Eugenics in British Economics from Marshall to Meade

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Through the ages

- **1786** “The farmer breeds only from the best of all his cattle; but our [poor] laws choose rather to preserve the worst” —Joseph Townsend

- **1911** “I am hugely delighted that it has been formed” —Marshall on the formation of the Cambridge University Eugenics Society

- **1964** I am “a radical in politics but a believer in Eugenics” —Meade
Outline

- Proto-eugenic thinking in Marshall and Edgeworth from 1879
- The eugenics movement takes off from 1900
- The economists react—1907-1912
- Later—after WWI
- Much later—into the 1960s
- Discussion
1879 Marshall and Marshall on the taming of Malthus

- New lands—to settle in and grow food.
- There can be no doubt that this extension of the English race has been a benefit to the world.
- A check to the growth of population would do great harm if it affected only the more intelligent races, and particularly the more intelligent classes of these races.

_Economics of Industry_
“There does indeed appear some danger of this evil”

if the lower classes of Englishmen multiply more rapidly than those which are morally and physically superior, not only will the population of England deteriorate, but also that part of the population that descends from Englishmen will be less intelligent than it otherwise would be.

Again if Englishmen multiply less rapidly than the Chinese, the spiritless race will overrun portions of the earth that would otherwise have been peopled by English vigour.
1879 Edgeworth’s mathematical utilitarianism

What sort of people do we want?

- When people vary in their ability to produce happiness, we choose those who are best at producing happiness.

VI.—THE HEDONICAL CALCULUS.

Problem.—To find (a) the distribution of means and (β) of labour, the (γ) quality and (δ) number of population, so that there may be the greatest possible happiness.

(γδ) A more important inquiry is: not assuming that all sections multiply equally, to find the average issue for each section, so that the happiness of the next generation may be the greatest possible.
When outdoor relief was given indiscriminately

Mischief was done, not by the amount of relief given, but by its being given in the wrong way and to the wrong persons, so as to cause the survival of the worst in place of the best; and probably half of all the lives of extreme misery and want in the country are due to this cause.
Natural Selection as affecting Civilised Nations

- With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health.
- We civilised men, on the other hand do our outmost to check the process of elimination …
I propose to show in this book that a man’s natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world.

The abilities are high level intellectual abilities.
Two novelties

- A new technical apparatus
- A new view of economics as a historical or evolutionary science.

Here Marshall drew on the biology of Herbert Spencer and the philosophy of History of Hegel
In the *Principles* Marshall provides a biological grounding for his beliefs

- Continues to emphasise the importance of working class education
- Worries that the relaxation of natural selection will lead to deterioration
- Worries that that inferior races will take the place of the superior.
Eugenics takes off in Britain

- 1901 Galton’s Huxley Lecture “The Possible Improvement of the Human Breed under the Existing Conditions of Law and Sentiment”
- 1904 the Eugenics Record Office established
- 1907 the Eugenics Education Society established
- 1911 a Cambridge University branch of the Society is formed – Marshall joins and Keynes is Treasurer
Pigou (1901) on how supporting children encourages improvidence among their parents

- In view, however, of the violent interference with individual liberty, which they necessarily involve, the present writer is unwilling to do more than suggest the propriety of examining them impartially and is certainly not prepared to recommend their immediate adoption.

- Indeed there is little prospect that a final solution to the problem will ever be achieved if public opinion cannot be brought to sanction, either the forcible detention of the wreckage of society, or the adoption of some other means to check them from propagating their species.
SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN BIOLOGY.

During the last six or seven years great progress has been made in the study of heredity among plants and animals. In 1900 the principles enunciated by Gregor Mendel nearly forty years earlier were rediscovered, and since that time, through

Hygiene and education, the panacea of the popular politician, are, suggests Mr. Punnett, "fleeting palliatives at best, which, in postponing, but augment the difficulties they profess to solve. . . . Permanent progress is a question of breeding rather than of pedagogics; a matter of gametes, not of training."
In his paper

Pigou

- Rejects the ‘breeding only’ case
- Accepts the case for segregation or sterilisation of some people
- Welcomes a eugenic family allowance scheme for people of established "civic worth"
The Feeble-Minded: 150,000 persons not certifiably insane but suffering from mental defect (1909)

Pigou

- We are trustees for the inherent quality as well as for the material welfare of future generations. A cause that makes strongly for race deterioration is operating and is known. It is within our power, with but little severity to any living person, to remove that cause.

- The time has arrived for legislation.
The Malthusian Law of Population, when it is in operation, maintains the lower classes of the population in a condition of perpetual misery.

But it is an engine of evolutionary progress, and those classes of society or portions of the world for which its operation is suspended are liable to be overwhelmed by the rest.
Keynes the most famous economist-eugenist?

- Keynes was Treasurer of the Cambridge University Eugenics Society

The Eugenics Society suffered a sad loss in the death of Lord Keynes. Though never very active in our affairs, this great public servant was always ready with his help when called upon, and the mere fact of his membership of the Society and its Council did much to secure the support of many of his contemporaries and disciples for our principles.

The End of Laissez-faire

- The time has already come when each country needs a considered national policy about what size of population, whether larger or smaller that at present or the same, is most expedient. And having settled this policy, we must take steps to carry it into operation.

- The time may arrive a little later when the community as a whole must pay attention to the innate quality as well as to the mere numbers of its future members.
“The national dividend and the quality of the people”

- A chapter in Pigou’s *Wealth and Welfare* (1912) and *Economics of Welfare* (1920)
- Probably the most important statement about eugenics in British economics
- It appears to say that eugenics doesn’t matter for the problems that economists are interested in.
The Eugenics Review

Galton Lecture.

By Professor A. C. Pigou.

Eugenists, along with other social reformers, have as their practical aim to improve society. Whereas, indeed, other social reformers concentrate attention on improvement through environing conditions, they look rather to improvement through a bettering of inherent inborn quality. But their final end is the same; and, therefore, before them as before all the rest of us, there stands, in the forefront of the battle, that ancient and formidable query "What do you mean by a good society? You have named to us the goal you seek; proceed to define and locate it."

That leads me to my concluding word. For there are many borderline problems in like case with this one. Eugenists must often find themselves engaged in enquiries that have an economic aspect; and Economists with enquiries that have an Eugenie one. I have been happy to have been invited to deliver this lecture, small though my qualification for the honour is, because in our momentary contact this evening, there is a sort of symbol that we mutually recognise the need for one another's help.

The first part considers the nature of a good society—Pigou points out many difficulties in the eugenic project.

The second part asks the eugenists to provide information on differential birth-rates to help determine the effects of narrowing wage-differentials or implementing a system of family allowances.
Meanwhile … Eleanor Rathbone’s *The Disinherited Family* (1924)

- Advocated family allowances
- Had arguments against all possible objections
- Including Pigou’s
- Advocated by the 1942 Beveridge Report
- Enacted in Family Allowances Act 1945
1934: Roy Harrod writing to the Oxford Magazine

This tendency to declining numbers has a wider importance, affecting the balance of power in the world and the handing on to future generations of the heritage not only of the British people but of the white races themselves.

Should not the University and Colleges seek to give an example, and, departing still further from their age-long tradition, provide that the lives of their married staff be not less comfortable than those of the bachelors by a system of generous family allowances?
In the more recent period, when referring to this theme, I have been in the habit, in order to safeguard myself against the charge of unthinking egoism and nationalism, to name the Japanese as, despite their faults, the greatest nation in the world. I am afraid this does me no good in the opinion of besotted egalitarians.

1972
James Meade (1907-1995)

“a radical in politics but a believer in Eugenics”

- Interested in reducing inherited inequalities
- Besotted egalitarian?
Meade’s programme

- (5) the development of educational policies which would equalize the chances of promotion in life for boys and girls of equal innate ability
- (6) the reduction of the relative fertility of those with low earning capacity (i) by giving easy and equal opportunity to all citizens for acquiring and using contraceptives and (ii) by increasing the tax burden of the childless relatively to those with children within the higher earned income brackets.
Discussion

What about other economists?

- My impression is that generally they were not interested.
- There were no controversies between economists about eugenics

Continuities and discontinuities?

- A series of economist headliners from Edgeworth to Meade favoured eugenics
- There was no cumulation, no sense of a literature
- AND SO just a footnote in the history of economics
1873 Marshall and the prospects of working-class improvement

- The key is education
- What about population growth?

An educated man would not only have a high conception of his duty to his children; he would be deeply sensitive to the social degradation which he and they would incur if he failed in it.