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Legacies of eugenics: confronting the past, forging a future

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ABSTRACT

The anti-eugenic commemoration of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, held at the American Museum of Natural History in New York between 22 and 28 September 1921, was unprecedented in terms of its global reach and the number of individuals and organizations involved. Meetings, conferences, seminars, exhibitions, and symposia were convened throughout 2021–22 to review how assumptions and attitudes rooted in eugenics continue to affect the world in ways both obvious and hidden. What are the lessons learnt for the future? This article reflects on the importance of these events in the fostering of an international awareness about the legacies of eugenics in the present.

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Introduction

After 1900, eugenics became an influential scientific theory used by physicians, health experts, religious leaders and politicians across the political spectrum to express their understanding of human and social evolution and formulate their duties and responsibilities towards the nation, the race, and future generations. Physical and intellectual achievements, it was assumed, were determined by heredity. To control heredity, eugenicists claimed, was to ensure the betterment of future generations and the survival of the species. Another popular claim put forward during the first half of the twentieth century was that modern society was under constant threat from those with physical and mental disabilities (Stern 2016; Herzog 2018). Eugenicists wanted to prevent these people from having children. Protecting the so-called “feeble-minded”, the constitutionally weak and the socially “unfit”

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was deemed detrimental to the future of the race. Finally, eugenics promised a solution to social problems as varied as crime, alcoholism, and poverty. None of these claims were substantiated by credible scientific evidence, but this did not prevent the application of eugenics on social, economic, and racial grounds. Throughout the twentieth century, eugenic beliefs supported the murder of millions of people belonging to religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and of those living with disabilities. Recurrently, it motivated the institutional confinement and sterilization of those women and men deemed a “threat” to society. This outrage continues today.

Reinvented in late nineteenth-century Britain by Francis Galton, modern eugenics was situated at the interstices of evolutionary ideas, statistics, demography, anthropology, and psychology (Galton 1909). This synthesis is best represented by the image of a large tree with strong roots, each representing a scientific discipline. The accompanying note is clear: “Like a tree, eugenics draws its materials from many sources and organizes them into an harmonious entity” (Laughlin 1923, 15). As the official logo of the two international congresses on eugenics held in New York in 1921 and 1932, this tree captured the attention of hundreds of scientists and participants attending these major events.

By the 1920s, national eugenics societies were established in most countries, and international congresses allowed eugenicists to meet and share their ideas. Across the world, a host of institutions, from universities to government agencies, promoted eugenic research to improve the heredity health of the population through selective breeding and the control of reproduction. The internationalization of eugenics reflected a general appreciation in many parts of the world that knowledge of human heredity was the sufficient and necessary foundation for the long-awaited renewal of the human race.

As a self-styled scientific theory of human betterment and planned breeding, eugenics was based on the principle that people who were deemed socially and biologically “unworthy” of reproduction should be prevented from doing so. In the name of future generations, eugenicists dissolved aspects of the private sphere, by scrutinizing and working to curtail, reproductive, individual, gender, religious and indigenous rights. The boundary between the private and public spheres was blurred by the idea of public responsibility for the nation and the race, which came to dominate both. Within this context, the individual’s alleged biological deterioration became symptomatic of a perceived collective degeneration, an imbalance that had to be remedied through appropriate eugenic, social, and medical interventions.

Eugenicists emphasized that multiple hereditarian and environmental factors determined human behaviour. Gradually, they began to promote themselves as society’s moral guardians, promoting sexual control, cleanliness, the wellbeing of future generations and the ideal of married life (Brauer 2004). To this end, eugenicists emphasized that individual

reproductive decisions have important social and racial consequences as well. Every eugenic movement placed the family at the centre of its programmes, proposing measures to protect it from social and biological deterioration. The improvement of the nation's health began with the wise choice of a spouse, and eugenic propaganda was used to popularize idealized versions of white masculinity and femininity and to depict ideas of marriage, racial vitality, and motherhood. Such depictions of the ideal "white" family incorporated both nature (good ancestry) and nurture (good environment). What mattered was the nation's eugenic health and its racial future (Hall 2008). Just as the debate over social and biological improvement became intertwined with the idiom of eugenics, so too did the operative link between race and national community underpin a new construal of collective identity, one which I described elsewhere as the biologization of national belonging (Turda 2010).

Eugenics was truly global, and while the full extent of its impact will probably never be known, it certainly cut deep and wide into the texture of our modern world. It is therefore imperative to engage with the legacies of eugenics and to reclaim the academic, cultural, and social spaces it occupied for so long. Over the past 30 years, scholars from various academic disciplines have offered a historically informed account of eugenics. They have determined the ebb and flow of the eugenic movements across the world and forced them out of their carapace. In so doing, they have rendered visible what was formerly hidden in many national historiographies.

The message of improving the race through eugenics was universal, cutting across geographies, cultures and religions. We should therefore not treat eugenics as a historical anomaly. Eugenics was not a deviation from the Western scientific norm that found practical application in Nazi policies of genocide. Eugenics was an integral aspect of global modernity, one in which the state and the individual embarked on an unprecedented quest to create an idealized future defined by the promises of evolutionary biology and genetics. In the twentieth century, the state and the society at large increasingly adopted a eugenic worldview, relying on speculations about cultural, ethnic and gender differences, social norms, and ideas of racial worth. Interpretations of one's economic and social productivity also flowed readily from eugenic arguments, and eugenicists posited that if an individual was found to be socially "unfit", it was appropriate for them to be "weeded out". "Unfit" had become a label for those members of society who were deemed "pathological", "criminal", "asocial", "foreign" and "undesired" (Carlson 2001). In this way, eugenics asserted the supremacy of heredity. Notions of cultural progress, intellectual achievement, racial protectionism, biological decline, social pathology, and criminal behaviour were all infused with the belief that it was the quality of a person's heredity that determined their destiny. To "correct" the outcome of successive

generations of “unfortunate” marriages through education and environmental improvement was deemed too costly and rather ineffective. Instead, the eugenicists preferred measures that they believed to be more practice and immediate in their effect such as sterilization, segregation, and legislation against immigration and miscegenation.

Some may today be surprised by the effective spread of eugenics across the political spectrum. Both the right and the left, for their own different reasons, were willing to sacrifice the “unfit” for the salvation of the “fit” (Nadkarni 2014; Kremontsov 2018; Cleminson 2019). Pursuing a political project in the name of science, eugenicists fused ideas of heredity and cultural determinism with modern visions of a “new society” and a “new man/new woman”, insisting that both demanded the same goal: to halt the degeneration of the human race and to save it from its imminent implosion under the weight of overpopulation. Constructing a quasi-mythical eugenic person was one ambition that eugenics shared with other modern political ideologies such as communism, fascism, and Nazism, and equally with nationalism, racism, and imperialism (Quine 1995; Dubow 1995; Stote 2005; Campbell 2007; Cassata 2010). These ideologies interlaid with eugenic thinking were not limited to a specific region of the world. Eugenic movements flourished in the Americans, Australia and New Zealand as well as in Western, Southern and East-Central Europe (Adams 1990; Broberg and Roll-Hansen 1996; Bashford and Levine 2010; Felder and Weindling 2013; Turda 2015; Paul, Stenhouse, and Spencer 2018; Walsh 2022).

Eugenics was understood in diverse ways and many of the interpretations one finds in the scientific literature and popular culture differ from context to context and from country to country. This is not to say that eugenics was an incoherent movement. Since societies across the world were developing and changing, eugenics adapted its meaning accordingly. Eugenics began to grow in popularity in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and the concept clearly emerged as a category in which debates about the improvement of the race and the future of society and nation were conducted. Eugenics, therefore, is a floating signifier (Hall [1997] 2021) that meant many things to many people; sometimes it was clearly defined, often it was left unclear on purpose. In most cases, the arguments upon which it was based were scientifically and morally unsound; yet throughout the twentieth-century communities of scientists, religious figures, social reformers, and politicians employed the term consistently endowing it with meaning and credibility. Eugenics drew its energies from, and in turn it reinforced, political beliefs inhabiting all national cultures. A cursory look at all modern states in the twentieth century reveals how eugenics ingratiated itself within every ideology and every form of government. Its polymorphous character is truly impressive.

In addition to offering protection for the population's racial health, eugenics further provided a defensive biological strategy for the ethnic majority. Profound socio-political changes brought about by industrialization, the First World War and the Great Depression created the need to generate a powerful sense of social cohesion and shared national identity. Trying to meet this need, eugenicists often employed discriminatory arguments to justify their visions of national protectionism. A person's importance to the nation was to be determined by biological, social, and cultural boundaries, separating those insiders who belonged to it from outsiders, who were viewed as potential enemies of the race. At the same time, eugenics created a complementary system of "internal cleansing", which separated those members of society deemed "unhealthy", "diseased", and "anti-social" from the "healthy" majority. These "dysgenic" individuals were often segregated, sterilized and, during the World War II, murdered.

When peace was declared in 1945, it brought with it not only the defeat of Nazi Germany but also the near-universal condemnation of eugenics. The "eugenic tree" was gradually denuded of its branches; yet its roots remained deeply buried in our society, culture, and politics. In fact, eugenics never went away. It survived in the democratic West and the USA as much as it did in communist Eastern Europe. In the post-World War II period, eugenics reared its ugly head whenever the desire to control and manage the population was publicly expressed, whether through research centred on the heritability of intelligence (as measured in IQ tests), when applied to the criminal behaviour of young "delinquents" or in relation to issues affecting the poor and the working class such as birth control, voluntary sterilization and the control of so-called "problem families". Eugenics resurfaces too when it is assumed in countries such as Hungary and Romania that the Roma are "culturally inferior" and "naturally" predisposed to criminality, vagrancy, and indolence. Feeding on the continuous existence of social, racial and gender discrimination, eugenics clung desperately on.

Healing the deep wounds caused by a century of eugenics requires public recognition of those wronged in the past and of those who continue to be mistreated in the present. It is a slow process, but progress is being made. Victims of sterilization in Japan, the Czech Republic, Peru, the United States and elsewhere are finally being issued official apologies and provided with financial compensation (Eugenics Compensation Act 2016; Hovhannisyán 2020). Human reproductive rights everywhere must be respected and no eugenic discrimination against people belonging to religious, ethnic, or sexual minorities, or those living with disabilities, should be allowed to happen again. Historically disenfranchised groups such as the Roma must be empowered, and racism rejected unhesitatingly. The stories of those women and men who have been harmed by eugenics must be told and their lives honoured. The time has come to cut down this tree and remove

its global roots. The personal and collective reckoning with the legacies of eugenics can then begin.

Confronting the past and the present legacies of eugenics requires immediate strategies, most notably the harnessing of current concerns with the pandemic to reveal the lingering complexity of eugenic ideas of human “improvement”. We continue to write the history of eugenics, and of its variations in national and international contexts, but this scholarly project must be accompanied by the re-orientation of various public institutions to be more responsive to calls from communities for recognition and reckoning. An anti-eugenic agenda is most compelling when augmented by demands for racial and social justice. We must prevent the denuded tree of eugenics from coming into new leaf.

Current scholarship balances various elements of continuity and discontinuity, of idiosyncrasy and similarity in eugenic practices nationally, regionally, and globally. To redefine the long history of eugenics now we need to consider a multiplicity of scientific, cultural, linguistic, and political contexts that served the complex ideological transmission and application of eugenic ideas and practices across the world. This task will require substantial comparative research, analytical effort, and extensive archival investigation so that a more integrated and inclusive approach to the global impact of eugenics can be built upon new and robust intellectual foundations.

In September 2021, I curated a major exhibition entitled “*We Are Not Alone*”: *Legacies of Eugenics* at the Wiener Holocaust Library in London. It has since travelled to Romania, Poland, and Sweden. The purpose of this exhibition is to confront our eugenic past and its legacies in the present. Rapid progress in genomics and in gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR prompt us to be more careful with how our genetic data is used and to what purposes. The possibility of genetic manipulation of human traits alerts us to a “new” version of eugenics which focuses not on “feeble-mindedness”, criminality and so on – as was the case during the early part of the twentieth century – but on genetic diseases caused by chromosomal disorders or single-gene mutations. The development of genomics, many believe, would finally allow the development of a “scientific eugenics” which could restrain itself from the “excesses” of the past. The aim, however, is the same: to control reproductive practices, thereby influencing the transmission of unwanted hereditary traits.

This exhibition and a number of international symposia – including the one hosted by the National Human Genome Research Institute between 2 and 3 December 2021 devoted to “The Meaning of Eugenics: Historical and Present-Day Discussions of Eugenics and Scientific Racism”, and another entitled “Battling Eugenics: Historical Perspectives and Cultural Debates” organized at the University of Warsaw between 26 and 27 April 2022 – have been committed to finding better ways to engage in debates beyond

the confines of academic life. These public events revealed the shifting and fluid meanings that characterized ideas of human betterment in different national and international contexts. They also invited academics and the general public alike to engage with the legacies of eugenics across time and space and to reflect on the meaning of eugenics for us today. This remains a sensitive and emotional issue for many people, not least because for so long eugenics has reinforced discriminatory practices based on race, class, gender, disability, and age.

We all have the ability to make the right choice and reject eugenics and its false promises of human improvement. Guided by the aim of unveiling a hidden and tenebrous history, our scholarly effort must reorient to focus on anti-eugenics (Ipgrave et al. 2022). To create the sense of togetherness, of acceptance and inclusion, together with the ability to respond forcefully to any form of discrimination, requires that we confront our eugenic past and its tentacular instantiation in the present. To educate about eugenics, to engage with it, and to condemn it publicly are all essential components of our efforts to understand a hidden and tenebrous past, while we work towards a fairer and more just society. We can only remove the global roots of eugenics through both personal and collective reckoning with the wrongs of its history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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