

BOOK REVIEWS

The dawn of a new dysgenics

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John Glad. *Future human evolution: eugenics in the twenty-first century*. Hermitage Publishers, Pennsylvania, 2006 hardcover, pp105 +30, price unstated. ISBN 155779-154-6.

Given the advances in our understanding of human genetics, some scientists now argue that a new dawn is on the horizon, a dawn not blighted by heritable diseases and disorders. The molecular biologist Robert L Sinsheimer noted that a "new eugenics has arisen based upon the dramatic increase in our understanding of biochemistry of heredity... this new eugenics would permit the conversion of all of the unfit to the highest genetic level" (1). This would require no large-scale social programme or policy; it would be accomplished on an individual basis of "rational choice," freely exercised.

This also of course makes eminent sense to national economies struggling to cope with welfare costs: the removal of the economic burden of millions of lives genetically tarnished and not economically productive. Not only are new technologies available, they are also demanded often by victims of diseases and their families who have organised themselves into pressure groups calling for greater funding to, for example, genetic screening programmes. At the same time, the genetics industry now introduces products and procedures virtually unhampered by public institutions, especially in the countries of the Third World, and feed the media with hype about a glorious eugenic future. This again sets off more demands for public funding for the genetics industry and so on. Is a new dysgenics then in the offing?

This book argues that there is indeed a new eugenics, untarnished by its dysgenic past. We are told that almost everything from cancers to schizophrenia and autism are genetic in origin and thus can be prevented by neo-eugenics. This is an old and familiar trope. Except that today we have a multi-million dollar genetic industry that feeds on this kind of talk, with some sections of the media and academy actively contributing, as in the past.

What however even this new eugenics ignores is that the human race is incredibly genetically polymorphic; positive eugenics would imply imposing genetic homogeneity. It is also well known that most human characteristics do not have a one to one relationship with a gene and that genes act in combinations and not independently. At the same time,

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as Kevles notes, "It is hardly sensible to base reproductive decisions, let alone public policy, on uncertain predictions... moreover, environmental factors – drugs, food additives, unclean air, etc. might well account for 80 per cent of prevailing human mutation... the arguments for maintaining human genetic variation worked as powerfully against positive eugenics as against negative ones" (1).

We know too that there are fundamental differences between biological inheritance and cultural inheritance. But a fraud is perpetuated in the name of science when Lamarckian inheritance is conflated with genetic evolution (2), when a gene is considered a unit of evolution (3), when an individual is considered the unit of adaptation, indeed when culture itself is somehow considered to be genetically determined. That genes are to be fore-grounded over the environment, that there are essential biological differences between men and women, between black, white and others, indeed among religious groups, are matters not of science but of prejudice. But arguments such as these have been dismissed in this book as those emanating from the irrational left.

Some books should not be reviewed in academic journals, and this is one of them. It should not be reviewed since it is not an academic publication but a propagandistic one – please notice that I do not say political. There are remarkable commonalities between the ideas of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and those of the eugenists. MS Golwalkar of the RSS wrote: "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races, the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by" (4).

Glad may not know what the RSS is, but then so many geneticists today—or indeed doctors or the middle classes in general—also know no history or politics. Is history then being repeated as tragedy?

References

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3. Dover G. "Anti-Dawkins" in Hilary Rose and Steven Rose Editors. *Alas poor Darwin: arguments against evolutionary psychology*. London: Vintage; 2001.
4. Golwalkar MS. *We or our nationhood redefined*. Nagpur: Bharat Publications; 1947.