

Are we already creating a super race?

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Feature: **Eugenics**

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Darwin predicted survival of the fittest, but does that mean stopping 'undesirables' from breeding is acceptable? The Edinburgh Filmhouse explores the history of eugenics

THE dream of creating a genetically optimal society in which persons are selected on the basis of their biological quality has had a long and chequered history. Adolf Hitler, wartime Chancellor of Germany wrote in 1926 "He who is not physically and mentally healthy and worthy must not perpetuate his misery in the body of his child."¹ But before the Second World War, he was by no means alone in having such views. In fact, many individuals in respectable society supported similar or related positions. For example, in 1913 Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States wrote: "I wish very much that the wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding ... Criminals should be sterilised and feeble-minded persons forbidden to leave offspring behind them ... the emphasis should be laid on getting desirable people to breed."²

Sir Winston Churchill was openly disappointed when, because of civil liberties, Britain resisted a programme that would prevent certain people from procreating.³ In 1910, he wrote to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith to express his support for a Bill that proposed the introduction of a compulsory sterilisation programme indicating that: "The unnatural and increasingly rapid growth of the feeble-minded and insane classes, coupled as it is with a steady restriction among the ... superior stocks, constitutes a national and race danger which it is impossible to exaggerate ... I feel that the source from which the stream of madness is fed should be cut off and sealed up before another year has passed."⁴

This discipline that promotes the propagation of desirable traits among humanity while taking measures to eliminate the undesirable is known as eugenics. Eugenics literally means "well-born". It involves the active selection of human beings who possess particular genetic characteristics that are judged to be superior. And, contrary to what many think, eugenics is not just a thing of the past. It has quietly crept its way back into present day reality. Indeed, many experts are starting to show a hopeful interest in the yet untapped potential of a human race transformed by exciting new genetic technologies.

In a world where the possibilities for these advances often seem limitless, this is an issue which demands thoughtful consideration. In fact, some of the key questions that are beginning to be asked emphasise the universal relevance of the eugenics debate: Should society create the perfect human race? Is this already happening? Why should parents not seek to have the perfect child? These questions become especially relevant when the abortion of fetuses with certain non-life-threatening disabilities begins to break record levels in the UK.⁵

In the pursuit of answers, the Edinburgh Filmhouse hosted a series of

films dedicated to the theme of eugenics at the end of November 2009. This came as part of an annual festival devoted to bioethical issues in the cinema. Each film was followed by a panel discussion made up of three or four invited experts in bioethics, science, law, medicine and politics.

One film highlighted by the festival stands out as particularly helpful for understanding both the issues at stake and the history of eugenics. Produced in 1998, *Homo Sapiens 1900* is a film by the provocative Swedish director Peter Cohen. This contemplative and searching documentary traces the history of Western eugenics, from its origins in ancient Greece to the present day. However, the film's chief focus is on man's ravenous quest for optimal human potential as manifested in the 20th century. The creation of the perfect man – the perfect race – reached new heights following the birth of Darwinian evolution, as the biological theory of the survival of the fittest was harnessed for social purposes. It was the British anthropologist Sir Francis Galton who first championed the notion that society must cease helping the underprivileged because such efforts stood in the way of evolution's natural selection process.

Standing on this foundation, other countries such as the United States, Sweden – and more notoriously Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – made varied attempts over the course of the 20th century to implement eugenic legislation. On one end of the spectrum, successful legislation took the form of mandatory sterilisations for those whose genetic material was deemed unfit for reproduction. On the other, is the genocide of Hitler's Nazi regime. Both are manifestations of humanity's pursuit to take the biological and genetic improvement of the human race into their own hands and to judge it according to their own standards. Both are founded on the belief that the key to a better humanity is an individual's genes. And both send the clear message that persons with physical or mental defects are unwanted.

The other films at the festival brought the eugenics debate right up to the present day. *My Sister's Keeper*, a film released in 2009, addressed eugenic concerns with cloning. *Gattaca*, a 1997 film portrayed a world in which scientists have attempted to create a "perfect" human race by eliminating disease with selective procreation. Each film selected for the festival engaged a unique facet of eugenics and was intended to contribute to a better understanding of these issues.

Participants in the Eugenics Film Festival went home with the realisation that because repetition of yesterday's mistakes is becoming a looming danger, it is important for thoughtful citizens to be aware of this history. They will then be able to ethically evaluate, for themselves, the eugenic issues in today's society. **LN**