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Book review

Eugenics: A Reassessment

Richard Lynn, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 2001, 384 pp., ISBN 0-275-95822-1, \$85.00 (hardback).

Richard Lynn, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland has written a highly readable and stimulating sequel to his 1996 *Dysgenics: Genetic Deterioration in modern populations*. In the present book, Lynn proposes that the condemnation of eugenics in the second half of the twentieth century went too far and so warrants a reassessment. The eugenic objectives of eliminating genetic diseases, increasing intelligence, and reducing personality disorders, he suggests, remain desirable and are now achievable by human biotechnology and personal choice, not governmental policy.

The book is nicely organized into four parts: History of Eugenics, Objectives of Eugenics, Classical Implementation of Eugenics Programs, and The New Eugenics. The first part provides an account of the foundation of eugenics by Sir Francis Galton and the rise and fall of eugenics in the twentieth century. One section on the “last eugenicists,” describes the work over the last three decades of Robert Graham, William Shockley, Raymond Cattell, and Roger Pearson.

The next two parts, Objectives, and Classical Implementations, provide an enormous storehouse of useful and up-to-date information, including extensive data on the social costs and benefits of different levels of intelligence and personality types. These include the “psychopathic personality,” which Lynn sees primarily as a function of very low agreeableness combined with very low conscientiousness. There are excellent reviews of the literature on the heritability of all kinds of traits and syndromes, the genetic principles of selection, and the various eugenic methods that have been tried, along with their relative success in different countries, and a discussion of the ethical principles of eugenics.

Lynn has a concise writing style that clips along and makes the book enjoyable to read. The final part, The New Eugenics, really sparkles. It contains five chapters: (1) Developments in human biotechnology, (2) Ethical issues in human biotechnology, (3) The future of eugenics in democratic societies, (4) The future of eugenics in authoritarian states, and (5) The evolution of the eugenic world state. In these, Lynn has clearly done his homework. His discussion of the new eugenics of human biotechnology—prenatal diagnosis of embryos with genetic diseases, embryo selection, and cloning—is state-of-the-art. Lynn thinks these more likely to be accepted spontaneously in

western democracies than were classical eugenics, which are no longer politically feasible in democratic societies. However, given some of the restrictive legislation Lynn documents as having been passed in the 1990s in Britain, the United States, and Europe, and by guidelines set out by UNESCO and the World Health Organization, the new eugenics may not be feasible either. Lynn suggests that the West has tilted too strongly toward individual rights and away from societal responsibilities.

Eugenics: A reassessment describes and answers many of the ethical issues that have been raised about human biotechnologies. It also considers how modern biotechnologies may be used by authoritarian states to promote state power. The last chapter, on geopolitics in the 21st Century, is deliberately provocative in the best traditions of that word, viz., a thinking exercise that focuses the mind. It argues that because of continuing dysgenic and below replacement fertility in Europe and white America, along with dysgenic immigration to both places, that toward the end of the 21st century the West will lose a power struggle with China. The first Modern Eugenic State, China is already well ahead in what they euphemistically term “fertility research” (i.e. selection from the mothers’s own production of embryos of the best characteristics for implantation).

Perhaps a perceived threat from China, Lynn suggests, will force the West to take eugenics and other population issues more seriously. But there is no law of nature that will prevent the West from drifting in the direction of Third World conditions. If people disagree with Lynn’s apparently logical conclusion (based on the trajectories he documents), they must say why. If they don’t like the predicted outcomes, well then, it’s up to them to change them.

Reference

Lynn, R. (1996). *Dysgenics: Genetic deterioration in modern populations*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

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