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A shameful history

Like the eugenicists of the early 20th century, James Watson betrays his fear of a changing world

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Despite his frantic backtracking, James Watson's statement that Africans are less intelligent than Europeans follows a long and dubious tradition of geneticists claiming that supposed racial differences have a genetic basis. The idea goes back to the birth of the science of evolutionary genetics and its bastard sibling: eugenics.

After the death of his young daughter, Charles Darwin lamented natural selection's "clumsy, wasteful, blundering and horribly cruel action"; but perhaps man could do better. Darwin did not suggest this step himself, but in the 1930s six of his family were members of the British Eugenics Society, and his son was president from 1911 to 1928. The Galton laboratory at the University of London is named after Darwin's cousin, the geneticist Francis Galton, who coined the term eugenics and advocated perfecting the human race by breeding "those only of the best stock" so that the "feeble nations" could give way before the "nobler varieties of mankind".

Eugenics societies sprang up at the beginning of the 20th century in most western countries to promote breeding programmes, but the movement was not confined to scientists. Browse through the Eugenics Society's membership list and you find lords, ladies, bishops, academics, writers, doctors, artists and politicians from all sides. In November 1913 the Oxford Union carried a motion approving the principles of eugenics. As a cabinet minister, the young Winston Churchill advocated compulsory sterilisation of "the feeble-minded and insane classes". George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells were profoundly influenced by Darwin. The contraception pioneer Marie Stopes campaigned to pass laws to enable sterilisation of the "hopelessly rotten and racially diseased".

But the writings of literary eugenicists betray their real roots: fear. In 1915 Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: "On the towpath we met and had to pass a long line of imbeciles. It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed." HG Wells openly advocated the killing of the weak by the strong, insisting that "those swarms of blacks, and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people ... will have to go".

Popular support for eugenics among the west European and US intelligentsia had very little to do with its dubious scientific credentials. Its wellsprings were linked to middle- and upper-class anxiety concerning burgeoning populations of the poor and waves of immigration.

Fear was translated into action in many European countries and US states that adopted eugenicist sterilisation policies. In liberal Sweden, more than 62,000 people (mostly women) with physical or mental disabilities or considered to be socially "undesirable", were sterilised against their will, and the policy continued well into the 1970s. The full horror of eugenics was realised in

the 1934 German "racial hygiene" laws, which led to the enforced sterilisation of more than 80,000 individuals.

Hitler's enthusiastic support of its principles established eugenics as the pariah of postwar science. But many geneticists continued to investigate the genetic basis of intelligence, creativity, sexuality and criminality.

Recent controversial (and often disputed) evidence that genes may indeed be linked to these traits has not come as a surprise to sociobiologists, such as Edward O Wilson, who have long argued that mankind cannot, uniquely, escape its genetic inheritance. But the debate that must follow has nothing to do with the ill-considered remarks of Watson. Like his predecessors, Watson betrays fears and suspicions: this time of white privileged Americans of a world that is slipping beyond their control.

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