improvements in education or social care can eradicate or even modify the germinal defect'.<sup>37</sup> Secondary amentia – which covered most cases of very severe abnormality and which was much more evenly distributed among the social classes and often marginally concentrated in some of the 'better' social strata – was stated to be due to environmental causes. The problem of these broad general definitions was that they were breaking down. Critics of the report were aware of the complexity and uncertainty into which the study of hereditary mental defect was being thrown by the development of Mendelian genetics. Sir Henry Brackenbury, member of the General Medical Council and the advisory committee to the ministry of health, in an address attacking sterilization, pointed out that some of the conditions of severe subnormality dubbed secondary amentia by the committee were in fact due to a single recessive gene.<sup>38</sup> L. S. Penrose, a specialist in the genetics of mental disease who worked with Haldane on problems of mutation rates, pointed out in his Colchester survey in 1938 the problems of diagnosis based on a simple heredity/environment division.<sup>39</sup> The *BMJ* warned that the aetiology and genetics of feble-mindedness were unknown and that diagnosis was based on 'a statistical convention' – that is, by the application of a mental test.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, there was a confusion in the committee's thinking. Was a low score on a mental test in itself evidence of social incapacity? The Wood Report suggested, as the *BMJ* pointed out, that 'if we are to prevent the racial disaster of mental deficiency we must deal not merely with mentally defective persons but with the whole sub-normal group from which the majority of them come'.<sup>41</sup> This implied, the *BMJ* commented wryly, that if sterilization was to be an effective measure it must be applied to one-tenth of the population.<sup>42</sup> The emphasis in the report on not just the certifiable mental defective but on his or her relatives and social grouping

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. (27 Apr. 1929), p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> Wood Report, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Sir Henry argued, the process of eradication of mental defectiveness by sterilization would be protracted and uncertain. Address to the British Medical Council reported in the *BMJ* (18 Mar. 1933), p. 483. This point had also been made by the geneticist R. C. Punnett, see 'The elimination of mental defect', *Eugenics Review*, xvi (Apr. 1926), 114–16.

<sup>39</sup> See L. S. Penrose, *A clinical and genetic study of 1,280 cases of mental defect*, M.R.C. spec. rep. ser. 229 (1938), H.M.S.O. (Colchester survey). Some of the conditions designated as secondary amentia – hence non-inheritable – in Tredgold, *Mental deficiency* (London, 1929, 5th edn), pp. 243–92 such as hydrocephaly and gargoylism appear in Penrose, *The biology of mental defect* (London, 1972, 4th revised edn), p. 192 and pp. 164–6 as much more complex and in some cases as genetically determined conditions.

<sup>40</sup> *BMJ* (22 Sept. 1934), p. 560.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 27 Apr. 1929, p. 108.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 108.

meant a wide compass for administrative interference in the pursuit of the eradication of mental deficiency and for the mental test to identify the potential parents of defectives. Moreover, in spite of its emphasis on 'social incapacity' as a criterion for institutionalization the report found it unacceptable that some certifiable mental defectives were able to pass their lives successfully in the outside world. The report stated that many mental defectives were escaping notice and were managing – partly through the protection and support of family and neighbourhood – to get on satisfactorily in life without contact with public authorities. They did not feel that this was a satisfactory state of affairs. The Wood Report lamented in particular the state of the larger towns and cities, where unlike the small village which was adequately supervised by doctor, clergy or the justices of the peace, defectives could pass their lives in relative obscurity. This, they felt, might be one possible reason for the lower incidence of mental defect recorded in the cities.<sup>43</sup> Thus the ambience of the report was a vigorous and even crusading desire to root out the 'defective'.

L. S. Penrose was highly critical both of the medical suppositions on which the Wood Report was based and of the social bias he detected in it. He pointed out that the report was based on a belief that failure to pass a mental test implied social incapacity, that 'sub-cultural mental deficiency' was largely found in the lower classes and on the totally unjustified attribution of the mental deficiency of the 'better classes' to environment. He pointed out that the 'socially inefficient' were generally the poor since the rich by reason of their wealth could, to a large degree, protect themselves or their relatives from the attention of the public authorities. Penrose detected in the report a general social picture in which was portrayed

a class of vast and dangerous dimensions and, since it had already been shown that improvement on a large scale was not to be looked for, there was nothing to be done but to blame heredity and advocate methods of extinction.<sup>44</sup>

Penrose noted a certain inhumane vindictiveness towards the feeble-minded. He detected in the movement for sterilization a punitive attitude towards human affliction. So did another critic of sterilization. Dr W. D. Chambers, physician superintendent of James Murray's Royal Asylum, Perth, considered that since 'definite knowledge concerning the inheritance of mental disability is scanty and could not possibly justify interference in any general way in social, political or racial problems... those who urgently demand sterilization on a large scale must themselves be suspected of pretentious or even sadistic tendencies'.<sup>45</sup>

An acquaintance with eugenic literature in this period confirms that an emotive content had entered discussions of 'the social problem group' and its relationship to mental deficiency. According to the *Eugenics Review*, discussing the question of sterilization of the mentally defective in 1928.

If it was said that sterilization was an affront to the dignity of humanity we should listen – and agree. But what dignity have the feeble in mind that legislation can deprive them of it? ... An intelligent and healthy dog is more spiritually kin to man, has more natural dignity than one of these. It is the existence of the feeble-minded which affronts human dignity.<sup>46</sup>

Penrose put forward a Freudian explanation for these attitudes.

<sup>43</sup> Wood Report, pp. 29–31.

<sup>44</sup> Penrose, *Mental defect*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>45</sup> *BMJ* (11 Aug. 1934), p. 279.

<sup>46</sup> Notes of the quarter, *Eugenics Review*, xx (Apr. 1928), p. 76.

It is a well known psychological mechanism that hatred, which is repressed under normal circumstances may become manifest in the presence of an object which is already discredited in some way. Conscience, super ego or whatever it may be termed which preserved the individual from assaulting his neighbour or expressing a public wish to mutilate his private enemy, is removed when a socially or politically abhorrent class of persons is concerned.<sup>47</sup>

Freudian or not, the effect of eugenic propaganda was to create a 'moral panic' – a belief that society was threatened by a small minority of the hereditary inferior who would 'swamp' it if uncontrolled. The consequences for social legislation of this moral panic were, for reasons outside the scope of this essay, never fully realized, but they were not particularly liberal or humane.

We reach a second major point of Freedén's analysis. Penrose was a frequent speaker at conferences organized by the Eugenics Society. Does his presence and that of other 'progressives' such as Huxley indicate a potentially radical, even socialist element in the philosophy of the eugenics movement? Rather it indicates the fact that the Eugenics Society between the wars was a unique forum for discussion of human biology and genetics. After all R. A. Fisher, whatever his social preconceptions, was an outstanding geneticist and genetics was, in that period, rather badly served in most traditional academic institutions. But the function performed by the Eugenics Society in stimulating discussion of human heredity ought to be sharply distinguished from the social concerns of the society. Most of those mentioned by Freedén as the progressive 'friends' of eugenics vigorously campaigned against the bases of eugenic social policy – as defined by the majority of the movement. Hogben – whatever his views on the Sterilization Bill of 1934 – helped by his department of social biology at the London School of Economics, sponsored a series of investigations directed against the presumptions of eugenics of which Penrose's book *Mental defect* was a product. Haldane held up eugenics to ridicule. In *Heredity and politics* (1938) he criticized the assumption that mental defect could be eliminated by sterilization and pointed out that more would be done by the provision of better bus services in rural areas. Haldane's technique in satirizing aspects of eugenics was to take its formal aims – the improvement of human heredity – seriously, and to contrast these aims with the Eugenics Society's actual social policies. For example he pointed out that by any strict Darwinian criteria the working classes were the most 'fit' since there were more of them. But the irony he achieved in his articles resulted from the contrast between the 'formal' aims of the eugenics movement and the reality. The eugenics movement was nowhere near in spirit or in practice the kinds of social reconstruction which Hogben or Haldane thought desirable and necessary to improve human heredity.

The other categories of 'progressives' mentioned by Freedén deserve a closer examination. There *are* links between eugenics and the philosophy of new liberalism and the heirs to that tradition could find a compatibility between eugenics and their social views. First, the concept of the 'residuum' was built into new liberal ideology.<sup>48</sup> This was logical deduction from their principles. New liberalism re-defined

<sup>47</sup> Penrose, *Mental defect*, pp. 173–4.

<sup>48</sup> On Beveridge and his attitude to the 'residuum' see José Harris, ch. vi. Harris also points out that initially the Depression of 1929–31 did not stimulate any radical conclusions in Beveridge, see ch. xiv. He was enough of a traditional political economist to believe that welfare reform must await national recovery. His interest in advancing comprehensive welfare was rekindled by contact with the Cambridge Group of economists in the late thirties (Joan Robinson, E. F. Schumacher, Nicholas Kaldor) who introduced him to Keynesian ideas (ibid.

citizenship not simply as a political right but as a moral, social and even aesthetic ideal. This concept of citizenship implied not only an extension of opportunities to the citizen but a reciprocal set of duties on the part of the citizen to the state. Inevitably some failed to reciprocate. There was, in fact, always the possibility of an intractable and undeserving stratum among the poor for whom all provision of work or benefits would be in vain – a group whose moral character and social life did not live up to these ideals of citizenship. The ‘social problem group’ fitted this idea perfectly.

Secondly, the moral ideal of citizenship propagated by new liberalism was essentially the values of the middle-class. Just like eugenics – though perhaps for different reasons – the middle-classes were regarded as the epitome of evolutionary progress. Moreover, new liberalism clearly saw them as having a special social role as the guardians of progress. Therefore the differential birth rate was as worrying to the new liberal as it was to the eugenicist.

In other words there was potentially an opening to the right as well as the left in the ideology of new liberalism. This becomes clear at the point at which its values and those of eugenics coalesce. It also becomes clearer when – granting the importance of new liberalism in guiding British society towards a more comprehensive view of social welfare – we see how the events of 1939–45 took some of them by surprise and left certain of them rather dissatisfied. The form and character of the ‘welfare state’ created in the 1940s was not altogether anticipated by their philosophy and view of evolutionary progress.

In addition the basic attitudes of other ‘progressives’ of the thirties needs closer examination. Huxley’s interest in eugenics was understandable, for as he wrote to H. G. Wells in 1930 about a joint literary project they had undertaken:

As they stand the remarks about different social classes are to me untenable. You make sweeping assertions about the absence of differences between them which I really can’t pass. I am quite willing to let you cut out my ‘sweeping’ assertions about the positive differences between them, but let us point out the problem. To be sure I wasn’t biased. I wrote to Carr-Saunders about the point and he writes a long letter back which boils down to what I also had in mind – that the present state of affairs may be eugenically neutral; cannot be eugenically good and probably is slightly eugenically bad.

This concerns the main bulk of the nation. As these differences will I hope soon be wiped out by birth-control, I agree to passing it over with a v. slight reference. On the other hand, I have again been reading the Mental Defective Report and it is really quite alarmist (considering what a conservative body the Committee was) about the ‘submerged tenth’ problem. And this is untouchable by birth-control... I really think we ought to say something on this point. It comes to this, that the evils of slum life are largely due to the slums, but to a definite extent *caused* by the type of people who inevitably gravitate down, and will make a slum for themselves if not prevented.<sup>49</sup>

As the thirties progressed both Huxley and to a greater extent Haldane moved to the left. Their acceptance of the need for social reform and for a more egalitarian society was not a logical expression of a general philosophical position which could also embrace eugenics, but a break with the major presumption of eugenic philosophy. Their continuing contact with the eugenics movement did not strengthen

p. 435). Added to this was the wave of popular sentiment in favour of reform 1939–43. For the disappointment of some liberals with the outcome of these reforms see Peter Clarke, *Liberals and social democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 284–90.

<sup>49</sup> Huxley to H. G. Wells, 10 February 1930. Quoted in J. S. Huxley, *Memories*, 1 (London, 1970, 2nd edn), 168–9.

their adherence to the idea of social reconstruction. It tended on the contrary to act as an inhibiting factor on it. Certainly Haldane admitted in 1949 that eugenics had led him down paths he felt he should not have followed.<sup>50</sup>

This interpretation suggests a different view of the development of welfare policy between the wars from that given in Freedman's article. He seems to be suggesting that there was a phenomenon in that period called 'social reform' to which progressive-minded people adhered and whose outlines were increasingly filled in by scientific evidence from reports and investigations. Given this view, the differences between the eugenicist who talked of social legislation and the socialist who talked of heredity become blurred as they are assimilated into the consensus. But, on the contrary, there existed a high degree of controversy over social policy in this period. Agreement on the need for state intervention covered very wide and substantial disagreement about what the objectives of this intervention should be. Much of the social legislation which followed the inter-war period was the result of a delicate political balance between opposing factions. In some cases one side won and the other lost. The eugenic view of social reform was hostile to an environmental view of the causes of poverty and to the use of social welfare to eliminate inequality. The inactivity of the National Government in these areas was closer to the eugenic ideal than the reforming temper of the 1940s.<sup>51</sup> The interventions in social life recommended by the eugenics movement, where they touched the life of the poor, were frequently restrictive and punitive in intent. The eugenics movement like other institutions in this period experienced the leftward trend among intellectuals in the late thirties.<sup>52</sup> But this did not arise from the abstract philosophical premises of eugenics but as the effect of outside influences against which the eugenics movement had stood firm for a long time and whose coming they deplored.

<sup>50</sup> The eugenics movement were caught in an embarrassing position when, contrary to their forecasts of a decline in national intelligence, evidence emerged in the *Royal commission on population* (1949), from a survey of Scottish schoolchildren, of a slight increase in I.Q. over a generation. Haldane was also embarrassed by this information. 'During the five years which have elapsed since I commented on Professor Thomson's memorandum I have devoted a good deal of work to the problem of selection. I am now in complete disagreement with his conclusions on the effect of differential fertility.' *Papers of the royal commission on population 1949*, v (1950), 43. For the background to Haldane's views see G. Jones, 'British scientists, Lysenko and the cold war', *Economy and Society*, viii, 1, 26-58.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the comments of R. A. Fisher: 'It is a fact and I think an important fact that we have at the moment and for the next few years a Government with power and authority to act on its convictions, pledged to diagnose and remedy at their source, the causes of national weakness... the easy optimism which assumes that we can enjoy prosperity without earning it is practically extinct.' ('Family allowances', *Eugenics Review*, xxiv (July 1932, 87.)

<sup>52</sup> A figure representative of this left-wing trend was François Lafitte, Havelock Ellis's stepson, who in 1938 at the age of twenty-four was appointed by a joint committee of Political and Economic Planning and the Eugenics Society to act as secretary to the Population Policies of the P.E.P. Committee. Lafitte's memoranda to the committee were infused with a radicalism surprising to many of them. The Eugenics Society by allying itself with P.E.P., which was more truly representative of 'middle opinion', was forced to accommodate itself to this. Even so the final report preserved some of the basic eugenic premises and took the hard edge off the social criticism present in Lafitte's early memoranda. See the final report 'Population policy', *Planning*, xiv, 281 (30 Apr. 1948), 311-22.