

**Development of Eugenics Theory from Positivist Rationalism  
to the Tragedy of the Second World War Exemplified by Selected Excerpts  
from the Works of Darwin, Galton and Stoddard**

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**Abstract**

The intensive intellectual and economic development of the Victorian era and, most of all, increasingly far-reaching contacts between Europe and non-European peoples made understanding and classifying the issues related to ethnic diversity of the world necessary. The emerging science of the West had to face a lack of data, a multitude of speculations, poor methodology and a Christian paradigm which led to a specific way of thinking. The biological realism of Darwin and his efforts to make the human race subject to objective/scientific classification, as well as his omission of ethical considerations, paved the way to the eugenic speculations of Francis Galton. The authority of later researchers, accepting their perspective with the resulting driving moral questions away together with a growing fear of degeneration of civilisation eventually led to the extreme radicalisation of opinions presented in the works of Lothrop Stoddard. A century of xenophobic thought followed, with racial polarisation, and then in national terms, a eugenicist world-view was finally vented technologically and ideologically through the tragedy of the Second World War.

**Historical background**

The Industrial Revolution started in the second half of the 18th century in the United Kingdom and introduced a new paradigm of thinking — a positivist philosophy rooted in Enlightenment thought. The development of engineering and free trade alongside rapid social changes contributed to the necessity of facing up to new or previously unknown problems, with their quality and scale remaining obscure.

Supported by these new technological developments, the economic aspirations of the great British Empire led to a heavy exploitation of overseas colonies. Regular acquisition of

goods from India, Africa or regions of the Pacific Ocean required not only logistic, military and economic potential but also new biological knowledge of previously unknown parts of the natural world. Therefore, it was not only new animal and plant species but the human race itself that fell within the area of Europeans' interest.

A *wild*, uncivilised part of humanity was no longer only a curiosity. Coming up against the scale of mutual relations and following the philosophy of positivism, one had to systematise a new world and find answers to entirely new questions of who *the savages* are, whether they were people or perhaps different races or even a species. The modern civilisation of the West adopted as a benchmark, virtually unquestioned, the notion of civilisation in general. Within the framework of this assumption, the question of analysing the difference in behaviour between the residents of Europe and far away *uncivilised* countries was discussed, together with the question of how these issues can be related to the undisputed authority of the Bible?

The drive for rationalisation and belief in the possibility of encyclopaedic classification of phenomena initiated several methodological research trends. The sciences of the 19th century stemmed from strictly national traditions: comparative linguistics in Germany, comparative anatomy in France and political economy in Great Britain. There, the issue of civilisation was viewed from the angle of work and its organisation, through politics and trade (Stocking, 2010, p. 30).

A new, *wild* human being was scrutinised from the perspective of the notion of civilisation. Undoubtedly, the influence of a feeling of state organisation effectiveness was expressed explicitly by the imperial nature of the then reality of Western Europe. Being guided by the analogy to the natural world, with its linear order as it seemed, the new studies started from plants through to animals, leading from the simplest forms to (white) human being who were taken as the closest to God. It was thus assumed that civilisation, understood as a way of social organisation, as well as its ideological and creative potential - that is, culture - are also subject to linear development.

As a result, the people of Europe of the 19th century, thought first about civilisation and not culture. Second, it was assumed that this civilisation (according to the positivist paradigm) is a single thing-in-itself capable of development in a specific direction under some conditions, and forced to stagnate or degrade in others. Therefore, *wilderness* was a degenerative state - peoples with no laws, history or rules written down did not create the possibility of investigating them so the origins of their present reasoning were unreachable. In this sense, they were insignificant to Europeans, as they did not contribute to intellectual output concerning inter-social relations (*civilis*). What is more, nationalism was no longer only a cosmopolitan value

but also a distinguishing category — peoples who neither had states nor were organised into nations did not offer a civilisational value contrary to Europeans (Stocking, 2010, p. 22).

Apart from taking interest in *what* and *how* things were developing, people also asked the question of *who* was subject to this development or possible degradation. A main factor which moulded the discussion on this subject was a deeply culturally rooted Christian faith, rationalistically based on the irrefutable teachings of the Bible. People started pondering the question of whether God created the First Couple who populated the Earth, if others living in different corners of the world are so different. Why did they look different, behave different and believe in different systems of values? Moreover, how was it possible that they lived in such distant areas, often separated from the world with an impassable sea?

Giving a simple answer to these questions turned out to be impossible; especially considering the confines imposed by the message revealed. Some thinkers took a polygenist variant into consideration which assumed the existence of first couples other than Adam and Eve and *local acts of creation* (e.g. in America). Others stuck to monogenism, and with the silent assumption of a *white* First Couple, thought that the rest of the humanity had somehow degenerated or was not part of the same species as European humans. For instance, John Bird Sumner — a bishop in the Church of England and Archbishop of Canterbury — thought that *wildness* had resulted from the post-flood degeneration of a part of the humanity. Fortunately, according to this same clergyman, the rest had chosen a right track of development so that Europe is “the centre, from which the rays of civilization are diverging in every direction” (Stocking, 2010, p. 33). As John W. Stocking emphasise, “[t]he effect of his argument was to place the savage not at the foot of a single upward ladder of progress, but at the bottom of a diverging ladder of degeneration” (pp. 33–34).

The type of thinking rooted in Christian dogma did not classify people as different or *in different stage of development*, but divided them between *normal* or appropriate and those who are *degenerated*. According to the American anthropologist, “[s]uch views were in fact the common currency of popular religious belief and the missionary movement” (p. 34).

Differences in appearance and behaviour were analysed methodically to solve what was apparently a mystery of degradation. In Germany, the interest in culture that surpassed material civilisation stemming from Romanticism (before 1800), then evolved into nationalism and racism. This also proved to be the direction of scientific research. According to the deterministic psychological view, human qualities and abilities were located in particular parts of the brain, and their development was partly shown by a shape of a skull. On this basis, cranial measurements were implemented. It seems that science was not supposed to give an answer to

the question of differences between people, but aimed at finding justification for the truth presented briefly in one of the publications of a French philosopher, Henri Saint-Simon. In his view, “[t]he negro, because of his basic physical structure, is not susceptible, even with the same education, of rising to the intellectual level of Europeans” (Swedberg, 1994, p. 148).

### **Eugenics of the first half of the 20th century**

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Mt, 5:48)

The idea of replacing natural selection with conscious selection of the human species emerged when the effectiveness of positivist thought enjoyed great success. Newly established eugenics was placed in the confines of science of that time. To understand popularity and daring of the new domain of knowledge better, one should take a closer look at the way of formulating a scientific presentation and the ethical position that scholars would take when discussing research questions.

The works of Charles Darwin provided a perfect material for the discussion of these issues. After all, he was the father of the theory of evolution and a symbol of scientific revolution which made an analytical effort of the human mind be elevated over irrational superstition.

Twelve years after the celebrated *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, 1859) was published, Darwin wrote another book (Darwin, 1871) whose content perfectly illustrates intellectual climate of science of the end of the 19th century. With this book, he simultaneously discussed the issue of classification of different varieties of the human species. Most of all, he pondered the value of differences between “human races” (p. 214), further clarifying that it is a value relating classification. When analysing the issue of belonging of different human varieties, as race, species or subspecies, he mentions the possibility of “ranking” races (p. 224) — in this case: separate subspecies — suggesting there and in other excerpts the necessity of creating classification which would not be scattered but based on a vertical scale.

Darwin does not say that, for instance, each species or any of the biological races is the result of the best possible adjustment to the conditions it has experienced so far. Here, the biologist seemed not to notice that different forms of biological life are emergent reflection of the different circumstances of their creation. Given this perspective, one cannot determine any of the classifying category as being *over* or *under* the others, or *better* or *worse* adjusted, but simply as a perfect effect of different causes. Hence, each individual is adjusted to his

environment and his problems and not the problems and environment of Europe. The historically established belief in a linear path of development towards the defined excellence resulted in a silent assumption that evolution (including a human being and his varieties) is arranged in a straight line leading from the degenerated abyss to the eternal light of heaven. Hence, one is developing better than the other entailing that there is an evolutionary path some will pass down while others become extinct along the way.

From the very beginning, Darwin's argument shows an inclination towards exclusive classification (*subspecies*) and ranking according to an objective scale. What is more, he silently adopts the notion of race as the basis for his deliberations, not even trying to provide more details. The whole presentation is based on such undiscussed assumptions and paradigms which, bear fruits of false conclusions though undoubtedly against the author's will. In his reasoning, Darwin confuses the notions of race, nationality, social order and civilisation painting everything with the same brush of apparently objective research within the scope of biological classification. The author mentions "native races" (p. 215), "Australian women (...) sterile with their own race" (p. 221), "grade of civilization" (p. 239) as well as "savages" juxtaposed with "classical nations" and "modern civilized nations" (p. 239).

The fact that "Europeans and Hindoos (...) belong to the same Aryan stock" is unquestionable to Darwin (p. 240); similar the opinion that "[o]f all the differences between the races of man, the colour of the skin is the most conspicuous and one of the best marked" (p. 241). Simultaneously, Darwin discusses neither the notion of race nor the related distinction of it; not even the reason why particularly the colour of skin is a separating element (apart from the fact that it is striking). Similarly, the reader does not know why nation, nationality and race are the same thing; that is, why civilisation is subject to a gradation and what is the scale of this gradation.

Darwin's research method is full of inductive arguments and hypotheses used as statements. Furthermore, the theoretical discourse is supported by suggestions concerning analytical methodology which uses anthropometry for classifying purposes. The author claims that

[t]here is (...) no doubt that the various races, when carefully compared and measured, differ much from each other — as in the texture of the hair, the relative proportions of all parts of the body, the capacity of the lungs, the form and capacity of the skull, and even in the convolutions of the brain (p. 216).

It seems that confusing biological heritage with education and cultural tradition is particularly significant, as well as the inability to distinguish between them. It is grounded in underlying racist beliefs. According to Darwin:

[A reader would be] deeply impressed with the close similarity between the men of all races in tastes, dispositions and habits. (...) This is shewn by the pleasure which they all take in dancing, rude music, acting, painting, tattooing, and otherwise decorating themselves, — in their mutual comprehension of gesture-language — and (...) by the same expression in their features, and by the same inarticulate cries, when they are excited by various emotions (p. 232).

The biologist also claims that “(...) the art of shooting with bows and arrows has not been handed down from any common progenitor of mankind” and “(...) the stone arrow-heads, brought from the most distant parts of the world and manufactured at the most remote periods, are (...) almost identical; and this fact can only be accounted for by the various races having similar inventive or mental powers” (pp. 232-233).

Here the state-of-the-art represents not only the image of theoretical and practical methodology. It not only mixes up the concepts of biology and culture, but also a total absence of ethics in the language of science. This probably had to do with one of the assumptions of the philosophy of positivism concerning the neutrality of scientific reason. A contemporary reader would be struck by expressions used in the discussion on a human being and his culture groups, such as *hybrids*, *race cross-breeding*, *children production*, analogies to *lower* animals (presumably contrasted with *higher* animals), comparisons to rats, the juxtaposition of civilising the savages and domesticating wild animals, as well as similarly dehumanised language that the researcher uses to solve the problem of classification. As a result, the authority of science represents the idea according to which Europeans are at the top of the evolutionary ladder and, below, like wild animals, lie uncivilised human races of subspecies. The barbarians belonging to a separate race are in opposition to the civilised nations (p. 238).

Darwin thus manifested the state-of-the-art related to science and philosophy of making this science ground the establishment of eugenics. It was taken to be a miracle of human rationalising thought; a notion introduced at approximately the same time by Darwin's half-cousin, Francis Galton.

The economic success of 19th-century England and the United States caused an increase in immigration flows mostly from poor regions of Southern, Eastern and Central Europe as well as India and distant Asia. People who did not know the language, being brought up in different cultural circles and traditions, quickly drew the attention of academics who — according to the philosophy of positivism — tried to direct their efforts to helping their own society and finding a systematic, rational way to make the country thrive even more. Unqualified and frequently uneducated people from poor environments and cultures in variance with the Protestant work ethic constituted a clear threat to the order of a modern civilisation. Morally corrupt cultural patterns, an improper work ethos and exotic social expectations resulted in the perception of the native peoples of the colonies – along with immigrants or even citizens from lower social strata - as parasites that posing a threat to the development of European well-being.

In his book, *Hereditary Genius, its Laws and Consequences* (Galton, 2006), first published in 1869, the British anthropologist refers to “nations and races”, “survivorship of the fittest” and “qualities needed in civilized society” (p. 305). In turn, Galton compares the “worth of different races” (p. 306) emphasising that “I shall make frequent use of *the law* [special typeface by P.Z.] of deviation from an average” (p. 306). The author claims that “the negro race is *by no means* [special typeface by P.Z.] wholly deficient in men capable of becoming good factors, thriving merchants, and otherwise considerably raised above the average of whites” (p. 306) and that when he was observing the natives during his trips in Africa, he felt ashamed by the representatives of his own species (p. 307).

Guided by methodological scrupulousness, Galton presents an appropriate scale (A, B, C, D) to classify people according to their races. He even refers to the Ancient Greeks' experience with immigrants (p. 308) and praises the great intellectual and economic efforts of modern Europe as well as the extremely hard work of its citizens. In contrast, Galton warns the reader of the consequences of welcoming foreigners who rank too low on the scale and informs him that, “*Our race* [special typeface by P.Z.] is overweighed, and appears likely to be drudged into degeneracy by demands that exceed its powers” (p. 311). By unfolding the portentous vision of destruction of civilisation, Galton writes that “the relations of society necessarily increase in complexity, and the nomadic disposition found in most barbarians becomes unsuitable to the modern conditions”; that is, they cannot be civilised and are unreliable at work (p. 312).

To make his reasoning more plausible, Galton eventually engages the highest authority by referring to the Creator himself:

(...) The sense of original sin would show, (...) not that man was fallen from a high estate, but that he was rising in moral culture with more rapidity than the nature of his race could follow. My view is corroborated by the conclusion reached at the end of each of the many independent lines of ethnological research—that the human race were utter savages in the beginning; and that, after a myriad years of barbarism, man has but very recently found his way into the paths of morality and civilization (p. 315).

Hence, it is obvious to Galton that Europeans have found their way to civilisation, contrary to the wild barbarians who may soon ruin the enlightened civilisation of the West.

The author sees the solution in the development of eugenics - the science that determines what improves the inborn qualities of a race to develop them to the utmost advantage (Galton, 1909, p. 35). Simultaneously, Galton concedes that

we must therefore leave morals as far as possible out of the discussion, not entangling ourselves with the almost hopeless difficulties they raise as to whether a character as a whole is good or bad. Moreover, the goodness or badness of character is not absolute, but relative to the current form of civilization (p. 35).

In his work, Galton spins a vision of a perfect society, simultaneously recognising the necessity to maintain its diversity. He wanted every social class or, as he puts it, every sect to improve its qualities in the best way possible with the help of science. These qualities were, amongst others, energy, health or impeccable manner. The task of the new engineering was to consolidate selected, socially conducive patterns and obtain better fertility by, for instance, breeding cattle (p. 39).

Galton clearly suggests the establishment of the record of best families (p. 41), simultaneously bearing in mind that this wide-ranging initiative needs nationwide cooperation involving both ideological foundation and administrative actions of the state. The activity of proper associations was to be supported by marriage restrictions thanks to which the next generations would be increasingly improving and unwanted qualities would be completely eliminated.

Social awareness of these practices, or rather social consent, is of key importance here. Without fellow citizens' approval, there can be no restrictions. This approval is particularly required given that the whole issue is at least morally doubtful, despite Galton's attempts to push this problem aside. Therefore, the scholar wants to employ the help of religion to promote



a new standard. According to the author, eugenics and its conclusions should be accepted by every tolerant religious belief as the new science promotes “a far-sighted philanthropy, the acceptance of parentage as a serious responsibility, and a higher conception of patriotism” (p. 68). If eugenic practices still clash with values of some religion, then the truths preached should be modified, being that “[r]eligious precepts, founded on the ethics and practice of olden days, require to be reinterpreted to make them conform to the needs of progressive nations” (p. 58).

Still, ethical rationalisation had to be supported by analytical argumentation. Thus, Galton offered a whole essay on the theory of probability, gushing over its methods and viewing it as a proper model base. The author demands specific quantitative results. Galton analysed the problem of the class of people afflicted with some pre-established form of degeneracy (pp. 81-82) to admit that to obtain trustworthy numbers underlying further reasoning, one needs a huge volume of research material. This material can be provided by the state through engagement in mass biometric analysis of the newly born with the participation of eugenic laboratories. What is more, Galton calls for mass teaching of the theory of probability to consolidate his proposed ideological foundation with the rational judgement and solid knowledge disseminated in the society. Finally, he offered a new detailed plan of mathematics education, with specific lesson plans and hours of instruction required to enable the society to grasp new numerical principles.

Galton is aware of a persisting lack of knowledge and the huge amount of work that needs to be done to obtain appropriate statistical data and enabling him to draw conclusions about the new social engineering. However, to his mind, we should invest time and funds to obtain this knowledge as its value is priceless and absolute in dimension. The promise of his project is so huge that he is ready to go as far as to definitive measures:

[w]hen the desired fullness of information shall have been acquired then, and not till then, will be the fit moment to proclaim a 'Jehad,' or Holy War against customs and prejudices that impair the physical and moral qualities of our race (p. 99).

Hence, the tendency to push ethics out of the scope of study, or rather replace it with a new, superior systems of values, led to further radicalisation of opinions. Statements that were once controversial became scientific enough to be accepted more-or-less unquestioningly and used as foundations for more daring and extreme theories. Over a decade after Galton, Lothrop Stoddard wrote in his book (Stoddard, 1922):

Much more serious is the problem presented by those far more numerous stocks which, while transcending the plane of mere savagery have stopped at some level of barbarism. Not only have these stocks never originated a civilization themselves, but they also seem constitutionally incapable of assimilating the civilization of others. (...) To such barbarian stocks belong many of the peoples of Asia, the American Indians, and the African negroes. These congenital barbarians have always been dangerous foes of progress. Many a promising civilization has been ravaged and ruined by barbarians without the wit to rebuild what they had destroyed. Today the progress of science may have freed our own civilization from the peril of armed conquest by barbarian hordes; nevertheless, these peoples still threaten us with the subtler menace of 'pacific penetration' (p. 5).

In turn, this doctor of Harvard University writes about “the influx of (...) lower elements into civilised societies” (p. 5), “higher race” (p. 10) and the threat of a decline in civilisation (p.13) under the influence of barbarian mediocrities. Stoddard warns the reader against the threat offering extreme means and, as Galton does, refers to the highest authority, Nature itself, which, according to him, is guided by “individually stern but racially beneficent will; eliminating the weak and preserving and multiplying the strong” (p.17). In his manifesto, the author blatantly writes that “civilization depends upon superior racial stocks” (p. 20), while “the inferior elements are, instinctively or consciously, the enemies of civilization” (p. 21). Finally, the text filled with th contempt for a human being, presents the idea of Under-Men (p.23) with their instinctive and natural inclination towards “revolution against civilization” (p.26); they are perceived as “dangerous enemies” and the source of anarchy pushing civilization down the abyss of degeneration. Hence, Stoddard mentions selection, fertility and the necessity to perform a eugenic selection of partners; all this to defend the civilisation created by the race of dominators.

## **Summary**

As science, a philosophical idea or a social movement, eugenics developed through the whole first half of the 20th century attracting politicians, preachers, rabbis and subsequent scholars to its sphere of influence. Fear of degradation, losing one's position, property, lifestyle, as well as extreme xenophobia, hate speech and conviction that there is an objective argument

justifying a disrespect for wellbeing of others led to the greatest holocaust the mankind has ever experienced, the Second World War, where mass genocide was supported by the technological nationalist propaganda machine. When one analyses the works of Darwin, Galton, Stoddard or Davenport, it is hard to escape the impression that the Final Holocaust was only the last act in the dark history of eugenic cancer eating away at human minds for the past one hundred years.

It seems that even if there had been no Adolf Hitler someone else would have rung the bell of mass apocalypse. From this perspective, the mass murder of dozens of millions of people is committed indirectly because of the scores of years devoted to a spiral of contempt and the emotional mixing-up of pseudoscience with hypotheses, superstitions, human fears and vain belief in the power of human mind to grow increasingly bigger. What is more, almost a century of development in the narrative of eugenics may give an impression that this was not a fleeting trend but a certain trait in human psyche related with rationalising survival fear in the face of biological threat, so underlying the reactions to demographic and cultural changes happening too fast.

From this perspective, one should feel concerned that the 20th century experience of the mankind in relation to eugenics has only been superficially discredited, while the reappearance of its arguments in new versions of an older political discourse may well take the public floor more than once in the future.

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