

Eugenics and Libertarianism

Matt Ridley's very interesting book *Genome* contains, among many other things, a brief history of the eugenics movement. Compulsory eugenics, sterilization of the "feeble-minded" and similar schemes, is sometimes blamed on Herbert Spencer and Social Darwinism, hence on laissez-faire beliefs, hence on libertarianism. Judging by Ridley's account, that is almost precisely backwards.

Spencer was indeed concerned about human eugenics but, as a believer in laissez-faire, he did not propose using government to improve them. Compulsory eugenics originated with Galton and was rapidly taken up by the British left, with supporters including Shaw, Wells, Keynes, Laski and the Webbs. The idea spread across the political spectrum; Winston Churchill was one of many enthusiastic supporters. In the U.S.:

The progressive social scientists, those who led the Progressive Era movement for labor reform, were especially attracted to eugenic ideas. Scholars like Irving Fisher, Francis Amasa Walker, Henry Rogers Seager, Edward Alsworth Ross, John R. Commons, Sidney Webb, Charles Richmond Henderson, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and journalists like Paul Kellogg of the *Survey* and the *New Republic's* Herbert Croly, all invoked eugenic ideas, especially to justify the exclusionary labor and immigration legislation that is a central legacy of the Progressive Era.¹

The result was an attempt, in 1912, to enact compulsory eugenics into law in the United Kingdom. It was successfully opposed by Josiah Wedgwood, who Ridley describes as a radical libertarian. His central argument was not that it was bad science but that it was a striking violation of individual liberty. He made that argument sufficiently persuasive to force the government to withdraw the bill. Another opponent was G.K. Chesterton, best known today as a Catholic apologist and the author of some early mysteries. Chesterton was another radical libertarian, although a somewhat odd one, to whom I devoted a chapter in the second edition of my *Machinery of Freedom*.

In addition to libertarian politicians such as Wedgwood and Chesterton, compulsory eugenics had another important opponent: The Catholic church. Compulsory sterilization was implemented in a considerable number of countries, including the U.S. and Sweden, and almost implemented in Britain. It was not implemented in countries where the Catholic church was powerful. In that case, at least, the Church's opposition to the latest findings of modern science put it where it belonged, on the side of the angels.

We were there too.

There was a second push for compulsory eugenics in the early 1930's, successful in some European countries but not in Britain. This time the failure was at least in part due to intellectual changes associated primarily with the left, the shift from belief in genetic determination of human beings to belief in social determination.

There is a different sort of eugenics that is alive and well in the modern world — decisions by parents related to the genes of their actual or potential offspring. One version is represented by the Committee for the Prevention of Jewish Genetic Disease, an organization that uses blood tests of

¹ Thomas C. Leonard, "Mistaking Eugenics for Social Darwinism: Why Eugenics Is Missing from the History of American Economics," *History of Political Economy*, Vol. 37 supplement: 200–233.

school children to identify the carriers of genes for Tay-Sachs or cystic fibrosis. When matchmakers are considering a marriage between two young people, they can call a hotline and quote the anonymous numbers each was assigned at the testing. If both carry the same mutation they will be advised against the marriage. The other version is the increasingly common practice of parents using amniocentesis to identify embryos carrying the extra chromosome that leads to Down's syndrome and aborting them.

Combining that approach with in vitro fertilization, it is possible to produce multiple embryos, extract a cell from each early in its development, analyze its genetics, and use that information in selecting which embryo to implant. At present that is mostly limited to eliminating known genetic diseases but in principle, as our knowledge of genetics increases, it should become possible to select for desirable heritable traits as well as against undesirable.

[Beyond This Horizon](#), an early science fiction novel by Robert Heinlein, described a much more powerful technology for libertarian eugenics, a way in which a couple can choose, among the children they could have, which children they do have. The basic idea is to select separately in sperm and egg, choosing the sperm that does not carry the father's genes for a bad heart, the egg that does cover the genes for the wife's musical talent.

The problem is how to analyze sperm or egg without damaging it. Heinlein's solution takes advantage of the fact that egg and sperm each contain half of the full set of genes of the cell from which it is derived — and the process that produces an egg or sperm also produces other bodies with the rest of the genes. Analyse an ordinary cell to get the full genotype, produce egg and sperm in vitro, keeping track of the extra bodies thrown off in the process, analyse them, subtract, and you now know what genes are in egg or sperm.

According to a [news story](#) published in 2013, someone was finally attempting something along the lines of Heinlein's approach, looking at the [polar body](#) that contains the genes that are not in the egg in order to deduce the genes that are. At least that is what the story seems to be describing, although there are not enough details to be certain.

Heinlein published the novel, and the idea, in 1942.