NOTES ON EUGENICS I

The Scope of Eugenics

Harold Joseph Laski

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Harold Joseph Laski (1893-1950) was a Marxist professor of political science at the London School of Economics and the author of twenty-six books and probably thousands of articles. A devout Jew, he strove, at the same time, to be accepted as an "English gentleman," but was disappointed by what he felt to be sense of reluctance to receive him into those circles. Nevertheless he achieved considerable influence and distinction in political and university life.

Published in 1910 in the *Westminster Review*, "The Scope of Eugenics" reflects the general Jewish support of and participation in the eugenics movement, not only at that time, but even decades later. Contrary to politically motivated claims, the eugenics movement was not dismissed as "unscientific" by geneticists in the 1930s (indeed, how could they possible have rejected the concept of selection in human populations?!), nor was it discarded as either science or worldview in the wake of World War II. The assault on eugenics was not launched until the late 1960s – a full quarter century after the end of the war.

"The Scope of Eugenics" speaks for itself, but is by no means an isolated, unique essay. It is published here as an historical document, as a link in the chain of interactions between politics and scholarship, about which Laski himself, of course, could have had no inkling.

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The Scope of Eugenics

The scientific advance of the last half-century has profoundly altered the aspect of sociology. We are no longer compelled to force conclusions derived from purely theoretical reasoning on an unwilling populace. We have at last come to

understand that biology is really the science of life, and that its utility is to be determined by its value to human society. There is no finer or truer aphorism to be found in all Huxley than his remark that science is systematised commonsense. It may have its technical terminology, but its purport is none the less dear. It aims at the discovery and utilisation of truth. We are beginning nowadays to apply scientific formulae to national problems. The statesman, somewhat to his surprise, has discovered that they have political value. It is by the standard of the man of science that the legislation of the future will be tested, and political theories have undergone a profound change since the acceptance of Darwinian conceptions. Science has revolutionised the art of the engineer, and it is becoming of increased importance to the manufacturer and the farmer. Cotton is dependent on chemistry, and it is to Mendelism that the agriculturist will turn in the future. This greater importance of science in the practical world is a sign, perhaps, of an awakened interest in life; a realisation that man, in Meredith's phrase, must become master of the event. We are no longer leaving the world to that divinity that shapes our ends despite our efforts to rough-hew them to our own will. We are becoming certain that whilst the results of natural selection were wholly beneficial in early society, the complex political organism, of which each of us is part, has to no small extent lessened the force of that great weapon of progress. We have practically supplanted Nature; we are no longer content to let her go her own way; nor do we put a blind confidence in her. She rooted out the weaklings; the battle was ever to the strongest, the race to the swiftest of foot. But we have refused any longer to tolerate her Spartan methods. We have demanded her abdication; or, at least, a constitutional rule. We are now, to drop the metaphor, consciously or unconsciously fostering the weaker part of mankind, until its numbers have become a positive danger to the community. The reports of the Royal Commissions on the feeble-minded and the Poor Laws are not the only signs of a danger, the gravity of which it is difficult to exaggerate. Nor, as has been suggested, is this social problem merely economic. Its answer cannot be found either in individualism or collectivism. It is not too much to say that the whole of our national welfare is bound up with its adequate

solution.

Perhaps the keynote of the past fifty years has been an exuberant optimism. There have been moments, indeed, of depression. The South African War seemed an indication of decadence; we conquered by the weight of superior numbers alone; and the recent success of Japan must have warned us to distrust mere quantity. We refused, however, to regard that warning. Failing to understand aright our position, we trusted to the blind force of nature for our redemption. In our enthusiasm for the theoretical advance resultant on Darwin's work, we did not realise that our social instincts militated against the force of natural selection. We were told that nature invariably selected the fittest for survival, and, unthinkingly, we looked forward to national perfectibility in the near future. But our artificial civilisation prevented any real advance; we could not let our weaker brethren go to the wall. We trusted to a biology that was often more reminiscent of Exeter Hall than of Darwin or of Weismann. Ours was a happy existence. Even if we had degenerates, the force of education would improve them; and that kindly but thoughtless humanitarianism so characteristic of the last age would do the rest. But half a century has passed; and the problem, greater with the growth of years, is still with us. We are beginning to realise that our life has not been based on a sound scientific foundation; and we have a feeling of trouble and dismay.

Slowly, but surely, science has evolved a solution to this problem. It is now more than fifty years since the publication of the "Origin of Species," and we can look back with feelings of satisfaction on the theoretical progress that has since been made. We are beginning really to understand the mysterious workings of heredity, and to realise how the chain that links father to son is forged. Statisticians, like Karl Pearson, naturalists like Professor Bateson, have really attained to an adequate conception of the meaning of Darwinism. It is not a mere branch of science. It is not only a path acquaintance with which is the high-road to a University degree. It is a series of biological laws which simplify the question of man's origin, and are of great value in the determination of his future development. The work that has been accomplished by Galton and Pearson, the likelihood that Mendelian hypotheses are

applicable to man, are surely of such great importance as to give us pause. The increase in mental and physical deficiency, in unemployment, and its correlative pauperism, is so great as to cause all thoughtful men to turn their attention to its arrest. Indeed, the most optimistic of us could hardly fail to observe the existence of a certain decadence at the present time. There may be little cause for pessimism, but there is no reason for congratulation. Like unskillful physicians, our statesmen do not attempt to ascertain the cause of the malady, and check it at its root. We feel its presence; we have a dim suspicion that our attempts at cure are but fleeting remedies at best, and not a panacea for our ills. And the gravity of the problem renders it impossible for us to wait in the hope that it will solve itself.

The science of Eugenics has been ably defined as the study of those social agencies that may improve or impair the mental and physical characteristics of the race. It is at once a study of national deterioration and of national progress. It is an attempt adequately to estimate the extent of the social problem in its biological aspect, and an indication of the scientific means for its solution.

It has been objected that the material for such a science does not exist. Stress has been laid on the impossibility of human experiment. Since we cannot deal with men as we deal with rabbits or with mice, it has been claimed that our knowledge of human genetics must be correspondingly defective. Professor Pearson has disposed of that argument, and we cannot do better than summarise his conclusion. Your science, objectors will say, pre-supposes the existence of a super-man, who is to society what Sir John Sebright was to pigeons, or, like Luther Burbank, seems to have some almost miraculous control over the productions of nature. We may meet that objection by a simple denial of its relevancy. No Eugenist claims to have faculties in any degree superior to those of the ordinary man. He has no wish actively to experiment on human society. On the contrary, he realises that the ceaseless flow of human energy provides him with more than sufficient material for his purpose. Different kinds of men are born; the average healthy being, the man of exceptional ability, the feeble-minded, and the epileptic. Each type, in due time marries and tends to beget its like. It is an

iron law of inheritance that the outstanding traits of the parents' characters are handed on in some remarkably similar degree to their children. Bad stock produces bad stock; the able produce the able; the strong produce the strong. This is true, of course, only of mankind in the mass; it is a law to which there are individual exceptions. The physician, further, provides the Eugenist with a record of the experiments that are continually and unconsciously being made. The material that can be produced from a great hospital, a home for degenerates, a school, an orphan asylum, is enormous. The report issued by the Edinburgh Charity Organization Society is a striking example of the material which can be procured. And in the histories of families like the Darwins and the Jukes, the Macaulays and the Sebalds, we have data upon which is possible to build at least the foundation of our science.

It will be well briefly to recapitulate the scientific basis upon which eugenics rests in order to render the more manifest the significance of its conclusions. The primary article of the eugenic creed is the importance, to use Galton's antithesis, of nature as opposed to nurture. The result of parental experience is not transmitted. Acquired characteristics do not affect the germ-plasm of the individual. It must, of course, be admitted that this is not a universally accepted view. The neo-Lamarckians are a large and powerful school. Darwin himself had a belief in the truth of its tenets, and the excision of Lamarckism from his works would profoundly alter their character. Herbert Spencer staked the fact of evolution on its truth; Earnest Haeckel has built his particular form of religion upon it. But the challenge issued by Weismann to the Lamarckians twenty-five years ago, revealed the entire inadequacy of their evidence. Their credentials were examined. Controversy raged round the work of Brown-Sequard, Ehrlich, and more recently of Kammerer. The supposed re-occurrence of different mutilations was held to be striking proof of its accuracy. But a critical examination of these results, and the fact that their importance is considerably diminished by the work of Weismann and Sommer, must lead to the conclusion that such modifications are not transmitted. It is important, moreover, to recollect Galton's striking experiments on the transfusion of the blood. His result is

practically conclusive evidence – substantiated as it is by the similar work of Romanes – that Darwin's provisional theory of pangenesis – a theory advance in order to explain the supposed transmissions of modifications, remains nothing more than a theory. That is experimental evidence. The conclusion reached by biometricians are of the same nature. Miss Barrington investigated the relative influence of heredity and environment on sight. The conclusion at which she arrived is that the effect of environment is practically negligible when compared with the influence of heredity. Professor Pearson and Miss Elderton have recently published a remarkable memoir on alcoholism, which, substantiating as it does the views of Dr. Archdall Reid, must command serious attention. We must, therefore, remain extremely doubtful of the inheritance of acquired characters. We must, for the present, at any rate, proceed upon the assumption that somatic modifications do not affect the germ-plasm of the individual.

No contest is so important in the modem study of biology as that raging between the Mendelians and the Biometricians. While no school is so rich in promise as the former, for the present, at any rate, the conclusions reached by the Biometricians are of more eugenic importance. The school, indeed, will have so to alter some of its fundamental conclusions as to bring them into line with the ascertained facts of Mendelian inheritance. Segregation is a physiological phenomenon of which Galton had no conception when he promulgated his law of ancestral inheritance; and that fascinating hypothesis will have greatly to be reconstructed before it can be accepted as authoritative or final. But Mendelism has as yet given us little certain material upon which to work, while to the biometrician we owe some of our most important results. It is impossible, of course, to minimise the importance of Mendelism. No modern study has a more profound significance. But there are some grave difficulties in the way of its universal application, difficulties which, in the end, may be more apparent than real. The fact, however, that we have little certain evidence of Mendelian inheritance in man, makes its results of considerably diminished importance, from the eugenic point of view.

Mr. Hurst, indeed, has almost definitely proved eye-colour

to conform to Mendelian hypothesis; and in such defects as Daltonism and brachydactyly, Professor Bateson has given good reason for thinking that Mendelian inheritance takes place. But in two subjects in which Professor Pearson has particularly interested himself – in albinism and lobster-claw in man, he considers the results distinctly unconformable. Recent biological research, however, justifies us in coming to the conclusion that the progress of individual, to use Mr. Punnett's apt phraseology, is "a matter of gametes, not of training; of breeding rather than pedagogics." That is a conclusion on which both schools alike are agreed. Professor Bateson has laid stress on the importance of negative eugenics. Professor Pearson has devoted himself to its justification and exposition. But eugenics does not pledge us to any single theory of inheritance. We accept, and thankfully, the results of all. It is our object to trace the differences and likenesses of inheritance, and thus to obtain, as Pearson has done, by the accurate totalisation of individual cases, the degree of resemblance not merely of physical, but also of psychical characters. It is important, however, to bear in mind that the exact means whereby the laws of inheritance are obtained are of more importance, though not of more interest, to the scientific experimenter than to the eugenist.

It is important that we should examine the results of the conclusion that acquired characters are not transmitted. It must lead, it is probable, to a revision of some current methods of charity. It is exceedingly necessary that our habits of life should be based on scientific principles. If we judge modern charity by this criterion it must demand our whole-hearted condemnation. Let us examine for a moment what often happens in the case of an habitual criminal. He commits some offence against society; he is imprisoned, and on the expiration of his sentence we help him to find work; we assist him to marry; we rejoice when he has children; and we altogether fail to perceive that his marriage is a national calamity. His criminality is part of his inheritance; it is probably due to a weak mental control. Nurture cannot eradicate it; it can only be rendered dormant during the individual life-time. When the appropriate stimulus is received it is re-awakened. Professor Pearson has proved, practically beyond

contradiction, that the psychical qualities of man are inherited in the same degree as his physical characteristics. Modern charitable methods do not proceed from this fact; they are based on a virtual denial of it. Let us take another case, which, though not exactly analogous, will serve its purpose. We have many excellent epileptic homes where our degenerates receive appropriate treatment. But it is important to remember that though treatment may render the individual normal, it does not normalise the stock. No mechanism is known which can remove from the nucleus that particular factor which manifests itself as epilepsy. It is hard, then, to understand the reason of a recent case, where the physician deliberately urged the marriage of a successfully treated epileptic in order, as he said, to perpetuate the results of that treatment. The fact, however, must be emphasised, that although the inheritance of the individual is the chief point for eugenic consideration, we have no desire to minimise the importance of his nurture. Man cannot be separated from his environment, and it is well that we should render it as healthy as we can. But we have learnt now the correlation between the two, and we realise, that however excellent the social heritage may be, it does not outweigh the importance of the natural inheritance. We shall never create a race of Englishmen able to survive in the struggle for existence, by merely turning every town in this country into a Bournville or a Letchworth. Such an environment would simply act as a stimulus to the inherited qualities. We must lay stress upon the fact that our modern methods of charity are based upon insecure biological data. We do not question the loftiness of the aim, but we must doubt the beneficence of the result.

The biological criterion we apply to charity is no less applicable to social legislation. It is necessary to refer here to a theory of Professor Pearson which will demand the earnest consideration of our statesmen in the near future. Professor Pearson directly assails the Factory Acts. They have lowered the economic value of the child. They have penalised parenthood. Before they were passed the child had a distinct economic value. Even at the present day he is a commodity whose production is regulated by the laws of supply and demand. That may seem an unpleasant doctrine, but it is none the less true

for that. Professor Pearson further considers that the Education Acts have had a distinctly anti-eugenic effect. They have raised the age at which the child becomes an economic asset, with the result that to poor parents he has no longer his former value. It seems evident, therefore, that from a purely selfish and personal standpoint the childless couple are economically better off than the parents. The children have become a burden, instead of a help. The danger of such a condition it is scarcely necessary to point out. It limits the production of fit children, while it does not impose the same limitation on those of the unfit, to whose aid charity is more usually applied. We lack the space to quote the formidable statistics by which Professor Pearson supports his contention. They are both weighty and powerful. It is, however, of importance to mention one or two facts which seem to necessitate some modification of this theory. In the first place, in so far as the acts regulated the supply of labour in a dangerous trade, and protected the interests of the workmen against the capitalist, they were, as Mr. and Mrs. Webb have amply proved, of distinct economic value. The logical conclusion to Pearson's argument would be his advocacy of their abolition. No one with the ordinary feelings of humanity could desire a return to the days before those Acts were passed, and that conclusion Professor Pearson avoids. He further fails to perceive that the Education Acts, in providing for free elementary education, and in thus removing a burden from the parent's shoulders, were undoubtedly eugenic. The real point of the theory lies in the fact that the environment created by the Acts, not the Acts themselves, had a vicious effect. This is an important distinction. Their aims, in so far as they were intended to preserve the physique of the mother and child, were undoubtedly beneficent and worthy of all praise. But it is obvious that it is biologically unsound to penalise parenthood in the struggle for life. The statesmen who passed the Acts had no real appreciation of the needs of the working classes, nor did they understand the essential dependence of economics on biology. It is early, perhaps, to suggest a possible line of improvement. It is probable, however, that a minimum wage in which due provision is made for the parents of healthy children – a provision that would remove the present penalisation – must go far towards mitigating their

evil effect.

It must be admitted that these are unpalatable facts, and that they leave a somewhat fatalistic impression on one's mind. The force of heredity cannot be evaded. Nothing is more justifiable than Heine's bitter mockery, "A man cannot be too careful in the selection of his parents." That may seem paradoxical, but it is a profound biological truth. It is useless to breed from a wilted stock in the hope that a fit mutation may arise. That nation alone can survive in the struggle for existence, the members of which are individually sound and strong. Since Professor Pearson has given us statistical demonstration of the fact that one-quarter of one generation produces half of its successor, it is obvious that the State which is careless in the selection of it parents begins to undermine its foundations. Mr. Balfour recently delivered a stimulating and suggestive address to Cambridge University on Decadence. He examined the causes of a nation's decline, and in his usual brilliant way, suggested various explanations of his phenomenon. He worked out Plato's conception of the State as an human organism, and concluded that, like the individual, it has its hour of decay. What, then, is the cause of this phenomenon? Can we ascribe it to the free distribution of corn as at Rome, to slavery, to the moral degradation of the race? Mr. Balfour rightly decided that none of these theories is an adequate explanation, though each of them may be a contributory cause. He suggests that decadence is the cause of decay; an hypothesis that reminds us of the facile generalisation by which the mechanism of docks is explained on the principle of horology. It is, indeed, questionable whether Mr. Balfour arrived at the true interpretation. He rightly rejected the usual historical account of decadence. Progress and retrogression are not to be explained in terms of Lamarckism. We know now that acquired characters are not transmitted, and that each age in a definite sense starts anew. A theory that would account for decadence through physical degeneration resultant on imperfect selection, seems a better interpretation of the facts. The decline of every great nation is probably to be traced to the fostering of the unfit at the expense of the fit, and their consequent over-propagation. Professor Ross, for example, has suggested that malaria has had

not a little to do with the decline and fall of Rome; a theory of which the suggestiveness is not to be denied. The wars of Napoleon and his code have had a disastrous effect on the physique of the French nation. An incomplete process of selection will, in a great measure, explain the downfall of Rome, of Spain, and of the present decadence in France. It is possible, moreover, that unless our statesmen carefully consider the biological problem by which we are confronted, it will be the primary cause of our own decay.

Extreme emphasis must be laid on the danger of breeding from the unfit at the expense of the fit. Statistical proof of this is ready to hand. In the first place, it is necessary always to bear in mind that half of one generation is produced by a quarter of its predecessor. If this is the case, it is surely of importance that marriages should be selective. If only a small proportion of parents are mentally or physically unfit to take the burden of reproduction upon themselves, the danger of their doing so is obvious. The Royal Commission on the Feeble-minded calculated that more than 200,000 mentally defective persons are at large in England. It is impossible, therefore, to exaggerate the danger of the marriage of even a tithe of that number. The fitter classes of the community produce families that are not only much smaller, on the average, than the families of the degenerates, but, further, much smaller than the families produced thirty years ago. Sidney Webb has calculated that the average number of offspring among English intellectuals is 1.5. That result is hardly to be explained by Herbert Spencer's hypothesis that individuation varies inversely to genesis. Karl Pearson, in a long and complex statistical enquiry, could find no particular quality associated with fecundity; and it is probable that voluntary restriction on the part of the parents largely accounts for this result. Mr. Webb has further calculated that in certain friendly societies, in the twenty-four years from 1880 to 1904, the birth-rate fell from 2,472 to 1,105 per ten thousand members. Mr. Whetham, taking consecutively 143 entries from "Who's Who," where the men and women have proved themselves able to a degree above the average, found that whereas before 1870 the number of children to a fertile marriage was 5.2, after 1870 it fell to 3.08. Mr. Powys, in a brilliant memoir published in

"Biometrika," estimated that the average number of children in the families of the professional classes of New South Wales is 3.3. The birth-rate among the families of American graduates, according to the authorities of Harvard University, is 2. Now let us turn to the pathological stocks. The birth-rate among the London mentally defective per family is 7; in Manchester it is 6.3. Dr. Goring has estimated that the fertility in criminal stocks is 6.6; in English deaf-mutes it is 6.2; among albinos it is as high as 5.9. In the families which use the schools for the feeble-minded, the average number of offspring is 7.3. The only conclusion to which these statistics point is that the unfit stock is increasing at the expense of the fit. The general opinion of enquirers seems to be that the transmission of desirable qualities is not being adequately maintained. Natural selection works by the elimination of those who are in any way unfit to cope with their environment; and its aim is the evolution of a higher type. It is, therefore, usually contended against eugenic proposals that natural selection works for the raising of the standard of racial efficiency. Now, whilst that ought biologically to be the case, the statistics we have quoted, prove it to be untrue. Our artificial civilisation militates against its force; individuals who would be eliminated in a free competition for existence survive, and have offspring. The different rates of fertility in the sound and pathological stocks point to a future swamping of the better by the worse. As a nation, we are faced by racial suicide.

It is to this problem that eugenics supplies the solution. It believes that the time has now come when man can consciously undertake the duties that have heretofore been performed by nature. Natural selection must be supplemented by reproductive selection. The parentage of the fit must be encouraged, the propagation of the unfit must be prevented. Such people, the opposition of whom eugenists have to face, assert that marriage is purely a private affair, and that the State has no right of interference. Eugenists maintain that such a view is anti-social, and productive of infinite harm. Whatever action is fraught with national consequences rightly comes within the cognisance of the State. Few things are more true than Ruskin's great assertion that there is no wealth but life, and eugenics provides life with the means to live usefully and

well. All progress is illusory unless it is associated with physical advancement; and such an advancement cannot be secured unless we prevent the propagation of the unfit. No Eugenist desires to see State-offices established to dispose of individuals in marriage as a judge disposes of criminals. That is a conception of the eugenic ideal which can rightly be left to such professional jesters as Mr. Chesterton. We must place our chief reliance on the force of public opinion. The time is surely coming in our history when society will look upon the production of a weakling as a crime against itself. When we remember that the highest duty is parenthood, it is surely only right to ask that the parents have no serious heritable taint. As Galton has so finely said, we must hold the eugenic ideal of parenthood with the fervour of a new religion. The advance of modern science, and the insight it has given us into life, make us realize more vividly, and with greater truth, the possibilities and limitations of our civilisation. Upon the framework, with which genetics provides us, we must build a strong political superstructure. We see the necessity of a radical reform in the basis of our life; we have realised that the science which enables us to elevate it lies ready to our hand. Society will work out its own destiny without eugenics; but with its aid it can accomplish its salvation.