

What the British taught the Nazis about eugenics

by Mark Burdman

Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings: The Eugenics Society, Its Sources and Its Critics in Britain

by Pauline M.H. Mazumdar
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Pauline Mazumdar's book is written in an objective, academic manner, often with technical sections that would tend to appeal only to someone with a professional interest in genetics, and her objectivity often makes it impossible to know what her moral attitude is toward the subjects she is describing. While these three elements conspire to make *Eugenics, Human Genetics and Human Failings* tedious reading at times, this problem is more than balanced by the fact that the book is dense with explosive material about one important trend in the thinking of British political, scientific, and intellectual elites from the period of the 1880s until the Second World War. Paradoxically, the dry, objective tone has the effect of making such material all the more shocking, and her devotion to her subject-matter has produced a lot of useful research. Mazumdar has written a book that is required reading for those seeking to understand crucial features of the last 100 years of history, particularly the period from roughly 1880 to the Second World War, and to counter the simplistic notions of this period purveyed in our media and university textbooks.

For all the voluminously documented crimes of the Nazis, the fact is, leading British circles were the earliest

proponents and developers of eugenics, a pseudo-science that these British influentials—including Charles Darwin's cousin Sir Francis Galton and various sons of Darwin, members of the Huxley family, International Monetary Fund founder John Maynard Keynes, and others—concocted to promote the reduction in numbers, if not the eventual elimination, of categories of people whose existence was undesired by them. Such undesirables were, in the earliest years of the history of the Eugenics Education Society (the name of the group at the time of its founding in 1907), referred to dismissively as “the residuum” and later as “the paupers”; in order to study them, the eugenics mob sponsored so-called “Pauper Pedigree Projects,” to reinforce the notion of “social class biologically defined.” Eventually, the name “social problem group” was used, to describe what is today often termed “the underclass.”

According to Mazumdar, “from its beginning in Britain, eugenics spread to many other countries,” creating a kind of “eugenics international.” It was the British eugenists who, years before the Nazis existed, synthesized the philosophical ravings of the late 19th century's Friedrich Nietzsche about the *Übermensch* (“Superman” in English) into a coherent thought-matrix, to justify measures against what Nietzsche labeled “the inferior race.” It was these same Britons who, starting about 1930, together with the Rockefeller Foundation and related circles in the United States, promoted the work of the notorious German race scientist Ernst Rüdin, including into the 1933 period when Rüdin's work provided the basis for the Nazis' compulsory sterilization law, and then used his work to promote eugenics measures in Britain. Beginning in 1929, the same individuals launched the institutions of the neo-malthusian population control movement. It

was Sir Francis Galton, the proponent of “hereditarianism,” who declared in 1883 that the “Age of Eugenics” had begun (the name of the Eugenics Society today is the Galton Institute).

While it was likely not her intention to do so, Mazumdar has provided confirmation for, and added crucial features to, the findings reported in publications associated with Lyndon LaRouche over the past 15 years. Her account complements various researchers’ documentation of the activities of the eugenics movement in the United States, such as the Cold Springs Harbor/Eugenics Record Office group, whose collaboration with their British counterparts Mazumdar mentions, although she omits the Harriman family’s funding of such activities.* Mazumdar gives crucial leads on the *British origin of and inspiration for* such trends in the U.S.

The book is particularly topical, in a historical period where eugenics thinking is being revived. Under conditions of worsening economic depression in the U.S., Britain, and other “advanced sector” countries, the recent years’ propaganda about “the underclass” can rapidly evolve into an overt racist genocidalist belief-structure, aimed at minority groups. This evolution is discernible in aspects of the propaganda of the American “neo-conservative” movement and in the popularization of the writings of such quacks as the late William Shockley, whose racialist theories were promoted by George Bush when he was a congressman. On a global scale, the same trend is perceptible in the ideology underlying the so-called new world order, a racialist malthusianism that seeks the elimination of “inferior” non-white peoples, under the guise of concern about “overpopulation” and “the ecology.”

Regrettably, Mazumdar doesn’t address this continuity into the postwar era—except for some hints in the concluding pages that the eugenics movement has shifted attention to the Third World—but rather stops at asserting that the classical eugenics movement died out after World War II, mostly because of the emergence of the “welfare state,” and also because the Nazis had so discredited eugenics in the public mind. She doesn’t take up the issue of its reemergence in new forms and guises. Also, in making what seems to be the correct claim that the British version of eugenics expressed a concern with *class* much more than the American and German versions, which were more concerned with *race*, she goes too far in downplaying the racialist element in the British case.

But, hopefully, a debate on this point is now beginning in Britain. On June 20, the London *Guardian* reported the findings of British researcher Clive Ponting, on the late Winston Churchill’s support for sterilization and forced detention of “mental degenerates” and “the feeble-minded,” in order to prevent the weakening of the “British race,” especially in light of the growing economic-industrial threat represented

by the U.S. and Germany. The *Guardian* piece is entitled, “Churchill’s Plan for Race Purity.” One of the *dramatis personae* in Ponting’s account, eugenicist Dr. Alfred Tredgold, also features prominently in Mazumdar’s book. Ponting’s biography of Churchill will be published in 1993.

‘They should be shipped off to uninhabited isles’

What Mazumdar shows is that the British eugenists sought frenetically to document the biological-hereditary determinants of poverty, to provide ostensible scientific proof for the proposition that “pauperism is hereditary” and that “the poor were pathologically different from the rest of the population,” so as to be able to argue that there would be no alternative to dealing with this “class,” than to practice sterilization, involuntary confinement, or other draconian means of control. The “assumed inheritance” of negative qualities made it seem to the Eugenics Society that “if the prolific breeding of this class were not controlled, pauperism and its associated undesirable qualities must necessarily keep on increasing until the direction of evolution of the human race was reversed,” she writes.

“Associated undesirable qualities” could mean just about anything to the British eugenics priesthood, depending on their tastes. They could range from the supposedly inherited quality of “feeble-mindedness,” to alcoholism, criminality, carelessness, improvidence, indifference, unlimited selfishness, unemployment, slum-dwelling, etc. Mazumdar cites the characteristic view of Eugenics Society General Secretary Charles Blacker, that “people who are below average in intelligence should be sterilized, even if they are not actually defectives.” It was this Blacker who actively promoted the ideas of Germany’s Ernst Rüdin. The two regularly corresponded, and Rüdin “sent Blacker a copy of the Proceedings of the Prussian *Landesgesundheitsrat* [state health council] announcing that eugenic sterilization was to be permitted there upon a voluntary basis. This pre-Nazi legislation was the first step towards the compulsory sterilization law, the *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*, that was to be passed in July 1933, almost immediately after the Nazi accession. Rüdin is said to have had it already prepared in his desk drawer.”

As Mazumdar shows, many of the studies that were supposed to prove the phenomenon of inherited “undesirable qualities” never discovered very much in reality, and the hard-core eugenists came under severe attack from certain leading geneticists and others. But nonetheless, the scientific patina that was given to class bias and racism conformed to the *policy intent* of British elites, such that eugenists often contributed to government advisory committees. For example, Eugenics Society ideas were incorporated in the 1909 “Report of the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded,” which was prepared by a joint committee of members of the Society and the National Association for the Care and Protection of the Feeble-Minded, in-

* See *George Bush: The Unauthorized Biography*, by Webster G. Tarpley and Anton Chaitkin, Washington, D.C.: EIR, 1992, Chapter 3; and also *EIR Special Report* on “The Genocidal Roots of Bush’s ‘New World Order.’”

cluding Churchill adviser Tredgold. Also, when the "Mental Deficiency Act" came into force in 1914, the Eugenics Society called it "the only piece of English social law extant in which the influence of heredity has been treated as a practical factor in determining its provisions."

More often than not, the eugenicists' point was made rudely and crudely, and the most shocking parts of Mazumdar's account appear in her quotes from some of the more candid spokesmen. In 1908, one Dr. Ettie Sayer told the (misnamed) Moral Education Congress, on the subject of "real moral

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degenerates": "If diagnosed as so actively anti-social and morally indirigible as to be unfit ever to live among a pure, honest, unselfish and public-spirited people, they should be classified and shipped off to various unhabited isles." Or, Eugenics Society President Leonard Darwin (one of Charles Darwin's several sons to be involved in the society's work) described the kinship relationships shown in the Pauper Pedigree Projects, as being like "rivers, flowing steadily on wide fronts, carrying on their surface patches of refuse."

From Cambridge, which Mazumdar identifies as a hotbed of eugenics sentiment in the pre-World War I period, the Rev. William R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's, made a speech on "Some Social and Religious Aspects of Eugenics," in which he stated: "I cannot say I am hopeful about the near future. I am afraid that the urban proletariat may cripple our civilization as it destroyed that of ancient Rome. These degenerates, who have no qualities that confer survival value, will probably live as long as they can by 'robbing hen roosts,' as Mr. Lloyd-George truthfully describes modern taxation, and will then disappear. . . ." One C.S. Stock, in a 1912 document published in Cambridge, praised eugenics research as "likely in the near future to provide us with the knowledge of how to rid society of a great incubus of disease, crime, deformity

and many other 'ills the flesh is heir to.' "

To accomplish its goals, the society formed a "Committee for Legalizing Eugenic Sterilization," with which Julian Huxley was associated, and which was the vehicle through which the Eugenics Society first made contact with Ernst Rüdin in 1930. As Mazumdar writes, Rüdin's group in Munich had developed a method of "empirical hereditary prognosis," the "practical result" of which "was to be the selection of diagnostic categories that would require sterilization for the elimination of pathological genes from the population. . . . In 1930, needing more data to support its sterilization campaign, the British Society turned to Rüdin."

'Control of the excessive fertility'

As Mazumdar shows, the eugenics movement, while an outgrowth of the emerging science of genetics, was rooted in the writings of Parson Thomas Malthus, who had been obsessed with the "uncontrolled fertility of the poor and especially the paupers." In 1916, Society President Leonard Darwin stated that the works of Malthus "unquestionably form the starting-point for all speculation on population, and are still valid in substance."

In the last quarter of the 19th century, malthusianism was reinforced by the ideology of "social Darwinism." Mazumdar presents evidence of an interesting shift in British social policy, consolidated during the period from 1859, when Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, to 1886, when riots by poor people in London terrified "the propertied classes." During this period, the British upper-crust progressively dropped Christian terminology in describing the problem of the poor. There had been a propensity to use the word "charity" in dealing with the poor, even if the *content* defined by that word had less to do with the Christian teachings of St. Paul than with promoting a form of "soft" social engineering, based on the notion that the existence of the "residuum" resulted from lack of sufficient "morals" or "character."

But in the 1880s, "the emphasis changed from demoralization to degeneration, as the growth of social Darwinism added a biological side to the picture of the casual poor." So, while the Charity Organization Society saw "lack of character of the residuum as the underlying cause of all their problems," the Eugenics Education Society felt that "inherited defect in turn underlay the lack of character, and that control of the excessive fertility of these people would get to the root of the matter. The fertility control method that they preferred was that of compulsory detention in state institutions; campaigns for the detention of inebriates, of those with venereal disease and of the feeble-minded were all carried on vigorously in the Society's first few years." As Mazumdar shows, several leading eugenicists, such as Churchill's favorite Dr. Tredgold, like Malthus before them, were adamantly against charity, since this would just perpetuate the "residuum." Malthus had warned that charity "would minimize whatever prudential check the poor were prepared to put

upon their fecundity,” and thereby advised against provision of housing to the poor.

In sum, the eugenists argued that the primary causes of destitution were defects either inherited or transmitted *in utero*, and what emerged, as the elements that came together to form the eugenics movement in the beginning of the 20th century, was a mélange of Malthus, Darwin, and the specific ideas of “hereditarianism” put forward by Darwin’s cousin Sir Francis Galton, the guru of the eugenics movement.

In 1929, such ideas branched out to encompass the issue of population control, with the formation of the British Population Society, which had 20 members, 14 of whom were members of the Eugenics Society, including Sir Bernard Mallet, president of the Royal Statistical Society and president of the Eugenics Society; Julian Huxley; John Maynard Keynes. The British Population Society had its offices within the Eugenics Society’s rooms and was affiliated with the International Union for the Scientific Investigation of Population Problems, headquartered at the Institute for Biological Research at Johns Hopkins University. Economist Keynes, who later was to found the International Monetary Fund, portrayed unemployment as a sign of overpopulation, Mazumdar points out.

‘Pernicious doctrine of the equality of man’

Malthusianism and social Darwinism were reinforced in the early 20th century by the influence of the English translations of the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. The library of the Eugenics Society in London contains the early series of Nietzsche translations, and several books on his work. As Mazumdar notes, “The commentators at this time generally saw Nietzsche as the philosopher of Darwinism and evolution, whose *Übermensch* was the forerunner of a new human race, a master-race.”

Hence, top Eugenics Society figures Havelock Ellis and R.A. Fisher were heavily influenced by Nietzsche, with the latter searching for “a new natural nobility of worth and birth.” Also Maximilian Muegge, a founding member who occasionally lectured for the Eugenics Education Society, wrote in 1909 in the first volume of the *Eugenics Review* that Sir Francis Galton had founded a racial religion: the ideal of the super-man would supply the religious feeling of responsibility which would give the science its popular support. Similarly, there was Georges Chatterton-Hill, a Nietzschean commentator who wrote an article in the *Eugenics Review* in 1912, directly quoting Nietzsche: “In the whole of Europe, the inferior race has now triumphed, in regard alike to their color and their brachycephalic features and perhaps even in regard to their intellectual and social instincts. . . . The race of the Masters and Conquerors is decaying even in a physiological sense.”

Nietzschean ideas were also reflected in the ideas of Ernest W. MacBride, professor of zoology at Imperial College, who organized Eugenics Society courses after 1914. Mac-

Bride had written in 1913: “The lessons which the eugenist seeks to enforce are written out in flame across every page of zoology: The wiping out of the less perfectly developed and less adaptive tribes is going on daily before our very eyes. If this sort of mental pabulum were supplied to those who are likely to become our public men and leaders instead of the exclusively classical education on which the last generation has been reared, the eugenists would not preach to deaf ears.” In 1924, the same MacBride railed against the “pernicious doctrine of the equality of man,” because of which, he claimed, the doors of immigration were opened wide and North America had become filled with a vast crowd of Mediterranean peoples, who were “outbreeding” their Nordic neighbors.

From such Nietzschean inputs, it is not difficult to see that the British eugenists would be attracted to Nazi race science as per Rüdin, nor that one branch of the movement, the “Positive Eugenics Committee,” would, in 1934, be particularly interested in the political measures taken by the fascist governments in Italy and in Germany.

And the Fabians?

There are two other aspects to Mazumdar’s book that require comment. One is the matter of the field of genetics itself. Mazumdar is a professional in this domain, and because this reviewer is a layman, many details flew by him. From the overall evidence presented, however, it is not so easy to tell what the difference is between genetics as such, and some version of eugenics thinking, and Mazumdar occasionally seems to equate the two. Even those geneticists opposed to the hard-core social eugenics view, favored some notion of social engineering, using genetics research to “improve the race.” From other epistemological and philosophical musings in the book, it would seem that genetics itself is rooted in a kind of deterministic materialism and radical positivism, almost a kind of Gnosticism. Much to the point here, is the comment of T.H. Huxley, one of the main philosophical-scientific inspirers of the eugenics movement, who in 1889 stated his “untiring opposition to that ecclesiastical spirit, which in England as everywhere else, and to whatever denomination it may belong, is the deadly enemy of science.”

The last point, and a somewhat distressing one, is Mazumdar’s ambiguous attitude toward the Fabian and Marxian left in Britain. She seems to sympathize with their critique of the class-based eugenics propaganda, while admitting that the Fabians had their own quite well-thought-out eugenics philosophy, as expressed in some atrocious views quoted by her from Sidney Webb and J.B.S. Haldane, both of whom saw a classless socialist society as a more effective vehicle for introducing policies like compulsory sterilization. However, she omits some of the wildest eugenics views expressed by H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and others of their ilk. The reader would have to have recourse to others’ researches to fill in this gap in Mazumdar’s otherwise exhaustive work.