

BOOK REVIEW

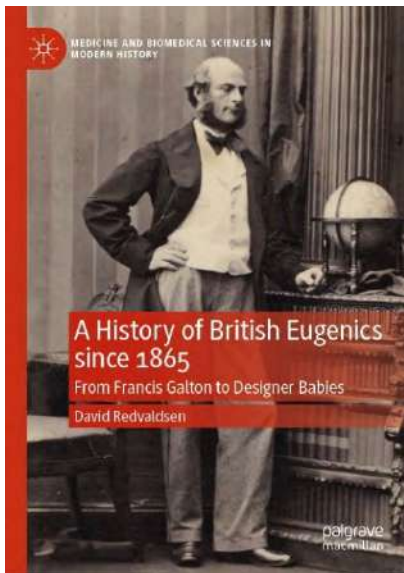
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Reflections on Reductionism in the Historicization of Eugenics and the Possibility of its Revision



Abstract: *The text reviews A History of British Eugenics since 1865: From Francis Galton to Designer Babies by David Redvaldsen. The book is read through the lens of the many challenges faced by those who historicize the legacy of eugenics. Two key tasks are posed: delineating the boundary-work that defines eugenics and demonstrating the meaningfulness of its historicization. The widely acknowledged ability of eugenics to penetrate the filters of any political ideology and epistemology is seen as a starting point for understanding its past, which is deconstructed in the process of working with the numerous dichotomies used in various historicizations. Working with an extremely narrow range of such dichotomies, Redvaldsen's book provides a systematic example of the inevitable reductionism involved in revising the legacy of eugenics.*

Keywords: *Eugenics; historical reductionism; colonial power; comparative history; entangled history.*

Redvaldsen, D. (2024). *A History of British Eugenics since 1865: From Francis Galton to Designer Babies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-3-031-72289-9, p. 331.

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Redvaldsen's book has the ambition to trace the *longue durée* of eugenics in Britain, from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Its five chapters follow the transformation of methods used to implement the mission of social selection, seen by Redvaldsen as a kind of *perpetuum mobile* of eugenics (p. 267). I read it as an attempt to answer a question posed by Alison Bashford in the epilogue to the *Oxford Handbook of Eugenics*: how can we address the various challenges in temporalizing eugenics which has a clear start, but an uncertain present and even future? (Bashford, Levine, 2010: 539-540). The historicization of eugenics faces various complex tasks, but two of them are key for achieving valuable output, namely, delineating the boundary-work that defines eugenics and demonstrating the accuracy of its historicization. As in his earlier (and brief) attempt to compare eugenics in Denmark and Norway, Redvaldsen focuses on its ideological impact on reproductive policy agendas (Redvalsen, 2012). The authority of eugenics to promote such extreme measures as forced sterilization is the central question for Redvaldsen's analysis, which remains purely comparative in its focus on target groups of eugenic intervention and promoters of reproductive surveillance. This research strategy produces a cascade of historical reductions that seems to be instructive to examine for anyone attempting to historicize eugenics.

Contemporary interpretations of eugenics vary in terms of the composition of driving forces and the interrelations between eugenics and other movements aimed at providing biology-informed arguments for various politics. Also, historians agree in their view of eugenics as slippery, easily accepting new knowledge and penetrating any value systems. Paraphrasing Moreno Figueroa's definition of racism as diverse practices which resurface in different forms and in sometimes imperceptible ways (Moreno, 2006), R. Sánchez-Rivera problematizes such a take on eugenics as a kind of "chameleon" as a result of adhering to traditional linear narrations of eugenics (Sánchez-Rivera, 2024). Sánchez-Rivera is not alone in accepting slipperiness as a methodological challenge. To impose historical 'order', scholars introduce dichotomies that map different flows and help recognize the complex relations within eugenic movements.

The impressive variety of such dichotomies – positive vs. negative eugenics, Mendelian vs. Lamarckian, old vs. new, reactionary vs. liberal, public vs. private, among many others – demonstrates the difficulty of interpreting the legacy of eugenics. The historicization of eu-

genics often involves deconstructing existing dichotomies and introducing new ones considered more fitting in light of newly discovered facts or even shifts in eugenic thinking (Meloni, 2016). Redvaldsen's study is not of this kind – he moves through these dichotomies with three distinct strategies. The methodical recording of the networks of British eugenicists based on archival materials and presented in a style reminiscent of a medieval chronicle, is subordinated to his effort to justify the dichotomies he deems historically significant for the British case.

Firstly, Redvaldsen chooses dilemmas central to his vision and excludes those that do not fit his strategy. For instance, he does not discuss at all the substantial legacy of British debates on the relation between heredity and environment in biological theory. Nor does his interest in historicizing British eugenics extend to their embeddedness in broader nation-building projects or transnational contexts. The suppression of these two dilemmas – heredity vs. environment (or nature vs. nurture), and national vs. transnational eugenics, results in the absence of a (de)colonial focus. This omission is visible in the absence of any mention of Chloe Campbell's *Race and empire: Eugenics in colonial Kenya* by (2007), which highlights the variety of approaches to heredity and environment among Kenyan and British eugenicists as decisive for understanding their complicated relationship. Nor does Redvaldsen engage with the collective volume *Eugenics at the edges of empire*, edited by Diane B. Paul, John Stenhouse, and Hamish G. Spencer (2018), which sheds light on the adaptation of British approaches in different peripheral colonial localities. He practically ignores the role of Vera Houghton, who was not only a leader in several British and international organizations such as the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress but also one of the leaders of the British Eugenic Society in the 1960s. The close cooperation between Houghton and C.P. Blacker – another leader among British eugenicists, in promoting family planning in Asian and African countries raises questions about the 'racelessness' of British eugenics, a position shared by Redvaldsen.

Another of Redvaldsen's methods is to embed his analysis within one or another pole of several established dichotomies of eugenics, for example when he develops his stance that 'the role of race and scientific racism in eugenics was downplayed' (p. 185). Redvaldsen is ready to accept only 'a tiny effect' of the new eugenics on the ethnic composition of Britain. His reasoning is likely based on a possible relationship between levels of integration and access to reproductive technologies,

but socioeconomic status as a decisive factor appears to him most likely (p. 278). Resembling his work on Scandinavian eugenics, here too he treats disability, class and race separately. Neglecting the multiple forms of discrimination and stigmatization different groups experience through eugenics results in further historical reduction – ignoring resistance against eugenics’ authority. His claim that, ‘[E]ugenics had deeper consequences on continental Europe and Scandinavia than it ever did on Britain’ (p. 271) invites questions about British society’s sensitivity to the threats of eugenics. To Redvaldsen, ‘[E]ugenics mirrored the society in which it arose in having both a benign and a dark side’ (p. 64). Does this mean that resistance is proportional to eugenic pressure? Is such a view not too reductive for understanding contemporary biosociality and biosolidarity? It is reasonable to recognize the value of historicizing the cases of eugenics application of a ‘modest’ political weight as a unique option to understand what made the application of negative eugenics impossible. Chloe Campbell’s work exemplifies this as she maps the options and limits of accepting the overtly racist medical research conducted by British physicians among Africans to demonstrate how haphazard the formation of anti-racist sentiment was and why it served as a restraining force. The disability rights movement is another example of anti-eugenic resistance. Its public influence would be key to understanding how eugenics operated as a form of ‘authoritative knowledge’ – a central motif in Redvaldsen’s narrative.

Two dichotomies – popular vs. scientific eugenics and public vs. private eugenics, and their interconnection, frame Redvaldsen’s approach to the continuity of eugenics. His stance that ‘there are medical, scientific and popular strands to the ideology’ (p. 286) serves not only as a maxim but also as a filter for selecting data relevant to his historicization, focusing on public policy. Redvaldsen’s interrogation of high- and low-brow eugenics emerges from his adherence to political analysis. The rich history of scientific debates within the British eugenics movement is absent in his narrative, and so is the impressive history of the diffusion of eugenic ideas into popular culture (Hanson, 2012). He traces the interaction between eugenicists and political movements in several campaigns promoting eugenics-informed legislation in different periods. His allegiance to the leading role of the political establishment reverses in the consistent objectification of ordinary as inactive people, often defined as victims of the contemporary popularity of the idea of ‘improvement’: ‘Prenatal diagnosis involves making a choice about

what sort of babies are worth having. The fact that the decision is made by the parents rather than by society does not cancel out the eugenic aspect' (p. 266). Similar stances appear in his discussion of sperm banks, in vitro fertilization (which he claims 'has clear eugenic effects', (p. 261) and even cloning. Limiting the role of modern reproductive technologies to a source of eugenic temptation significantly reduces the scope of the public and private dichotomy. By contrast, Chloe S. Burke and Christopher J. Castaneda have introduced this dichotomy to historicize eugenics in an anti-reductionist manner, including a more nuanced focus on the regulation of reproductive technologies (Burke, Castaneda, 2007).

The book ultimately leaves the reader with a paradox: eugenics is portrayed as an agent of reproductive surveillance that nevertheless proved incapable of advancing its own agenda. The number of filters that exclude evidence of the colonial and racial dimensions of British eugenics from Redvaldsen's narrative are closely tied to his methodological choices. This raises the question: how can the historical revision of eugenics be organised to overcome multiple pitfalls of reductionism? Whether recent trends in entangled and interdisciplinary historicization can be useful remains to be seen.

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