

Eugenics Society

Introductory article

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Eugenics in Britain was seen as a solution to the problem of pauperism. It was a political, rather than a scientific movement: it did not, however, achieve its aim of legalizing sterilization for the feeble-minded.

The Eugenics Society's roots go back to the nineteenth century, to the network of associations in the United Kingdom that focused on the problem of the urban poor: the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science was founded in 1857, the Charity Organization Society in 1869, the Society for the Study of Inebriety in 1884, the National Association for the Care and Protection of the Feeble-minded in 1896, the Moral Education League in 1898, the Sociological Society in 1904 and the Eugenics Education Society in 1907. Each group had its own explanation for poverty and crime: the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science claimed drunkenness as a root cause of pauperism, and the Charity Organization Society, indiscriminate charity. Temperance advocates demanded legislation to control dipsomaniacs and get them institutionalized. Advocates of the care and control of 'the feeble-minded' were making the same demand in 1908, for the same reasons, the prevention of pauperism and crime. Economic causes were rarely discussed: poverty was usually seen as an individual defect. Among the usual moral, social and environmental concerns of this network of activists, the eugenicists were the only group pointing to a biological cause. Many people belonged to more than one such society.

The formation of the Eugenics Education Society in the United Kingdom followed the traditional pattern: its driving force was Sybil Gotto, already involved in social meliorism when she first read Francis Galton's work. Montague Crackanthorpe, a lawyer friend, introduced her to Galton. Sylvia Gotto proposed to Galton her idea of forming a society to educate the public on eugenics, defined by Galton in 1904 as:

the study of all agencies under social control which can improve or impair the racial quality of future generations.

At first, the Moral Education League was asked to adopt the new program and change its name to the Eugenic and Moral Education League, but that did not happen. The early lectures arranged by the Eugenics Education Society, however, often concerned moral education. It also demanded the detention of inebriates, especially women, and, though it coyly refused to be too vocal about it, the detention of

people with venereal disease. Montague Crackanthorpe became the first president of the Eugenics Education Society, to be succeeded by Leonard Darwin, son of Charles Darwin, in 1911. The Society's members, like those of the other groups pressing for legislative solutions to their problems, were mainly professional and middle-class. At its height, almost all well-known figures of the period were sympathetic to the aims of eugenics. About a third of the members were women, who seemed to feel drawn to a movement that dealt with the scientific choice of a mate, an enhanced status for motherhood and the bearing of healthy children. Eugenics promised them what we would now call empowerment. Until about 1930, it was unusual to hear any criticism of the movement.

The problem of the differential fertility of classes was one that particularly concerned eugenicists. Galton himself had suggested in 1891 that the direction of evolution of a people depended on which of its classes was the most fertile; the most prolific would set the bodily, intellectual and moral qualities of the race as a whole. Evidence put together in 1906 by David Heron, Galton Research Fellow at the Biometric Laboratory, University College, London, under Galton's great admirer, the statistician Karl Pearson, showed that the highest fertility was correlated with the most undesirable social factors and the lowest stratum of society. National degeneration, frequently and seriously discussed at this time of falling birth rates in Europe, would be the direct result. For the eugenicist, social classes lost their loose connection with property and status, and became permanent biological subspecies. Inherited low intelligence went with the so-called social diseases, alcoholism, venereal disease and ineducability.

The 'Education' in the Society's name referred to the nature and importance of heredity. It has often been said that Mendelism and biometry were two incompatible views of heredity, but the Society did not think so. As Montague Crackanthorpe put it in his presidential address for 1910, the Mendelian thesis that characters might be latent or patent argued against the biometrician's view, which was based on the observation of patent characters only. But eugenics needed the services of both Mendelism and biometry;

so the Society taught both, in the lectures it arranged and in the course on 'The biological and statistical basis of heredity' it put on at Imperial College, London, in 1913. The practical method preferred was the pedigree study. A pedigree showed in a uniquely convincing way how a trait, desirable or undesirable, was passed on through a family. No theory was needed to grasp its implications.

The first research project begun by the Society concerned the pauper class. E. J. Lidbetter, Relieving Officer at a Poor Law Authority workhouse since 1898, was its leader. He was trained through the Society's own classes and, in 1911, at Leonard Darwin's suggestion, began collecting data on pauper families for a pauper pedigree project. The pauper stocks, according to the Society, were a broad, intermarried stratum of the population, a social class biologically defined in which every generation showed miscellaneous defects such as drunkenness, theft, laziness, tuberculous diathesis, moral obliquity, weakness of character and feeble-mindedness. Every generation was studded with paupers, relieved at public expense. Any account of the eugenics movement in Britain has to emphasize that it was characters such as these, and not genetic disease, that the movement focused its energies on. Eugenics was a scientific manifestation of middle-class horror at the lives of the so-called residuum, the urban poor. It was a solution for urban poverty, not for the kind of 'inborn errors of metabolism' described by Archibald Garrod in 1909.

The pedigree project was interrupted during the First World War, but restarted in 1920. The Society now dropped 'Education' from its name, preferring to focus on research; however, over the course of the 1920s, its methodology fell behind current standards. The statistician R. A. Fisher, a keen eugenicist, now on the committee, attempted to upgrade the design of the study; but pedigrees were difficult to quantify, and Lidbetter resisted change. His views, however, seem to have influenced Fisher. It had been argued that the eugenicists' program of segregating the feeble-minded would have little effect on their numbers for many generations. Fisher suggested that this presumed a randomly mating population. Those persons classed as feeble-minded, however, as Lidbetter was finding out, did not mate randomly. They constituted one-sixteenth of an intermating class which itself formed 5% of the population – in fact, the residuum or pauper class. It was believed that segregation in institutions should therefore reduce their numbers fairly quickly.

The 1930s saw a series of eugenically oriented official reports on the subject of feeble-mindedness. In 1929, there was the *Wood Report* on the incidence of mental deficiency in the population; in 1934, the *Brock Report* on sterilization; and, in 1938, the *Colchester Survey* on the genetics of feeble-mindedness. The

Society was involved in all of them. Their predecessor, the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded, of 1906, had drafted the bill for compulsory detention of the feeble-minded, resulting in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. The *Wood Report* defined the lowest 10% on the social scale as the 'social problem group', associated with feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, pauperism, crime, unemployability and alcoholism. The eugenicists, the report said, were doing important work in focusing attention on this group and the social, racial and economic problems it represented. The Wood Committee's successor, the Brock Committee, investigated the effectiveness of sterilization as a means of controlling feeble-mindedness.

The Society's campaign to legalize voluntary sterilization in the United Kingdom began in 1929; it was led by the psychiatrist Carlos P. Blacker, the Society's General Secretary, along with R. A. Fisher, Julian Huxley, E. J. Lidbetter and a physician, J. A. Ryle. Contact with German researchers brought advice from Ernst Rüdin of Munich, designer of the Nazi sterilization bill, and an expert on the inheritance of schizophrenia and manic-depressive psychosis. He was less interested in feeble-mindedness, he told them, but he provided a few references. Neither the pedigree studies favored by the Society nor the complex mathematical Mendelism introduced by Wilhelm Weinberg were of practical use to the Germans. They had now turned to the method of empirical prognosis, collecting data to show the incidence of psychosis in extended kinships, with a view to sterilization of affected families.

The North American and the German eugenic movements had strong political support for sterilization legislation, resulting in thousands of people sterilized, and, in Germany, progressing to killing of mental patients under the Nazi regime. In Britain, opposition from Catholics, the Left and the trade unions combined to create a politically hostile climate. Geneticists such as the Marxists J. B. S. Haldane and Lancelot Hogben, and the Quaker Lionel Penrose attacked eugenics with varying degrees of indignation as class prejudice cloaked in science, a criticism not far from the truth. Unlike the situation in the United States and Canada, and in Germany, sterilization was never made legal in Britain.

It has been said that the 1930s was a period of reform eugenics, in which the movement lost some of its hard-line character. However, the 1930s was the decade of the Society's campaign; American and German sterilization rates were at their peak – in North America, sterilization for feeble-mindedness was to continue into the 1970s. The development of knowledge of human heredity had little effect on the movement. A sophisticated mathematical Mendelism now superseded the old look-and-say pedigree

method. But eugenics was mainly a political ideology, dependent on the science of genetics largely as a source of rhetorical argument and telling example. The influence perhaps ran in the opposite direction: most human genetics at this time had some relation to the eugenics movement, either in support of or in response to its claims. It was the eugenics movement that made human genetics, especially population genetics, an important area of study.

Demography too was an offshoot of eugenics. The Society helped to found the International Union for the Study of Population Problems or International Population Union, founded 1928, and its British wing, the British Population Society. The occasions for the eugenicist interest were the question of the falling birth rate and the problem of the differential fertility of classes. The Society's leaders, Blacker and the sociologist Alexander Carr-Saunders, also set up and subsidized the Population Investigation Committee, founded 1936, though it claimed to be independent and apolitical. The International Population Union was run at first from the Johns Hopkins office of Raymond Pearl, an American eugenicist, but it later moved to London, where it published the journal *Population* from 1933 to 1939.

The Eugenics Society was also interested in birth control. Before the First World War, contraception seemed dysgenic, practiced by people whose fertility the eugenicists wished to promote. In the 1930s, however, Blacker and the Society supported the Birth Control Investigation Committee and worked alongside the pioneering but quarrelsome and difficult Marie Stopes to control the fertility of the working class. In 1930, pressured by feminists, Marie Stopes and the Society, the Ministry of Health permitted local governments to provide birth-control information in their clinics.

Throughout the 1930s, critics of eugenics pointed out the scientific weaknesses of the Eugenic Society's

methods and the class bias inherent in its program, but the Society continued its campaigns, hoping eventually to get the legislation it demanded. It was not until after the Second World War that it was forced to rethink its position. The important problem for British eugenics had been the inheritance of pauperism, whose specific pathology was feeble-mindedness. With the coming of the Welfare State after the War, the remains of the Poor Law and its stigma disappeared. Class bias became less socially acceptable: a depressed class whether biologically or administratively defined no longer seemed dangerous. In addition, association with Nazism made the very word eugenics suspect. The *Annals of Eugenics* became the *Annals of Human Genetics* in 1955, and the Society's journal, the *Eugenics Review*, was last published in 1968. The journals that succeeded it were addressed more to those interested in poverty and fertility in the Third World. In 1989, the Eugenics Society changed its name to the Galton Institute. Its more recent publications have focused on its history rather than its future prospects. Interestingly, it has not involved itself in medical genetics or genetic counseling: Eugenics had never been about genetic disease.

See also

Eugenics
Eugenics: Contemporary Echoes

Further Reading

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