

Eugenics: From Hitler's Sparta to contemporary legitimacy

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It is a dark omen that the word eugenics has resurfaced in recent weeks on social media. Prominent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins tweeted on the 16th of February 2020 claiming whilst he deplores eugenics morally, it may work in practice.¹ It may seem like shite spouting, or maybe an irrelevant rant in the echo chamber of social media, but the fact that a prominent public figure considers it reasonable to promote eugenics in any way is worrying. On 17 February, an adviser appointed to Boris Johnson resigned over a media furore over his past writings on genetics, including a quote of his stating that there are “very real racial differences in intelligence”.² Strains of eugenic thought are snaking through the capitalist zeitgeist, and it would be wise to be vigilant about how these ideas could gain traction again.

Eugenic ideas were not considered controversial until after the second world war, but they have managed to resurface through covert structural racism and contemporary debates around population control. These ideas always implicate women as they seek to constrain reproductive freedom. Spartan society set an ideal for women as the producers of the ‘race’ over any other conception of their humanity, an idea which was reproduced in Nazi ideology and in colonial projects. Eugenics is inherently racist as well as sexist, as it rests on a belief in racial superiority. This superiority is not necessarily linked to skin colour as a biological indicator, as mainstream perceptions of racialisation are often limited to this perception. The core of eugenics is the belief that one group of human beings is essentially genetically superior to another. It has been historically used as a pseudo-scientific basis for the exploitation or extermination of certain populations.

In the context of the climate crisis, amid anxiety and fear about how we may sustain our planet and our own species, eugenic ideas have wormed their

way into some awful proposals on how we deal with it. The overpopulation myth may not outwardly call for genocide, but the logical conclusion to the problem according to that philosophy is to limit the reproduction of the human race. In a world of such imbalanced power, alongside racism and misogyny, it is hard to see how the manifestation of such ideas would not involve the extermination of minorities.

It is impossible to look at eugenics without considering some of its origins in human history, which are directly linked to sexual reproduction and the control of women’s bodies. In modern instances, eugenics becomes more intertwined with biologically situated racism. Looking at eugenics from this standpoint enables us to see how all forms of oppressions – race, sexuality, ability and gender based – are connected, and how eugenics is a set of beliefs which can be utilized to the benefit of the ruling class.

Spartan society

Historical studies have argued that Spartan society treated women differently to contemporary Greek and Roman societies. In Ancient Athens, women were considered a necessary evil, a tolerated part of the family unit that had no overlap with the public life of their husband and was customary rather than legally enforced.³ This was probably the reality for most privileged women, but not necessarily for the lower class women who had to work. In Sparta, the exclusion of women from public life was not as extreme. The population of Sparta was made up of 85% women, helots (subjugated peoples) and perioiki (non-citizens). Many women, forbidden from performing labouring tasks, needed something to occupy themselves with while the men were fighting in the military.⁴ Athleticism was highly valued and women were expected to maintain themselves through a variety of sports activities – running, wrestling,

javelin throwing – with the central aim of making their bodies more resilient for childbirth.⁵ Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* recounts how surrogacy was acceptable in situations where a man was undesiring of his wife, as the primary function of marriage was the reproduction of the Spartan population.⁶ According to Xenophon, a man could even use another man's wife to birth his children. These attitudes and social practices towards women reinforced their role as reproductive vessels.

What is interesting to note is that Spartan society practiced a form of eugenics. New-born babies were first bathed in red wine, then scrutinized by the Gerousia elders, and if they deemed the baby of poor constitution, they ordered the mother to expose the baby on Mount Taygetus.⁷ Those who survived could grow up through the very rigorous school system and become warriors. Little is known as to whether baby girls were treated the same. Considering how women's physical health and prowess was valued, it would be safe to assume these practices targeted them too.

The role of women in Spartan society is based on unreliable sources. Little was written, or built, by the Spartans and accounts by allies and enemies tended to fill in the gaps, making it hard to know what the real situation of women was.⁸ One reason for this lack of evidence is that the Spartans were known for being secretive, protective of their formula for running society which they held maintained their military supremacy.⁹

This did not matter much to Hitler, who fetishized Spartan society as a model society in which to base the construction of a modern fascist state.¹⁰ The Nazis were not the first to glorify ancient Greek society; some Enlightenment thinkers also saw it as a model. Rousseau, for example, regarded Sparta as "the example we all ought to follow" for the creation of civil society, and claimed that in ancient Athens, "It is certain that domestic peace was in general better established... than is the case today".¹¹ Implied here by Rousseau, is a celebration of life divided by gender which was something accepted at the time: men dominated the public, civil, moral realm and the ownership of property, and women were mainly absent from public life.

The emergence of modern eugenics

The emergence of eugenics can be linked to a reactionary group of romantic philosophers and thinkers whose

theories of societal decline and degeneration erupted out of nostalgia for the *ancien regime* in France and a rejection of the Enlightenment and the French revolution.¹² They fetishized the aristocratic civilization that modernity and the bourgeois capitalist class were dismantling. In the late 19th century this developed into eugenic theory. The Industrial Revolution had resulted in the rapid growth of populations in the west, and high concentrations of people in urban areas. This led to a devastating spread of diseases, facilitated by inadequate sewerage, terrible labour conditions and cramped living. The bourgeoisie resisted any attempts at social legislation to ease these issues. To many, eugenics seemed like a solution to these problems. 'Biological degeneration' of the human race was the result of the 'weaker' elements being given free rein and the solution was to sterilize the 'degenerates' so that they would not reproduce their 'hereditary' degeneracy. These ideas overlapped with those of racial superiority, which categorised defined races a biological phenomenon.

Modern eugenic thought originates in Britain, although eugenic legislation was never passed.¹³ Many laws around marriage bans and sterilization were passed in the USA, from the mid to late nineteenth century onwards. After the Nazi atrocities, eugenics lost popularity due to its obvious associations. It wasn't that eugenics itself was considered bad, but the perversion of it by the Nazis which made it unacceptable.¹⁴ A paper on eugenics from 1930 states "its progress has been slow owing to the intricacies of the law, the hostility of the Catholic Church and the conservatism of American public opinion".¹⁵ This sentiment seems bizarre, but eugenics was not considered a right-wing idea at the time.

Surprisingly, many feminist organisations in the early twentieth century advocated eugenics. State and local feminist groups in the United States campaigned for eugenic policies. Some scholars argue that this was because they were falling in line with conventional political ideas, others argue that there was a racial bias as the feminist movement was dominated by middle class white women.¹⁶ They attempted to frame the issue of gender equality as one of 'racial improvement'. This was highly contradictory considering that eugenic policies in the United States at the time were targeting women who were considered sexually or mentally deviant.¹⁷

Eugenic feminism was really an attempt to allow white middle class women to emancipate themselves on the backs of oppressed minorities.

In the 1950s-60s, the discourse around eugenics erupted again with a focus on population control.¹⁸ Population growth in developing countries, alongside the Cold War and general social unrest, caused anxieties amongst western powers. Incredibly, involuntary sterilization of ‘feeble-minded’ women in the United States did not stop until the 1970s, with the definition alluding to prisoners, mentally ill people, and even ‘bad mothers’. Levine calls current eugenic policies “consumer eugenics”; referencing state policy in Rajasthan as an example in which cars are used as an incentive in exchange for sterilization in order to reduce the population.¹⁹

The Nazi regime

The Nazi sterilization regime was especially heinous. Emulating the Spartan Gerousia, sterilization courts were established in 1933. Sterilization was made compulsory for people with hereditary diseases, a broad spectrum of mental illnesses including schizophrenia, psychosis and manic depressive disorder, epilepsy, neurological diseases, and physical disability.²⁰ The removal of the uterus for ‘mentally deficient’ women was advocated as once sterilized, they were considered at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases from men enticed by the fact that they were incapable of becoming pregnant.²¹ Hitler’s obsession with direct medical killing manifested in the T4 euthanasia plan – which involved mass murdering of ‘degenerate’ individuals. While there was a fairly equal level of sterilizations on a gender basis, servants, unskilled and poor workers, sex workers and Jewish women were disproportionately targeted. The degradation of women was central to Nazi ideology. Much like in Spartan society, motherhood was the only suitable role for a woman, and producing more white German children was state policy.²² Women were sent back into the home while men occupied the public and military sphere. Unmarried ‘racially viable’ women were candidates for breeding camps where they would be impregnated. This was the re-establishment of the ‘private’ woman and the ‘public’ man; not a reconstruction of Victorian gender roles but harking back to Spartan designation of women

as reproductive vessels. Nazism was the apex of fixation on Sparta. Eugenicist Karl Muller claimed that the Spartans were racially pure due to their Nordicism and military proficiency.²³ Social democrat Victor Ehrenberg stated while in exile in 1934 that Sparta infused itself into every aspect of a citizen’s life under the Nazi regime.²⁴ Hitler praised Sparta in his unpublished *Zweites Buch* (1928) as “the first racialist state” to practice eugenics.

Ireland

Ireland also had its own eugenic societies. Prominent members of the national Eugenics Society included William Butler Yeats and the Guinness family.²⁵ Eugenics was discussed and received across religious lines, although there was a Catholic opposition around interventions in sexual reproduction such as sterilization. The Catholic Church, however, welcomed ideas around restricting ‘racially deficient’ individuals from marriage and controlling their ability to procreate. The dominance of the conservative Catholic Church in Irish society after the formation of the Free State is probably one of the main reasons eugenics did not gain the same foothold as it did in other countries.

Sterilization practices today

Eugenic practices continue to this day, and this is especially evident in incidents of coercive birth control administration. It goes without saying that that the availability of contraception is good thing for many people’s lives, but the choices of women of colour regarding their reproductive health and wellbeing are restricted by racist social policies. The state, philanthropic organisations and pharmaceutical companies work in tandem to implement these veiled eugenic projects in the USA. Depo-Provera was administered to Navajo women and Black women in the south of the USA before it was even approved as a contraceptive in the 1980s.²⁶ Low income adolescents from Black and Latino neighbourhoods in the United States were targeted for Norplant use, with philanthropic organisations even subsidizing the provision of the contraceptive.²⁷ In 2013, a report showed that Ethiopian migrants in Israel were being coerced into getting Depo-Provera injections with threats of not getting into Israel and being told that they wouldn’t be able to bear the pain of childbirth.²⁸ The CRACK (Children Requiring

A Caring Community) program ran in California in the 1990s, offering \$200 to any drug user who could prove they were permanently or temporarily sterilized, and offering more money to those who chose the former option.²⁹ There are reports that prison officers, social workers and hospitals referred patients to the CRACK program. This program still exists today under the name Project Prevention.

It was only in April of 2017 that the European Court ruled the forced sterilization of transgender individuals who wish to acquire legal gender recognition was deemed a breach of human rights.³⁰ At this time 22 countries in the European Union were still enforcing this policy. In Japan in January 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that transgender individuals seeking gender recognition had to have their original reproductive organs removed before it could be granted, with the court stating that “the law is constitutional because it was meant to reduce confusion in families and society”.³¹ In this instance the judiciary is attempting to preserve the traditional family structure and the normative role for human beings determined by their assigned gender at birth. The sterilization of transgender people is evidence that the dominant ideology of gender is still intrinsically tied to biological sex traits.

What is frightening is the resurgence of eugenic thought amongst the far right, with bizarre and statistically falsified non-scientific articles doing the rounds. Writing for the *The Occidental Observer* (a magazine funded by ultra-right wing ex-Republican multi-millionaire racist William Regnery II who financially props up alt-right figures) Marian Van Court claims that “If the retarded were given sufficient cash or other incentives to adopt permanent birth control, mental retardation could be cut by approximately 1/3 in just one generation. This is only one among many possible eugenic measures, but this step alone would significantly alleviate all social problems”.³² Eugenics is prevalent in far-right ideology. Yet the recent World Health Organization report on *Eliminating forced, coercive and otherwise involuntary sterilization* mentions nothing of the political issues that are propelling the growth of the far right who are advocating explicit eugenic policies, or the culpability of racist nation states that continued to allow eugenic practices to continue. It is equally frightening that the bureaucratic neoliberal

centre is incapable of dealing with this problem, because the essentialization of biologically assigned sex and racial signifiers plays a part in the functioning of a capitalist society. Capitalism needs women to perform unpaid domestic labour, it needs racialized people to scapegoat for its inadequacies, and it needs to racialize people in order to justify its imperialist projects. The biological determinism that capitalism is so wedded to should be condemned and rejected. It is used to justify a supposed meritocratic society and the idea that there is a small group of better, more efficient people who should control most of the wealth in the world.

In recent years, online communities have formed with the goal of promoting eco-fascism – a loose subculture centered around the fetishization of right wing terrorism amid the impending collapse of society due to climate catastrophe.³³ Eco-fascism proposes genocidal solutions and an end to industrial society, which would pave the way for the so-called restoration of white male authority and blood and soil nationalism. This kind of extreme, racist ideology can seem legitimate to people who are alienated from the mainstream narrative of climate justice. It makes socialist arguments around the climate movement all the more urgent to counter contemporary racist ideologies.

Slorach in his article *From Eugenics to Scientific Racism* argues that the scientific refutation of eugenics is important, but without political action it may be futile. He notes that direct actions to de-platform eugenicists in universities have been effective in the past. Whilst most contemporary science does not hold a candle for eugenics, state policies are still influenced by its legacy. The far right has invigorated a resurgence of scientific racism which needs to be challenged at every turn.

The horrific legacy of eugenic policies and the current sterilization laws in many countries across the world will haunt the history of humanity for a long time to come. Atrocities may surface again if the reactionary elements of society that peddle eugenics as a legitimate science are allowed to flourish, and they must be opposed and dismantled at every opportunity. A world that does not rely on segregation by class or repressive identity categories needs to be proposed convincingly to working class people, and desired by them too. A strong, left wing movement is clearly necessary to take on the remnants of biological determinism and eugenics.

However, capitalism was constructed on imperialism and colonial exploitation, with racist ideologies central to this. The removal of a political system based on greed and exclusion, and its replacement with a struggle for equality and economic justice is the only way that such standpoints can be eradicated from society.

Notes

- 1 <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/1228943686953664512>
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/17/boris-johnson-adviser-quits-over-race-and-eugenics-writings>
- 3 M. Golden, and P. Toohey (eds), *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p.34.
- 4 The perioiki were not Spartan in origin and were usually involved in trading. P. Matyszak, *Sparta: rise of a warrior nation*, (Pen & Sword Military, 2017), p.53.
- 5 Matyszak, p.72-3.
- 6 Matyszak, p.75.
- 7 Matyszak, p.76.
- 8 J. Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis usurped Europe's classical past*, (University of California Press, 2016), p.214-15.
- 9 Matyszak, p.71.
- 10 Chapoutot, p.216.
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- 12 A. Pichot, *The Pure Society*, (Verso, 2009), p.112.
- 13 Pichot, p.148.
- 14 Pichot, p.217.
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- 16 M. Ziegler, 'Eugenic Feminism: Mental Hygiene, the Women's Movement, and the Campaign for Eugenic Legal Reform, 1900-1935', *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (Winter 2008), p.213-17 Ziegler, p.214.
- 17 Ziegler, p.214.
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- 21 Lifton, p.26.
- 22 C. Gupta, 'Women in Nazi Germany', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 17, (1991), p. WS40.
- 23 Chapoutot, p.216.
- 24 Chapoutot, p.217.
- 25 https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/30008006.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-4946%2Fcontrol&refreqid=search%3Ac74380c56b1c86f2dbeaccb17046394
- 26 J. Scully, 'Eugenics, Women of Color and Reproductive Health: The Saga Continues', *Africological Perspectives*, Vol. 1, (2004), p.176.
- 27 Sully, p.177.
- 28 E. Knutsen, (2013), 'Israel Forcibly Injected African Immigrants with Birth Control, Report Claims', Forbes, [online].
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- 30 'Human Rights Victory! European Court of Human Rights ends Forced Sterilisation', Transgender Europe, 2017[online].
- 31 Associated Press, (2019), 'Japan's Supreme Court upholds transgender sterilization requirement', NBC, [online].
- 32 M. Van Court, (2004) 'The case for eugenics in a nutshell', *Eugenics*, [online].
- 33 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2019/mar/20/eco-fascism-is-undergoing-a-revival-in-the-fetid-culture-of-the-extreme-right>
- 34 Roddy Slorach 'From Eugenics to Scientific Racism', *International Socialism*, Issue 165, Jan 2020. <http://isj.org.uk/from-eugenics-to-scientific-racism/>