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## The eugenics movement Britain wants to forget

In the first of a three-part series to mark disability history month, **Victoria Brignell** looks back at the way the UK and USA have treated disabled people and uncovers a history that both countries would prefer to forget.

**Britain and America** are two countries that, in recent years, have led the world in attempting to give disabled people rights and equality. During his presidency, George Bush Senior was proud to sign the Americans with Disabilities Act while the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act has gradually transformed the lives of disabled people in the UK. It may appear on the surface that the UK and USA have nothing in common with Nazi Germany, a regime that is estimated to have killed 200,000 disabled people and forcibly sterilised twice that number.

However, there is a dark side to the history of the two partners in the "special relationship" that has quietly been forgotten and swept under the carpet. It is a history that is deeply uncomfortable, disturbing and shameful and which seems to contradict the values America and Britain claim to uphold. This makes it even more vital that light is shone upon this history. Even if it is painful to do so, the past must be confronted and acknowledged.

This story begins 150 years ago. In 1859 Charles Darwin published his groundbreaking book *Origin of Species* which expounded his theory of evolution by natural selection. It wasn't long before scientists and political theorists began to apply Darwin's theory to human beings. With the spread of ideas about "the survival of the fittest", social Darwinists started to question the wisdom of providing care to the "weak" on the grounds this would enable people to live and reproduce who were not meant to survive. They feared that offering medical treatment and social services to disabled people would undermine the natural struggle for existence and lead to the degeneration of the human race.

Such views took hold not only in Germany but also particularly strongly in America and Britain. The existence of disabled people was increasingly seen in the UK and USA as a threat to social progress. Darwin himself wrote in his 1871 treatise, *The Descent of Man*, "We civilised men.... do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed and the sick.. .Thus the weak members of society propagate their kind."

It was a British man, not a German, who first came up with the term eugenics in 1883. Francis Galton was a cousin of Charles Darwin and he became obsessed with *Origin of Species*, especially its chapter on the breeding of domestic animals. This inspired him to spend much of his life studying the variations in human ability. He wrote: "The question was then forced upon me. Could not the race of men be similarly improved? Could not the undesirables be got rid of and the desirables multiplied?"

Galton was convinced a person's mental and physical abilities, like the plant and animal traits described by Darwin, were essentially inherited from one's parents. He grew concerned that eminent British people were marrying late and having too few children. Galton wrote in his 1869 book *Hereditary Genius*: "Let us do what we can to encourage the multiplication of the races best fitted to invent, and conform to, a high and generous civilisation, and not, out of mistaken instinct of giving support to the weak, prevent the incoming of strong and hearty individuals."

Galton argued that early marriage between healthy, mentally strong families should be encouraged by financial incentives, and reproduction by the "feeble-minded" should be curtailed. In his mind, superior mental and physical capabilities were advantageous not only to an individual but essential for the well-being of society as a whole. To try to spread his ideas, he even wrote a novel *Kantsaywhere*, about a society ruled by a Eugenic College that followed a eugenic religion designed to breed fitter, more intelligent humans. Galton's views were not regarded as eccentric or offensive at the time. Far from it. In fact, he received many awards during his career. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1860 and was knighted shortly before he died.

Galton's writings played a key role in launching the eugenics movement in the UK and America. Supporters of eugenics called for government policies to improve the biological quality of the human race through selective parenthood. They linked physical and learning disabilities to a range of social problems including crime, vagrancy, alcoholism, prostitution and unemployment. Eugenics quickly gained many backers on both sides of the Atlantic, including leading politicians and opinion formers.

It wasn't just figures on the extreme right of politics who backed the eugenics philosophy. Some of British socialism's most celebrated names were among the champions of eugenics - Sidney and Beatrice Webb (the founders of the Fabian Society), Harold Laski, John Maynard Keynes, even the *New Statesman* and the *Manchester Guardian*. They hoped that a eugenic approach could build up the strong section of the population and gradually remove the weak. In July 1931, the *New Statesman* asserted: "The legitimate claims of eugenics are not inherently incompatible with the outlook of the collectivist movement. On the contrary, they would be expected to find their most intransigent opponents amongst those who cling to the individualistic views of parenthood and family economics."

Many early left-wing thinkers wanted government to direct social policy towards "improving" the human race by discouraging reproduction among those sections of society deemed to have undesirable genes. Supporters of state planning often found the idea of a planned genetic future attractive. As Adrian Wooldridge, author of *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England 1860-1990*, comments: "The Webbs supported eugenic planning just as fervently as town planning." Beatrice Webb declared eugenics to be "the most important question of all" while her husband remarked that "no eugenicist can be a laissez-faire individualist".

Similarly, George Bernard Shaw wrote: "The only fundamental and possible socialism is the socialisation of the selective breeding of man." Bertrand Russell proposed that the state should issue colour-coded "procreation tickets" to prevent the gene pool of the elite being diluted by inferior human beings. Those who decided to have children with holders of a different-coloured ticket would be punished with a heavy fine. HG Wells praised eugenics as the first step towards the elimination of "detrimental types and characteristics" and the "fostering of desirable types" instead.

None other than William Beveridge, the architect of the post-1945 welfare state, was highly active in the

eugenics movement and said that “those men who through general defects are unable to fill such a whole place in industry are to be recognized as unemployable. They must become the acknowledged dependents of the State... but with complete and permanent loss of all citizen rights - including not only the franchise but civil freedom and fatherhood”. A belief in eugenics was certainly not confined to the jackbooted far right.

As the end of the 19th century approached, eugenicists were becoming increasingly influential in British politics. A Royal Commission on the Blind, Deaf and Dumb concluded in 1889 that intermarriage between these groups was to be strongly discouraged. Its report was based upon advice from Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who had warned in his 1883 work *Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race* that the “passions of the deaf and dumb are undoubtedly strong”. In 1896 a pressure group entitled the National Association for the Care and Control of the Feeble Minded was set up in Britain to bring about the lifetime segregation of disabled people. Its campaigning reached its peak in the run-up to the 1910 general election.

Advocates of eugenics made significant advances during the Edwardian period. In 1907, the Eugenics Education Society was founded in Britain to campaign for sterilisation and marriage restrictions for the weak to prevent the degeneration of Britain’s population. A year later, Sir James Crichton-Brown, giving evidence before the 1908 Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded, recommended the compulsory sterilisation of those with learning disabilities and mental illness, describing them as “our social rubbish” which should be “swept up and garnered and utilised as far as possible”. He went on to complain, “We pay much attention to the breeding of our horses, our cattle, our dogs and poultry, even our flowers and vegetables; surely it’s not too much to ask that a little care be bestowed upon the breeding and rearing of our race”. Crichton-Brown was in distinguished company. In a memo to the prime minister in 1910, Winston Churchill cautioned, “The multiplication of the feeble-minded is a very terrible danger to the race”.

In 2012, athletes from around the world will assemble in London for the Paralympic Games, a global event which celebrates the talents and achievements of disabled people. However, a century earlier, in 1912, London was the setting for an international gathering with a very different and more sinister agenda - the first International Eugenics Conference. Organised by the British Eugenics Education Society and dedicated to Galton who had died the year before, 400 delegates attended including illustrious figures such as Winston Churchill (who was then First Lord of the Admiralty), Lord Balfour and a number of European ambassadors.

Charles Darwin’s son, Major Leonard Darwin, presided at the conference. In the run up to the First World War, he lobbied the British government to establish flying squads of scientists, with the power of arrest, who would travel around the country identifying the “unfit”. Those classified as such would be segregated in special colonies or sterilised.

The eugenics campaign continued to gain momentum in the interwar years. Membership of the British Eugenics Society reached its peak during the 1930s. The 1934 report of the Departmental Committee on Sterilisation chaired by Lord Brock recommended legislation to ensure the ‘voluntary’ sterilisation of ‘mentally defective women’.

Supporters of eugenics in Parliament included the Labour MP Will Crooks who described disabled people as “like human vermin” who “crawl about doing absolutely nothing, except polluting and corrupting everything they touch”. A bill for the compulsory sterilisation of certain categories of “mental patient” was proposed in

Parliament in 1931 by Labour MP Archibald Church. He claimed it was necessary to stop the reproduction of those “who are in every way a burden to their parents, a misery to themselves and in my opinion a menace to the social life of the community”. Although such legislation was never actually passed in Britain, this did not prevent many sterilisations being carried out under various forms of coercion.

Eugenics still received backing in eminent circles in Britain until well into the 1940s. Leading economist John Maynard Keynes served on the governing council of the Eugenics Society and was its director from 1937 to 1944. Even in 1946, Keynes was calling eugenics “the most important and significant branch of sociology”. On the evening that the House of Commons debated the Beveridge Report, Beveridge himself spoke at a meeting of eugenicists at the Mansion House.

While a belief in eugenics is now largely a thing of the past, the values underpinning it have not gone away. Only 25 years ago, a British MP was prepared to publicly voice the view that a disabled child was an unnecessary drain on society’s resources. During a House of Commons debate on abortion in 1985, an MP asserted that to abort a “handicapped” foetus could save the country £1 million over the course of a lifetime.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/society/2010/12/british-eugenics-disabled>

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## **When America believed in eugenics**

In the second of her series to mark disability history month, **Victoria Brignell** investigates America

**In the decades** following the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species, a craze for eugenics spread not only through Britain but through America as well. Overbreeding by the poor and disabled threatened the quality of the human race, American campaigners warned. Drastic measures must be taken to avert a future catastrophe for humanity.

Amid popular fears about the decline of the national stock, one of the main drives behind the formation of American immigration policy at the end of the 19th century was the desire to exclude disabled people. The first major federal immigration law, the Act of 1882, prohibited entry to any ‘lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge.’

As the eugenics movement gathered strength, the exclusion criteria were gradually tightened to make it easier for immigration officials to keep disabled people out of America. The 1907 law denied entry to anyone judged ‘mentally or physically defective, such mental or physical defects being of a nature which may affect the ability of such alien to earn a living.’ It added ‘imbeciles’ and ‘feeble-minded persons’ to the list of automatically excluded people and inspectors were directed to exclude people with ‘any mental abnormality whatever’. Regulations in 1917 included a long list of disabilities that could be cause for exclusion including arthritis, asthma, deafness, deformities, heart disease, poor eyesight, poor physical development and spinal curvature.

Detecting physical disabilities was a major aspect of the American immigration inspector’s work. The Commissioner General of Immigration reported in 1907: “The exclusion from this country of the morally,

mentally and physically deficient is the principal object to be accomplished by the immigration laws.” Inspection regulations stated that each individual ‘should be seen first at rest and then in motion’ in order to detect ‘abnormalities of any description’. It was recommended that inspectors should watch immigrants as they carried their luggage upstairs to see if ‘the exertion would reveal deformities and defective posture’. As one inspector wrote: “It is no more difficult to detect poorly built, defective or broken down human beings than to recognise a cheap or defective automobile.” An abnormal appearance meant a chalked letter on the back - L for lameness, G for goitre, X for mental illness. Once chalked, a closer inspection was required, which meant that other problems were likely to be established.

Preventing disabled people immigrating to America was motivated by both economic and eugenic concerns. Officials wanted to keep out people considered likely to be unemployed and who might transmit their ‘undesirable qualities’ to their offspring. There was widespread support for this approach to immigration. In 1896, Francis Walker noted in the *Atlantic Monthly* that the necessity of ‘straining out’ immigrants who were ‘deaf, dumb, blind, idiotic, insane, pauper or criminal’ was ‘now conceded by men of all shades of opinion’ and indeed there was a widespread ‘resentment at the attempts of such persons to impose themselves upon us.’ William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, argued that immigration restrictions were “necessary to the preservation of our national characteristics and to our physical and mental health”. A New York Supreme Court judge feared that the new immigrants were “adding to that appalling number of our inhabitants who handicap us by reason of their mental and physical disabilities.”

Disabled people born in the USA were as despised as disabled immigrants. A leading American-based scientist, Alexis Carrel, who worked at the prestigious Rockefeller Institute in the early years of the 20th century, advocated correcting what he called “an error” in the US Constitution that granted equality to all people. In his best-selling book *Man, the Unknown*, he wrote: “The feeble-minded and the man of genius should not be equal before the law. The stupid, the unintelligent, those who are dispersed, incapable of attention, of effort, have no right to a higher education.” Arguing that the human race was being undermined by disabled people, he wanted to use medical advances to extend the lives of those he deemed worthy and condemn the rest to death or forced sterilisation. He later praised Hitler for the “energetic measures” he took to prevent the contamination of the human race.

Carrel was not a lone maverick in America. His views were shared by large sections of the American population. While some scientists distanced themselves from him, much of America idolised him and welcomed his ideas. His book sold more than two million copies and thousands of people in America would turn up to hear Carrel’s talks, sometimes filling venues to capacity. He was even awarded the Nobel Prize.

Soon the White House itself was intent on restricting the right of disabled people to reproduce. President Theodore Roosevelt could not have been more blunt: “I wish very much that the wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding; and when the evil nature of these people is sufficiently flagrant, this should be done. Criminals should be sterilised and feeble-minded persons forbidden to leave offspring behind them”. Theodore Roosevelt created an Heredity Commission to investigate America’s genetic heritage and to encourage “the increase of families of good blood and (discourage) the vicious elements in the cross-bred American civilisation”. Funding for the eugenics cause came from such distinguished sources as the Carnegie Institution and the WK Kellogg Foundation, and support also came from the influential leaders of the oil, steel

and railroad industries.

In an effort to prevent unfit offspring from being born, sterilisation laws were introduced in many American states to stop certain categories of disabled people from having children. The first such law was passed in Indiana as early as 1907. This was 26 years before a similar law was introduced by the Nazis in Germany in 1933, The Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Disease. In their sterilisation propaganda, the Nazis were able to point to the precedent set by the United States.

From 1907 onwards, many American men, women and children who were “insane, idiotic, imbecile, feeble-minded or epileptic” were forcibly sterilised, often without being informed of what was being done to them. The German geneticist Fritz Lenz commented in 1923 that “Germany had nothing to match the eugenics research institutions in England and the United States”. He went on to castigate the Germans for “their backwardness in the domain of sterilisation as compared to the United States, for Germany had no equivalent to the American laws prohibiting marriage... for people suffering from such conditions as epilepsy or mental retardation”.

A landmark Supreme Court case in 1927 upheld America’s sterilisation legislation on the grounds it was necessary “to prevent our being swamped with incompetence”. Judge Holmes, reflecting in his judgement that our “best” citizens may be called on to give up their lives in war, said of sterilising the feeble-minded or insane: “It would be strange if we could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the state for these lesser sacrifices ...It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind”.

By 1938, 33 American states permitted the forced sterilisation of women with learning disabilities and 29 American states had passed compulsory sterilisation laws covering people who were thought to have genetic conditions. Laws in America also restricted the right of certain disabled people to marry. More than 36,000 Americans underwent compulsory sterilisation before this legislation was eventually repealed in the 1940s.

America was not the only country in the Western world to introduce compulsory sterilisation of disabled people. Sweden sterilised 60,000 disabled women from 1935 until as late as 1976. Thousands of children labelled as having learning difficulties were sent off to live in “Institutes for Mised and Morally Neglected Children” where they were required to undergo “treatment”. When the extent of Sweden’s sterilisation programme came to light in the 1990s, some heartbreaking stories emerged. One woman was told that she would remain shut away in an institution for the rest of her life if she didn’t agree to be sterilised. She recalled crying as she was forced to sign away her rights to have a baby. Another man described how he and his teenage friends, terrified by the prospect of an operation, hatched a plan to run away. Other countries which passed similar sterilisation laws in the 1920s and 30s included Denmark, Norway and Finland. However, America led the way in promoting such a practice.

With such a prevailing culture, it is not surprising that some disabled Americans felt compelled to remain single voluntarily. According to a recent biography by Lyndall Gordon, the acclaimed American poet Emily Dickinson was epileptic. For this reason, Dickinson chose to spend the second half of her life as a recluse, refusing to leave her father’s house. In middle age, Dickinson had a passionate romance with a widower who wanted to marry her but she turned him down, regarding herself as unfit for marriage. People with epilepsy in America were

warned against marrying for fear that sexual arousal might provoke seizures.

Following the first International Eugenics Conference in London in 1912, two more were held, in 1921 and 1932. Both were hosted by New York and both were dominated by America. At the 1921 conference, 41 out of the 53 scientific papers presented were written by Americans and the invitations were even sent out by the American State Department. At one stage, 375 courses covering eugenics were on offer at American universities including Harvard, Columbia and Cornell.

Not only did the American authorities take measures to stop disabled people immigrating, marrying or having children, but there are examples of American disabled people dying needlessly because society believed their lives were not worth living. In 1915 a leading Chicago surgeon Dr Harry Haiselden decided to allow a disabled new-born baby to die. This wasn't the first time he had permitted a baby with an impairment to die, but no disciplinary action was taken against him. He was investigated three times by different legal authorities and each time they found in his favour. He was expelled from the Chicago Medical Society but only because he wrote newspaper articles about his work, not for his treatment of these children. Indeed, Haiselden received support from many prominent Americans and also won endorsements from some of America's most well-regarded publications including the New York Times and the New Republic.

In 1937, a Gallup poll in the USA found that 45 per cent of supported euthanasia for "defective infants". A year later, in a speech at Harvard, WG Lennox argued that preserving disabled lives placed a strain on society and urged doctors to recognize "the privilege of death for the congenitally mindless and for the incurable sick". An article published in the journal of the American Psychiatric Association in 1942 called for the killing of all "retarded" children over five years old.

After World War II, the Nuremberg court established by the Allies did not order reparations to be paid to the families of disabled people killed by the Nazis nor that those responsible be punished. German doctors accused of murdering disabled people defended themselves by claiming (with some justification) that they were only implementing ideas which had found support in other countries, including America.

What's more, the Allied authorities were unable to classify the sterilisations of disabled people in Nazi Germany as war crimes because similar laws either did exist or had recently existed in America and other European countries. The new West German administration only provided compensation for people who had been sterilised against their will if they could prove they had been sterilised outside the provisions of the 1933 sterilisation law - in other words, if they could prove they were not genetically disabled. Following the defeat of the Nazis, compulsory sterilisation ended in Germany but it continued elsewhere in America and Europe. Only in the 1950s was the eugenic philosophy finally discredited in most countries.

There was no wholesale slaughter of disabled people in the UK and USA as there was in Nazi Germany. However, there are disturbing similarities in the history of these countries. The widespread support given to eugenics in America and Britain shows that many people in these countries shared the values and ideology of the Nazis towards disability. Eugenicians in Britain and America like those in Nazi Germany believed it was socially desirable to prevent the creation of new human beings who might be physically or mentally disabled. Just as the Nazis set out to eliminate disabled people during the Holocaust, so the long-term aim of America's sterilisation programme was to rid the country of people deemed to be "inadequate". Although no formal mass sterilisation programme was implemented in the UK, an unknown number of forced or coerced sterilisations

occurred in this country.

Forced sterilisation and mass killing are ethically different. But underlying both these measures was the presumption that there are people who are unworthy of life. The Nazis believed that disabled people's lives had little value and wanted to relieve society of the burden of having to care for people they regarded as useless. We need to recognize that there was a time when such attitudes also received considerable support throughout America and Britain as well.

Social reformers in America and Britain wanted to create a perfect society, but the kind of society they envisaged contained an intolerant, illiberal, authoritarian dimension which allowed no place for disabled people. As Isaiah Berlin once put it, "Disregard for the preferences and interests of individuals alive today in order to pursue some distant social goal that their rulers have claimed is their duty to promote has been a common cause of misery for people throughout the ages."

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