

To what extent were ideas and beliefs about eugenics held in Nazi Germany shared in Britain and the United States prior to the Second World War?

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Summary

The term eugenics was first coined by Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, in 1883. The eugenic movement gained public popularity across Europe and North America at the end of the Victorian era, fuelled by the concept of 'social Darwinism' and public fear of a decline in the number of ideal citizens. The origins of eugenic legislation can be found in the USA's immigration acts of the early 1880's. Indiana was the first state to pass sterilisation laws, in 1907. The laws that followed were used as templates by the Nazis, thirty years later. In Britain the Wood Committee (1924) and the Brock Committee (1931) both put pressure on parliament to introduce eugenic laws but were defeated. The anti-eugenics movement was stronger than in other protestant European countries and eugenics fell out of favour as the 1930's progressed. In the USA however, support remained strong, leading one activist to comment in 1934, 'The Germans are beating us at our own game'. There appears to have been little emphasis on eugenics in the Weimar Parliament, but the Nazi's legislation, on coming to power in 1933, surpassed anything conceived on either side of the Atlantic at the outbreak of war in 1939.

Résumé

L'expression 'eugénisme' fut inventée, en 1883, par Francis Galton, le cousin de Charles Darwin. L'eugénisme acquit de la popularité à la fin de l'ère victorienne, stimulé par le développement du 'Darwinisme social' et par la peur d'un déclin de l'espèce, avec une diminution du nombre de citoyens normaux. A l'origine possible de la législation eugénique, on retrouve les « immigration acts », promulgués, aux Etats Unis, au début des années 1880. En 1907, l'Indiana fut ainsi le premier état américain à promulguer les lois encourageant la stérilisation. Celles qui suivirent servirent d'exemples aux Nazis, trente ans plus tard. En Grande Bretagne, les Comités Wood (1924) et Brock (1931) tentèrent, en vain, de faire adopter par le Parlement les lois eugéniques mais ils ne furent pas suivis. Le mouvement anti-eugénique acquit plus de force que dans d'autres pays européens protestants et les partisans de l'eugénisme perdirent la faveur du public, après les années 1930. Aux Etats-Unis, cependant, l'appui au mouvement eugénique restait puissant. Ainsi, un actif partisan de l'eugénisme remarquait-il, en 1934 'Les Allemands nous ont battu à notre propre jeu'. La République de Weimar ne semble pas avoir soutenu, de façon appuyée, l'eugénisme. Lorsqu'éclate la seconde guerre mondiale, par contre, la législation nazie en matière d'eugénisme s'est considérablement développée depuis 1933, date de l'accession au pouvoir d'Hitler et, en 1939, elle dépasse alors tout ce qu'il est possible d'imaginer de ce côté de l'Atlantique.

The final horrific consequences of a national, centrally implemented, government programme of eugenics are demonstrated nowhere better than in the context of Nazi Germany. The sequence of events that led up to the extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka is so well known as to be imprinted in our national consciousness. What is less well known, indeed rarely acknowledged, is the extent to which eugenics enjoyed a wide following amongst the political and scientific elite of Great Britain and the United States in the first part of the twentieth century.

The term 'eugenics' was first coined by Francis Galton in 1883. Galton (first cousin of Charles Darwin) took the philosopher Herbert Spencer's idea of 'social Darwinism' (the idea of survival of the fittest to justify Victorian ideals of laissez-faire economics and individualism) and applied it to the human population as a whole. By 1900 the concept had caught the public imagination, particularly when the poor quality of recruits for the Boer War (1899-1902) became evident resulting in much debate over the nation's 'stock'.¹

Around the same time in the United States, a rapidly expanding and still volatile country, a number of immigration acts were introduced to prevent the free

influx of certain ethnic groups. Arguments for restricting immigration were economic, (it was thought that new arrivals would depress wages), cultural, (new arrivals might bring with them radical and 'un-American' ideas) and racist (working along side an African-American decreased the status of one's own job dramatically). The first laws, passed in 1882 and 1902, were the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Others followed; the number of eastern and southern Europeans allowed into the USA was restricted, as they were believed to be of inferior intelligence and capabilities to northern Europeans.² These laws provided a model upon which the Nazis later based their own legislation.³

It is easy to dismiss eugenics as a pseudoscience but it was supported by many of the leading academics of the day who employed the latest of modern techniques in investigating it. Eugenics appealed to a wide variety of fields. Fabians and Socialists; such as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and J. B. S. Haldane, and Conservatives; Leonard Darwin (son of Charles and head of the Eugenics Society) and Dean William Inge of St. Paul's Cathedral.⁴ It appeared self-evident to these groups that qualities such as intelligence, mental illness, work ethic, criminality and poverty were inherited. Did intelligent,

hard working, upright citizens not breed more of the same? It seemed logical that if undesirable groups were prevented from reproducing, their numbers would decrease to the overall benefit of society.

Most eugenicists appear to have been in favour of sterilisation as a means of restricting population growth. More extreme ideas also circulated: Haldane advocated either massacre or a lavishment of wealth and freedom in which people would have the freedom to destroy themselves.⁵ However, as a biochemist and geneticist, he began to doubt whether 'feeble-mindedness' could ever be bred out of the population through sterilisation. He was one of the first to question this idea.

In the USA, Indiana was the first state to pass sterilisation laws in 1907. Others rapidly followed; by 1931 the total reached twenty-eight. In Iowa the law was especially strict, here is an extract from the draft of a model sterilisation law from 1922;

Sterilisation should be used for:

- (a) *A socially inadequate person who by his or her own efforts regardless of aetiology or prognosis, fails chronically in comparison with normal persons to maintain himself or herself as a useful member of the organised social life of the state; provided that the term socially inadequate shall not be applied to any person whose individual or social ineffectiveness is due to the normally expected exigencies of youth, old age, curable injuries, or temporary physical or mental illness.*
- (b) *The socially inadequate classes regardless of aetiology or prognosis are the following:*
 - (1) *Feeble-minded*
 - (2) *Insane (including psychopathic)*
 - (3) *Criminals (including the delinquent and wayward)*
 - (4) *Epileptic*
 - (5) *Inebriate (including drug habitues)*
 - (6) *Diseased (including the tuberculous, the syphilitic, the leprous, and others with chronic infections and legally segregatable disease)*
 - (7) *The Blind (including those with seriously impaired vision)*
 - (8) *The Deaf (including those with seriously impaired hearing)*
 - (9) *Deformed (including the crippled)*
 - (10) *Dependents (including orphans, ne'er-do-wells, the homeless, tramps and paupers)*

As David Galton comments, half the modern population of London could probably be fitted into one of these categories.⁶

Across the Atlantic, the British eugenics movement focused on the Eugenics Society formed in 1907. This mirrored the international trend; the Eugenics Record Office in the United States opened in 1904 and the German Society for Racial Hygiene in 1905. It has been

suggested that the Eugenic Society executed a three-phase plan. Firstly, the collection of evidence to support the heritability of mental deficiency and the use of these data to gain support for eugenics. Secondly, to lobby parliament to pass a bill legalizing voluntary sterilisation in a manner that would satisfy the public. And thirdly, to have legislation passed to allow the compulsory sterilisation of all people defined as 'socially inefficient'.⁷ Supporters in parliament included Winston Churchill who favoured the use of eugenic principles to address poverty. As Home Secretary in 1910, he actively circulated pro-eugenic literature and urged Sir Herbert Asquith (the then Prime Minister) to pass eugenic legislation.⁸

In 1924 the Wood Committee was appointed, and was given the task of reviewing the procedure for ascertaining the number of mental defectives. Its membership included prominent eugenicists and the committee soon associated itself with the widespread fear that mental deficiency was accelerating. The language and terminology of the Wood Report (1929) was extremely eugenic and eugenics was praised as a science. It provided plenty of encouragement for the Eugenics Society, which stepped up its parliamentary campaign for a voluntary sterilization bill. This was defeated in the House of Commons in 1931.⁹

Eugenics in Germany grew up at the same time and in the same conditions as the eugenics movement in the rest of Europe. Again, it appealed to a spectrum of people, encompassing both the political left and far-right, anthropologists, social scientists, and members of the medical profession. Originally it was an apolitical movement that counted Jews amongst its more prominent members. In 1903 the Racial Hygiene Society was founded, with the aim of establishing 'racial hygiene' as a credible and legitimate branch of science. It tried to occupy the middle ground between Aryan enthusiasts and socialist Darwinists.¹⁰ It appears strange that eugenics survived in the atmosphere of modernisation, rationalisation and experimentation that marked the Weimar Republic. Weindling suggests that organicist values deeply rooted in German culture provided the link the movement needed to survive." In the early 1920s positive eugenic ideas predominated, these focussed on liberal ideas of the individual's personal efforts to improve their health as well as inspire more orderly behaviour and instil a sense of national duty. The German League for National Regeneration and Heredity was founded in 1925. This stressed the importance of science in the health of future generations, although it also took a nationalist slant. Both organisations became steadily more involved in the state's welfare apparatus.

From the mid-1920s however, the mood changed towards negative eugenic practices; sterilisation,

abortion and detention. Racist and nationalistic elements also grew in popularity. Issues such as birth control were fiercely contested by the feminist and sexual reform movements. The foundation of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in 1927 was crucial. Funded mostly by the state, its research was carried out in an atmosphere dominated by prominent eugenicists with strong anti-democratic sentiments.

The economic chaos following the Wall Street Crash led to the collapse of the German welfare system. Doctors found they had grown in power as the arbitrators of state benefits whilst economic pressure led to the combination of the anti-feminist, anti-Semitic and anti-socialist movements towards an authoritarian goal. Negative eugenic methods gained popularity as a cheaper alternative to welfare benefits and a method of avoiding what many saw as the looming genetic crisis. It should be noted however, that strong opposition remained, the Reich Health Office refused to support changes to the law regarding sterilisation in 1928 due to reports of cruelty in the USA's eugenics programmes and acknowledged that there were gaps in the understanding of the heritability of some conditions. However, international eugenics conferences and support from the church raised the acceptability of sterilisation as a welfare measure. The Nazis were amongst its staunchest supporters and following the 1932 elections were able to increase their political pressure. The simultaneous growth of racial anthropology was strongly criticised by the left as a cover for right-wing racism; however the massive growth in the right's political power was able to override the opposition.¹² Once Hitler came to power in 1933 the Nazis were able to pass increasingly stringent eugenic laws with little opposition, the exact nature of these is well documented elsewhere and goes beyond the scope of this essay. However, it should be noted that the scale of Nazi eugenic policy could only have been implemented in a centrally controlled totalitarian state.

In 1932 the Brock Committee was appointed in Britain to assess the extent to which mental illnesses are hereditary and to evaluate the use of sterilization as a means to limit the dissemination of such illness. This marked the peak of the eugenicists' influence in Britain. The committee was named after its Chairman, Sir Laurence Brock, a senior civil servant with close contacts amongst the eugenics movement. Brock managed to secure a high level of autonomy in appointing members of the committee, four of whom were dedicated eugenicists. The committee's report (1934) is clearly biased by this selection. This had three consequences; toleration of imprecision in defining who would be encouraged to submit themselves to

'voluntary' sterilisation; confusion over consent; and a need to discount recently discovered evidence for environmental causes of mental illness. The Brock Committee recommended in favour of voluntary sterilisation. A Royal Commission however was never appointed, and the committee itself was quietly forgotten as the cruelty of compulsory sterilisations in Germany became apparent¹³ from the mid-1930s and public enthusiasm waned.

Britain was one of the few northern European Protestant countries not to pass eugenics laws. The Scandinavian countries all started sterilisation programmes in 1926. In Sweden the laws were not repealed until 1976, resulting in the sterilisation of twenty thousand young women. Britain's anti-eugenics movement was based on ideas expressed in books such as J. S. Mill's 'On Liberty', (published in 1859). This advocated that eugenics was a question of an individual's choice not a matter for state control. Evidence for environmental factors in the aetiology of mental illness started to emerge in the 1930s challenging those who argued that it was entirely inherited. Biologists also started to argue that the concept of definitive races did not exist. In 1935 J. Huxley and A. C Haddon published a paper in which they studied the characteristics of Jews and gentiles. They found that both groups overlapped in every possible characteristic and, without uniform environment, it was impossible to tell whether there were any innate genetic differences at all. Arguments such as these prompted people such as Haldane to swap sides in the debate.¹⁴ The Catholic Church also played an important role; to people who believe the right to give and take life is God's alone, the idea of state enforced sterilisation was obviously anathema.

Despite dwindling support for eugenics in Britain, eugenics programmes in America continued with majority support throughout the 1930s. In 1934, Dr. J. DeJarnette (a major influence in the sterilisation programme in Virginia) was moved to comment that, 'The Germans are beating us at our own game.'¹⁵ Indeed in the early years of the Nazi regime in Germany, praise for the laws introduced was forthcoming from America. In 1933, an officer of the American Eugenics Society wrote to newspaper editors praising Hitler's great courage and statesmanship. In 1936, the University of Heidelberg awarded Harry Laughlin (head of the Eugenics Record Office) an honorary doctorate of medicine, an honour he accepted as 'evidence of a common understanding of German and American scientists of the nature of eugenics'. This does not however make the American eugenicists in any way complicit in the final outcome of the Nazis' eugenics legislation. It is most likely that they could not, or did not want to guess at what the Nazis were capable of.¹⁶

The Nazis' drive for national racial purity is well documented and its full details are outside the scope of this essay. On coming to power in 1933, Hitler's government formulated a Eugenic Sterilisation Law, which came into effect the following year. An extreme version of the American draft law quoted earlier, it forced physicians to report all 'unfit' persons to Hereditary Health Courts who judged whether they should be sterilised. By 1937, two hundred and twenty-five thousand people had been sterilised (ten times the number sterilised over the past thirty years in America). During the first few years of the regime Nazi eugenic policies ran independently of anti-Semitic policies; the two merged in the Nuremberg marriage Laws of 1935. After the Second World War at the Nuremberg trials it emerged that Nazi doctors had established centres for experimental sterilisation. Witnesses amongst the survivors reported that their aim was to find the most effective method in order to repopulate all western European countries within one generation after the war.¹⁷

In conclusion, support for the concept and practice of eugenics was common to Britain, the United States, and Germany, until the mid-1930s. The United States was the first country to introduce eugenic laws in 1907, although they never became federal and their severity varied greatly between states. Support for the eugenics movement (centred at the Eugenics Records Office) continued throughout the 1930s, with Nazi eugenic legislation being praised by many. In Britain the eugenics movement (led by the Eugenics Society, formed in 1907), enjoyed much popular support until the mid-1930s. Legislation came close to being passed in 1929 following the Wood Report and in 1934, following the Brock Report, but opposition from liberal, scientific and religious quarters prevented this from occurring. Reports of the cruelty of compulsory sterilisations occurring in Germany and a cooling of the diplomatic atmosphere meant that eugenics never returned to favour amongst the British public. In Germany pro-eugenic and anti-eugenic movements followed a pattern comparable to those in Britain prior to the Wall Street Crash. Following the collapse of the welfare state negative eugenic measures were seen as a method with which to control spending and save the nation from 'genetic crisis'. Political opinion swung away from liberal values of individual consent towards totalitarian government, the support of the church aided public acceptance of sterilisation and abortion. On coming to power in 1933, Hitler seized the opportunity to pass more and more extreme eugenic legislation. In the early 1930s, this may have had some resemblance to the most extreme of American state's laws, but the Nazis went into depths only possible in a totalitarian state during the circumstances of world war.

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