



EUGENICS: The resurgence of race-based science as a tool for economic exploitation

By Mary Serumaga



“The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”—Toni Morrison

When Britain and the West in general face economic crises, eugenics crops up as a seemingly innocuous topic for general academic discussion. However, the recent revelation that University College London has secretly hosted conferences at which race science has been on the agenda is cause for genuine concern.

While European eugenics focused on natural traits thought to be inherent in “class”, American and colonial eugenics were based on perceived racial differences. Eugenics, race-based science and “genetic behaviourism” are one and the same thing - a justification for economic exclusion that could easily gain traction in a globalised economy.

In the 21st century, competition for land has given rise to land-grabbing as Northern countries attempt to ensure future food security for their citizens. Actual ownership of the means of food production would enable importers of food to side-step the problems of commodities price volatility, such as the hike in food prices that occurred in 2007-8.

Activists monitoring the phenomenon state that a significant proportion of Africa's arable land is now owned by foreign governments or transnational companies. The International Food Policy Research Institute estimates that 20 million hectares were appropriated in this manner between 2007 and 2009 alone. The goals of white settler colonial states are now being achieved by the global North and the more developed countries in the global South through the grabbing of land from the poor in sovereign countries - land that is handed over to them by these countries' elitist leaders. A lack of food security after the First World War was what drove scientific racism in Kenya and other colonies.

It is important to know and understand the nature and history of eugenics because of its impact on the course of modern history and its potential impact on the future. Mercurial in nature, eugenics comes disguised as science. But even as it is derided as a pseudo-science, it continues to be studied by members of the most respected educational institutions (Cornell University, Harvard and Stanford[1] and Cambridge[2] in the 1920s and University College London from at least 2014). Early studies were funded by oligarch-owned philanthropic organisations, such as the Carnegie Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1920s, and the findings were applied to the entire spectrum of government policy, including education, population control and immigration.

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The connection between the Carnegie Institution's work through the Eugenics Record Office in New York, which the Carnegie Institution funded between 1910 and 1939, and the Holocaust is often missed: the director of the Eugenics Record Office received an honorary degree for his work in "racial cleansing" from a German university.

It is important to remember that the Nazis used eugenics to justify their extermination of Jews, homosexuals, disabled people, gypsies and others they viewed as "genetically unfit". Adolf Hitler's "Final Solution" addressed a problem perceived and defined by the eugenics movement - what to do with the poor, the disabled and the non-Caucasian. The vigilant will recall that the Holocaust, among the worst excesses of eugenics, was preceded by the stigmatisation of non-Caucasian, unhealthy and poor people in the United States and elsewhere.

For these reasons, Africans must monitor the ebb and flow of the eugenics movement. The first line of defence is to be able to recognise eugenics policies in whatever disguise they appear and regardless of the prestige of their sponsors.

Race science in colonial Kenya

Throughout the colonial period, Britain attempted to address its food security challenges (Britain produced less than 10% of its own food) by encouraging immigration to Canada, Australia and the colonies. To do so they had to offer sweeteners, such as free or cheap land and labour.

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The report of a study tour of five East and Central African territories by the East Africa Commission was tabled in parliament during the annual Colonial Office debate of 1925. The Commission was staffed by officials from the three British political parties and drew up a strategy for the Empire in Africa.

The Commission answered policy questions, the most pressing and persistent being about land ownership. It was finally decided that Africans in Kenya and Rhodesia could not legally own land. Much of the land was sold, leased or given away to British economic migrants by the colonial government. Over 2,000 British ex-servicemen were given free smallholdings in Kenya as a reward for service, and more were given land in what is now Zimbabwe. In Southern Rhodesia, the remaining land belonged to a charter company while in Kenya the land was deemed Crown Land.

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It was hoped that the white settler population would multiply and grow agricultural produce for export as well as provide a market for British goods. Africans were relegated to areas designated as "native reserves". Within a generation, as predicted by MPs such as J. Wedgwood Benn, the population of the reserves was too large to sustain subsistence farming for all.

Landless Africans were forced to become labourers and squatters on British plantations and "houseboys" in the settlers' homes. When gold was discovered in the Kakamega reserve, prospectors were allowed to invade the area from as far away as Australia and the United States while Kenyans could not get licences to participate in mining.

Those in the reserves who were able to grow crops were banned by Ordinance from growing coffee and maize, lucrative exportable crops on which the settlers depended for their income.

To ensure people turned up for work, those Africans who were unable to show that they had put in between two and six months labour on British farms were brought before magistrates who sentenced them to a number of lashes. So determined were some Africans to farm their own plots that they would volunteer immediately for the lashing, and having done with it, would return to their plots in the reserves. This was the case even where compulsory labour on the railway was being enforced:

"It is a matter of common knowledge and every day practice in the Colony that the native, given the choice of going before a magistrate or accepting a thrashing from his master, will choose the latter. That sort of thing, and a matter of £6 a year wages, is not going to produce cotton in Kenya to justify this railway. The native will not work for £6 a year or the alternative presented to him of either a thrashing or going before a magistrate." (Hope Simpson, Colonial Services debate, 3 March 1924.)

To rationalise their exploitation and abuse of African people, the Imperial government resorted to pseudo-medicine backed by a species of law. Beginning with the law, the East Africa Commission relied on the principle of trusteeship. The Imperial government, it was said, held the resources of the colonial empire in trust for Africans, British settlers in Africa and for mankind in general. The trusteeship was necessary, in the Commission's analysis, because Africans were unable to govern themselves or husband their resources even though there were stable communities that had existed at least as long as Britain.

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This brings us to the pseudo-medical science. Eugenics attributed (perceived) economic “backwardness” to inherited “feeble-mindedness”. Roadblocks to African economic development imposed by the Imperial government and all the indignities visited on them notwithstanding, the key to the African “problem” was said to be an inherited incapacity to thrive economically or socially.

Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, William Ormsby-Gore, stated in his introduction to the report that he had the following on the authority of the European settlers he met on his tour:

*“During our tour of East Africa we were frequently told by Europeans, officials and unofficials alike, that the African native is a ‘child’. Without questioning the truth of such a generalisation, it at any rate suggests that the position of the European race ruling in Africa is that of a guardian to a ward, and that our duty is to protect the interests of someone less capable of safeguarding his or her own interests, and to educate a less developed and less efficiently equipped people to become better equipped and more **efficient** (emphasis added).*

“It is difficult to realise without seeing Africa what a tremendous impact is involved in the juxtaposition of white civilisation, with its command over material force, and its comparatively high and diversified social system, on the primitive people of Eastern Africa.

“The African native is confronted with a whole range of facts entirely beyond his present comprehension and he finds himself caught in a maelstrom of economic and cultural progress which in the majority of cases baffles him completely.” (The East Africa Commission Report, 1925, p.21.)

Ormsby-Gore’s remarks should not lead to the conclusion that the Under-Secretary was naïve; he was not. He prefaced his remarks by saying that claims of African backwardness are a generalisation - but then he went on to build a policy based on that generalisation, characterising Africans as bewildered by the social changes going on around them. His use of the word *efficient* is a code used by eugenicists to describe everything the purported lesser races and classes are said not to be — intelligent, conscientiousness, capable of impulse control and, therefore, able to be productive workers.

Stressing the need for British trusteeship, Ormsby-Gore added that it would be necessary only until Africans had been educated to fend for themselves - as though a hereditary disease of the mind is curable by education. Ormsby-Gore was a consummate opportunist - he used scientific racism as a justification for theft and exploitation. Given that the Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, belonged to the eugenics movement, Ormsby-Gore, his Under-Secretary for five years and then his successor, can be assumed to have held similar views.

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The Europeans who met with the East African Commission would have been settlers and colonial officials with a financial interest in the matter. They may have included some of the sixty individuals who joined the Kenyan Society for the Study of Race Improvement (KSSRI) founded in 1933.^[3] There was the influential Nellie Grant, a prominent eugenicist and philanthropist in Kenya. Ormsby-Gore may also have met Dr. Grant, Chief Medical Officer (in the colonial administration), who

received a grant from the Carnegie Institution to study African innate backwardness and who unsuccessfully lobbied the British Parliament for a grant to continue his research.

H.L. Gordon, a medical doctor resident in Kenya, was a representative of the British Medical Association and the author of several papers on eugenics published in scientific journals. He argued that any investment in the education of Africans without improving their genetic stock would be a waste. These principles were applied to European immigration as well – some with mental illnesses were forcibly sterilised and immigration was controlled to admit elite classes. (Chloe Campbell in *Race and Empire: Eugenics in colonial Kenya*).^[4]

The research involved measuring the skulls of living Africans and European settlers and weighing the brains of the deceased in mortuaries for comparison. The choice of this method was odd given that a founding father of eugenics, Karl Pearson, had done similar experiments at the beginning of the 20th century and found no correlation between skull/brain size and mental capacity. In a paper delivered to the Cambridge Philosophical Society in 1902, he stated, “So far then as our Cambridge results go, they thoroughly confirm Dr. Lee’s investigation as to the capacity of the skull. There is no *marked* correlation between ability and the shape or size of the head.”^[5]

Grant, however, arrived at the conclusion by extrapolation that all African “backwardness” was actually a medical condition that he called bradyphysis, a disease defined by eugenicists and never recognised outside that field. He advised that any attempt to educate Africans had to take account of this condition. To fail to do so, he further argued, caused schizophrenia in Africans, whose frontal lobes are incapable of assimilating so much complex new information. It was no coincidence that such a large potential financial saving should come to light at a time when resources were scarce and all resources were required to bring Britain out of the post-war Depression.

The East African Commission Report had envisioned making education available to Africans only “in the widest possible sense”. Shortly after it was debated in parliament, the nationwide education systems set up and run by Christian missionaries partnering with indigenous leaders in Uganda was taken over by the colonial government for “reorganisation”.

There was significant opposition over the years to academic education for Africans and Makerere University, in particular – Africans were to be trained only for labour and service. However, there were individual British MPs who were willing to blow the whistle on such exploitative policies:

“I agree, and every sane Member of this House agrees, with the desirability of doing all that can be done to educate the natives, but I have a very shrewd suspicion that the motive behind the suggestion contained in this [Ainsworth] circular is not altogether the benefit of the native, but in order that the native may become a better wealth-producing machine.” (Ben Spoor, Colonial Office Debate, 29 April 1920.)

An early scheme for colonial development was debated in parliament in 1929. Major Archibald Church, the Labour MP, a eugenicist recently returned from touring Kenya, proposed research in alleged African backwardness. With reference to colonial development research, Church said, “We are in the first instance reclaiming human material, much of which is waste human material at the present time; and, in the second place, we are developing the natural resource of territories which are otherwise going to waste.”^[6]

The treatment of colonised people in Kenya provides some insight into the consequences of allowing the state (limited or otherwise) to determine the standards to which the citizenry should aspire. In Kenya, in particular, the Imperial government issued numerous ordinances to force the indigenous population to abandon subsistence farming in favour of wage labour. It introduced a poll tax, a hut

tax (European settlers were not required to pay income tax, which served as an incentive to attract new immigrants), forced labour and child labour.

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It is immediately clear that the vested interests of those controlling the state shaped the decisions regarding the lifestyle of the rest. Africans were required to provide the labour without which settler plantations could not function. In addition, their wages were the source of income with which to buy British goods manufactured from the very commodities the Africans produced. Parliamentary debates of the 1920s through to the 1940s show that the Africans in Kenya and Uganda were unwilling to abandon their homes to labour for cash and to accumulate manufactured possessions, and preferred self-employment, which was a constant source of frustration to the ruling class.

"[...] We do not want to force anybody to work who is able to support himself and his family without doing more than he cares to do. It is all very well to talk about teaching men the dignity of labour, but, when that lesson is taught by the people who are going to benefit from that labour, I think we want to look at it very closely before we allow ourselves to be carried away by that sort of argument." (Wedgwood Benn, HC Deb 30 July 1919.)

Naturally, there was resistance to this kind of exploitation even as Africans were being stigmatised as being lazy.

The resurgence of eugenics

Race-based science was thought dead by the 1960s, mortally wounded by universal revulsion at the extreme measures applied by Nazi eugenics and the fall of the British Empire in the 1960s. However, the announcement of its demise was premature. One Philippe Rushton^[7], a Canadian psychology professor at Ontario's North Western University, put eugenics on the agenda again in 1988. He too did a lot of measuring and tabulating and found, among other things, that the length of a male's penis is inversely proportional to the size of his brain. He then concluded that there is an inverse relationship between intelligence and sexuality: non-whites - blacks, in particular - are highly sexual. And less intelligent than whites.

Then followed a long nationwide series of demonstrations by students against Rushton, not because of his absurd findings, but because he undertook his study without informing his subjects about what he was doing (the work of eugenicists is so often shrouded in secrecy). He was reprimanded for that, although he was not required to resign. He went on to advocate for the preservation of Canadian society by erecting barriers to Arab and African immigration.

Coming to the present day, in 2018, Toby Young, a British public servant, resigned voluntarily from the board of the Office for Students for some Twitter-related offences. During parliamentary questions regarding his conduct, his interest in eugenics came to the fore. It was interesting to learn that he had attended one of the secret conferences on eugenics hosted by University College London and his support for the movement was known at the time of his appointment. (These conferences are currently suspended pending an investigation into the abuse of venue booking procedures.)

In his essay "The Fall of the Meritocracy", Young asserts that he is not an egalitarian and that social differences are inevitable. These differences come about, he argues, because of genetically-inherited traits like IQ, conscientiousness, impulse control and a willingness to delay gratification (presumably

as when training to be a white collar professional). His markers for success are the attendance of elite schools and employment in what are considered elite professions. Young then says that for the state to attempt to obtain these benefits for all would only lead to coercion and loss of liberty, as evidenced by the failure of the “socialist utopia”.

Young’s ultimate goal is to maintain minimal state intervention in governance: “If you think a free society is preferable to one dominated by the state, and the unequal distribution of wealth is an inevitable consequence of reining in state power, then you should embrace the principle of meritocracy for making limited government sustainable.”

The basic weakness of his thesis is that he assumes that everyone has identical values and aspirations in life. He defines success as “wealth and prestige” and white collar jobs (“high-paying firms and rarefied social environments”) as the most desirable employment. Meritocracy is his roadmap for providing everybody with the opportunity to attain those goals while accepting not all will reach them.

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It would be interesting to see a study of the types of lifestyle people actually aspire to (for example, does everyone want a white collar job?) Many professionals desire a simpler, uncomplicated life, possibly involving growing their own vegetables. Many farmers enjoy being farmers, potters want to be potters and bakers, bakers. Their choices should not be seen as a lack of ambition or success.

Young’s proposes a scheme for enabling the less intelligent - and according to him, the less affluent/successful - to produce offspring more intelligent and better equipped than their parents (assuming they want to join the war for accumulation of wealth). It is what he calls progressive eugenics. This emergent area of study seeks to develop technology with which poor couples with low IQs would be able to screen their embryos for IQ to enable them to choose the ones with the highest IQs for implanting and birth. The higher IQ offspring would then avoid being trapped in a cycle of “poverty, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency, criminality and drug abuse.” Wow.

The scheme is envisaged as completely voluntary. In the beginning it may be voluntary, but successive modifications could lead to coercion by barring the offspring of people not practising “racial hygiene” from access to health and education services. The “genetically unclean” could be easily stigmatised and excluded, for example, by requiring an individual’s embryonic registration number to be included on birth certificates and/or other official documentation.

What this tells us is that it is too easy to concoct scientific-sounding covers for greed. Judging from his paper, what Young’s real fear is the old-fashioned concept of sharing that made society possible in the first place, a vision of society as a community to which all are able to make an important contribution. Eugenicists are reluctant to allow a greater share of the common good to go to the less affluent who also happen to be the world’s primary producers and service providers. However, he does admit that redistributive taxation has its place. Thus the rationale for new eugenics is simply built on multiple deceptions.

The myth about IQ and success

IQ (intelligence quotient) testing has been controversial from its inception, a bit like lie-detector

testing, a fact that is not widely acknowledged. IQs develop as a child grows, so environment would have more to do with it than eugenicists may be willing to admit. There has been work done showing that the more an infant is stimulated by rocking and the environment, the more dendrites (interconnecting transmitters) develop in her brain and, therefore, the more complexities the infant can grasp.[8] Therefore, IQ is not quite like the lottery in blue eyes.

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Eugenicists believe that IQ influences the financial decisions people make and that those who are intelligent invariably make good decisions while the unintelligent make poor decisions, resulting in generational poverty or wealth. Young puts it this way, "Cognitive ability and other characteristics that lead to success, such as conscientiousness, impulse control and a willingness to defer gratification, are between 40 per cent and 80 per cent heritable."

This argument does not take into account existing evidence that the tendency for the poor to gamble on lotteries is strongly influenced by "peer-play" and self-perceived social deprivation as well as educational attainment.[9] These findings suggest that risky behaviour, whether it be gambling, poor academic performance, drug use, promiscuity, impulsivity, low self-control or violent crime (what the eugenicist calls *inefficiency*), increases to the degree that the actor perceives a gap between his current state and his desired goals/state. Addressing this need by providing access to health care, education, employment or other opportunities reduces the risk-taking behaviour (gambling, in this case).

Myths about the poor and non-Caucasians

Of course, anyone on the earnings spectrum could perceive themselves as being deprived and could engage in destructive behaviour. After all, undesirable characteristics perceived in the poor by eugenicists have been found to be present in the affluent too. A good example would be the relentless pursuit of profit by vulture-funds, stockbrokers and bankers that contribute to the collapse of entire economies. These people are driven by the perception that they are not doing as well as their peers and must act in increasingly extreme ways to close the gap. Much of the profits they make are not connected to any type of productive activity but are purely gambling profits. Their losses tend to be equally dramatic.

A University of St. Gallen study of stockbrokers indicated a tendency among them to be so highly competitive that they were motivated not only to outperform their peers in accumulating wealth, but also to destroy the achievements of their competitors. On tests, their performance showed higher levels of recklessness and manipulative behaviour than a control group of psychopaths.[10] Aside from engaging in activities that should ideally be construed as immoral or unethical, it has been shown that stockbrokers can be as illogical as poor gamblers in the decisions they make. Therefore, the link between IQ, decision-making and wealth is not as linear as eugenicists insist.

On this basis, environmental factors imposed by an economic system that relies on some existing in poverty traps in order for others to live lives of privilege need to be considered as drivers of persistent poverty. An example would be the sub-prime mortgage scam that led to the global financial crisis of 2008.

The angst driving the current resurgence of interest in eugenics seems to stem from the experience of the global financial crisis of 2008/9, the shock and awe of Brexit and the

banking crisis predicted for the near future.

Finally, the link between race and crime was found not to have been proven when Rushton's data was re-examined.[11] When it comes to drug abuse, for example, this is an addiction that knows no social boundaries. And white collar crime is just as much a menace to society as crimes committed by inner-city or poor people. In the UK and USA, fraud by bankers and shady government bail-outs with taxpayers' money are as damaging to the common good as drug-smuggling. Corruption in public office and predatory trade practices by multinational corporations literally cause the deaths of millions in the developing world.

Interest in eugenics has marched hand-in-hand with Britain's economic fortunes from the colonial era. The fear of not having enough has always led some to scramble to justify their instinct to acquire as much as possible for themselves at the expense of others. They blame the less acquisitive for their lack of aggression and make plans to assault them — physically, if necessary — to achieve economic ends.

The angst driving the current resurgent interest in eugenics seems to stem from the experience of the global financial crisis of 2008/9, the shock and awe of Brexit and the banking crisis predicted for the near future. This renewed interest in race-based science is an effort to stigmatise and exclude some sections of the global community and to justify the exploitation of those deemed to be racially inferior.

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