ON THE OTHER HAND

Eugenics has a long racist history. Ross (CP, 1985, 36, 857) believes “it is historically incorrect . . . to refer to the nineteenth century eugenacists as ‘racist’ from today’s enlightened view.”

Webster’s Third International Dictionary defines racism as “the assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another which is usually coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others.”

From its inception the eugenics movement has embodied this definition of racism. Francis Galton, the father of the eugenics movement, in his very first article on the subject in 1865, noted that the Negro, Hindu, Arab, Mongol, and Teuton all have “their peculiar characters,” which “are transmitted, generation after generation, as truly [sic] as their physical forms” (Galton, 1865/1976, p. 26). He believed, without citing any evidence, that there was “a difference of not less than two grades between the black and white races . . .” (Galton, 1869/1962, p. 394).

Galton (1883/1907) defined eugenics as a “science” that “takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had” (p. 17). And in the same work he later asserted that “there exists a sentiment, for the most part quite unreasonable, against the gradual extinction of an inferior race” (p. 200). Then, in 1884, Galton wrote to the distinguished Swiss botanist, Alphonse de Candolle: “It strikes me that the Jews are specialized for a parasitical existence upon other nations, and that there is need of evidence that they are capable of fulfilling the varied duties of a civilized nation by themselves.” Karl Pearson, Galton’s disciple and biographer, echoed this opinion 40 years later during his attempt to prove the undesirability of Jewish immigration into Britain: “. . . for such men as religion, social habits, or language keep as a caste apart, there should be no place. They will not be absorbed by, and at the same time strengthen the existing population; they will develop into a parasitic race . . .” (Hirsch, 1970/1976, p. 161). Thus, from its very beginnings, eugenics assumed a hierarchy of races and fostered discrimination based on that assumption; also, such racist ideas were transmitted from master to disciple across the generations.

In contrast, Alfred Russell Wallace (1908, p. 15), co-founder with Darwin of evolutionary theory, noted that “in comparing a savage with a civilized race, we must always remember that the amount of acquired and applied knowledge which we possess is no criterion of mental superiority on our side, or of inferiority on his.” He expressed such views as early as 1864. Ironically, the “enlightened view” of race, denial of hierarchy, originates from the 18th century (see Tawney, 1931/1964, pp. 91–116).

Why is it so difficult for some 20th century intellectuals to acknowledge racism? Remember that it was no less an establishment authority than the president of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences who called on the scientific community recently to “unfrock the charlatans”, see Hirsch (1981) for an examination of “today’s enlightened view.”

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References