

C Ben Mitchell charts the history of eugenics to the modern day



Two children with achondroplasia, a genetic condition that causes a form of dwarfism, in which growth of the long bones is restricted during development. Photo: Wellcome

The return of Eugenics?

KEY POINTS

The eugenics movement had its origins in the early 19th century under the leadership of Galton in England and Davenport in the US, both of whom encouraged breeding of 'desirables' and reproductive controls for 'undesirables'. In the US this led to 'fitter families' contests and mandatory eugenic sterilisations. Hitler simply took these ideas further. Now we are seeing the rise of a new eugenics movement armed with genetic technology and using the tools of prenatal selection and abortion, harvesting of egg and sperm from desirable donors and genetic enhancement. It is likely that personal choice, consumerism and legal constraints on reproduction, rather than sterilisation, will fuel eugenics in the future.

Author of the Father Brown mysteries and political essayist, GK Chesterton perceptively said, 'We can be almost certain of being wrong about the future, if we are wrong about the past'. The American eugenics movement is an historical epoch that we can ill afford to be wrong about. Our future may depend upon our right interpretation of its past.

The old eugenics

Eugenics is a compound of two Greek words meaning *good* and *genes*. The eugenics movement began at the turn of the last century in England and the United States. Under the leadership of social engineers Galton and Davenport, it became a remarkably powerful social force.

Francis Galton (1822-1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin, was described as 'a clever and compulsive counter'.¹ Obsessed with numerical patterns, he studied mathematics at Cambridge. As the father of eugenics, Galton felt that social control was necessary to reduce the numbers of 'unfit'. He argued that both Christianity, with its emphasis on the dignity of all human beings, and medical science, with its abilities to keep alive those who might otherwise have died of their physical, mental or moral defects, were holding back the progress of the human race. 'If a twentieth part of the cost and pains were spent in measures for the improvement of the human race that is spent on the improvement of the breed of horses and cattle, what a galaxy of

PERSONAL CHOICE AND CONSUMERISM ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO FUEL EUGENICS TODAY

genius might we not create'. So Galton founded eugenics societies to encourage 'desirables' to reproduce and work to prevent 'free propagation of the stock of those who are seriously afflicted by lunacy, feeble-mindedness, habitual criminality, and pauperism'.

Over in the United States, biologist Charles Davenport (1866-1944) published *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*.² Under his directorship, The Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor served as headquarters for the American eugenics movement. Even president Theodore Roosevelt was enthusiastic: 'I wish very much that the wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding; and when the evil nature of these people is sufficiently flagrant, this should be done. Criminals should be sterilised and feeble-minded persons forbidden to leave offspring behind them . . . the emphasis should be laid on getting desirable people to breed'.³

Fitter Families contests were held across the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. Such families were those with fewest incidences of physical and mental disability, whose ethnic heritage had remained intact. Racial intermarriage disqualified families from entering and fitter families were exclusively Caucasian. Mary T Watts, co-founder of the first contest at the 1920 Kansas Free Fair, said: 'While the stock judges are testing the Holsteins, Jerseys, and whitefaces in the stock pavilion, we are judging the Joneses, Smiths, and Johns'.⁴ Each winner's medal proclaimed 'Yea, I Have a Goodly Heritage'.

The eugenics movement did not limit itself to merely breeding better humans. To prevent 'undesirables' from reproducing, mandatory sterilisation laws were enacted. The 'feeble-minded', 'indolent', and 'licentious' were sterilised either without their consent or against their wills. 'Eugenical sterilisations' increased from 3,000 in 1907 to over 22,000 in 1935. By the 1930s most states had mandatory sterilisation laws.⁵ In one well-known case, a young mentally retarded girl named Carrie Buck was given the choice of being sterilised or being returned to her mental asylum. Because both her mother and grandmother had allegedly been mentally retarded, the famous jurist Oliver Wendall Holmes declared of Carrie Buck, 'Three generations of imbeciles is enough' and mandated that she be sterilised.⁶

Of course, the most infamous use of eugenics was in Nazi Germany. Hitler's racism and American eugenics seemed made for one another. Madison Grant, founder of the racialist movement in America, stated: 'Mistaken regard for what are believed to be divine laws and a sentimental belief in the sanctity of human life tend to prevent both the elimination of defective infants and the sterilisation of such adults as are themselves of no value to the community. The laws of nature require the obliteration of the unfit and human life is valuable only when it is of use to the community or race'.⁷ Hitler drank deeply from the well of American eugenics, calling Grant's volume 'his Bible'.⁸

The new eugenics

Today, armed with genetic technology, a new eugenic enthusiasm has emerged. The March of Dimes, an advocacy group dedicated to preventing birth defects, found in a 1993 poll that eleven percent of parents would abort a foetus whose genome was predisposed to obesity; four out of five would abort a foetus if it had a disability; and forty-three percent would use genetic engineering, if available, to enhance their child's appearance.⁹

Increasingly, college-age women are being solicited for their eggs on the basis of their desirable genetic traits. In 2000, the University of Minnesota's student newspaper advertised for egg donors. Preferred donors were women five foot six inches or taller, Caucasian, with high ACT or SAT scores, no genetic illnesses; extra compensation was

offered to those with mathematical, musical or athletic abilities. Acceptable donors would be offered as much as \$80,000 for their eggs. This is eugenics with a vengeance.

Contemporary culture's emphasis on the genetically 'fit' and difficulty in embracing those who are 'less fit' fuels this new eugenics mindset. The quest for genetic enhancement is the most virulent form of the new eugenics. James Hughes, one of the architects of so-called transhumanism, has argued: 'The right to a custom made child is merely the natural extension of our current discourse of reproductive rights. I see no virtue in the role of chance in conception, and great virtue in expanding choice. If women are to be allowed the "reproductive right" or "choice" to choose the father of their child, with his attendant characteristics, then they should be allowed the right to choose the characteristics from a catalog. It will be considered obsessive and dumb to give your kids only parental genes'.¹⁰

James Watson, who with Francis Crick discovered the double-helical nature of the DNA molecule, told *The Guardian* in 2003, 'If you really are stupid, I would call that a disease... So I'd like to get rid of that...It seems unfair that some people don't get the same opportunity. Once you have a way in which you can improve our children, no one can stop it. It would be stupid not to use it because someone else will. Those parents who enhance their children, then their children are going to be the ones who dominate the world'.¹¹

A truly human future

It may be unlikely in our age of reproductive freedom that the new eugenics will be enforced through mandatory sterilisation. However, there are other, more subtle forms of coercion. Personal choice and consumerism are much more likely to fuel eugenics today. One day, when genetic tests are more widely available, it might even become illegal to bring a child into the world with a genetic disability.

Discrimination against persons because of their race, gender or disabilities is an ugly reality. Discrimination based on genetic identity is even uglier. If we would preserve a truly human future for ourselves and for our children, then we must value individuals for who they are, not for what they can do. The laudable goal of treating human disease and relieving human suffering must not be allowed to become a tool for exercising quality control over our offspring. To do so would be to use the good gift of genetic knowledge for evil ends. Only vigilance on the part of all of us can prevent a bleak genetic future.

C Ben Mitchell PhD is editor of 'Ethics & Medicine: An International Journal of Bioethics', and Associate Professor of Bioethics and Contemporary Culture at Trinity International University in Chicago, Illinois



References

1. Black W. *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*. London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003:14
2. Davenport C. *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*. Manchester, USA: Ayer Company Publishers, reprinted 1972
3. Rifkin J. *The Biotech Century: Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1999:117
4. www.icp.org/exhibitions/eugenics/intro3.html
5. For information and hundreds of pictures from the American eugenics movement see www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics
6. Carlson E. *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001:255
7. Grant M. *The Passing of the Great Race*. Manchester, USA: Ayer Company Publishing, reprinted 1970:49.
8. Black W. *Op cit*:259
9. Rothblatt M. *Unzipped Genes: Taking Charge of Baby-Making in the New Millennium*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997:6
10. Hughes J. Embracing Change With All Four Arms: A Post-Humanist Defense of Genetic Engineering. *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 1996;6 :94-101 www.biol.tsukuba.ac.jp/~macer/EJ64/EJ64E.html
11. www.futurepundit.com/archives/000998.html