

## **“We Are Not Alone”: Legacies of Eugenics exhibition**

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We write this article as academics based in University College London. A university with a chequered history of providing the scientific justification for the practice of eugenics. Ours is a university from which Francis Galton and then Karl Pearson, famous and renowned statisticians, espoused the virtues of eugenics. The question of dealing with the legacy of eugenics applies to our own institution as much as any other.

Eugenics may be synonymous with the Nazi extermination of Jewish people. But its history is much broader and wide ranging. Eugenics or ‘good breeding’, is about who is worthy to reproduce. Eugenicians sought to apply techniques used in animal breeding to human populations, choosing the strongest, smartest, fittest to advance the human race. To quote Galton, “Eugenics deals with what is more valuable than money or lands, namely the heritage of a high character, capable brains, fine physique, and vigour; in short, with all that is most desirable for a family to possess as a birthright. It aims at the evolution and preservation of high races of men”.<sup>1</sup> To ‘advance the human race’ certain people should be encouraged to

procreate, while others should be 'discouraged'. The degree to which some have been 'discouraged' has led to some of the greatest atrocities, including mass sterilisation and ultimately leading to genocide.

Eugenics is a product of racist and colonial mindsets. Racial categorisations themselves, were a colonial construct that were designed to separate and put people into a hierarchy. The top of the hierarchy were the White European colonial powers. These hierarchies and eugenic principles have been applied to minoritised groups around the world, for example towards Jewish people in Nazi Germany, Black women in the USA, and Roma communities in Europe. Eugenics also contributes to current debates around migration through the idea of race suicide, or replacement theories, where new populations 'out-breed' the local one and take over. This idea was originally applied to populations of colour arriving to White America. While the sentiment continues to shape racial discourse in the US, it has extended to include others, for example to Muslim people coming to Europe.

The Legacies of Eugenics exhibition, currently located in the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) in London, guides us through the history of this theory through the main historical figures in the eugenics movement using static images alongside the RCPsych archives of Galton's letters. The pernicious nature of eugenics was to add science to moral debates. These were biological justifications. The idea of social advantage or disadvantage determining these factors was put to one side. And throughout this, mental health has been central. Take, for example, the role of psychiatrists in providing evidence to permit the voluntary sterilisation of patients with mental disorders in relation to the proposed (but not passed) Sterilisation Bill of 1931. This history can be painful but is important and necessary. Quoting the Royal College of Psychiatrists, "only by publicly accepting the history, can we challenge systemic inequality in health care and treatment." How should we perceive these historical figures? Through the prism of their own time, certainly, but dissenting voices were present then. Importantly the oppressed voices were usually absent.

The power of the exhibit was its ability to highlight the ease with which these ideas come to infuse every system organising social life. The exhibition moves viewers through sectors managing education, military, health, mental health and disability across Europe and the Americas. Practices in each sphere were easily transformed into sites of violence through the leveraging of 'scientific fact' which privileges White European bodies as superior. It reminds us that while we want to continue as though this is a figment of the past - one does not need to look very far to find modern manifestations of such ideals in our daily lives.

The concept of eugenics continues to be marshalled primarily through science and medicine. Recent publications across a range of journals about cognition, intelligence and genetics bear the marks of these ideals.<sup>2</sup> As stated in the UCL Inquiry into the History of Eugenics, "Around the world, eugenics of one form or another is implicated in: compulsory sterilization; legislation on mental deficiency; immigration law and racist policies; the notion of natural intelligence; normalisation of segregation by race, ability and class".<sup>1</sup> Eugenics plays out in medical debates and practices today. Where do we as a society stand on end-of-life care, and who can choose how they die? Who is abled or disabled and what rights do they have? What worth do we give to people and certain kinds of bodies? Knowledge of our history, especially how science may be used and abused, is as essential today as it was in the 1800s.

## References

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- 2 Wang M, Huang S. The collective effects of genetic variants and complex traits. *J Hum Genet* 2022:1–8.

**Conflicts of interest**

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