

History Repeating?

The Peculiar Comeback of Eugenics

In the U.K., birthplace of the pseudo-science of eugenics, old ideas apparently linger. Dr. John Harris, a bioethics professor at Manchester University, member of the country's Human Genetics Commission, and advisor to the British Medical Association, has a sterling professional pedigree. His moral judgment, however, is quite

another matter. In January, Harris told a meeting of leading scientists and ethicists that children born with less-than-perfect parts or severe defects should not be allowed to live and burden society. "I don't think infanticide is always unjustifiable," Harris said, according to the London *Sunday Times*. "I don't think it is plausible to think there is

any moral change that occurs during the journey down the birth canal.”

In other words, the moral difference between late-term abortion and infanticide is really nonexistent. “There is no obvious reason why one should think differently, from an ethical point of view, about a fetus when it’s outside the womb rather than when it’s inside the womb,” Harris explained. And rather than take this to mean that fetuses might be afforded some ethical and legal regard, he concludes that killing may be permissible even after birth.

Harris’s comments drew criticism from many observers, especially British pro-life groups. As Julia Millington, spokesman for one such group, noted: “It is frightening to think that university students are being educated by somebody who endorses the killing of newborn babies, and equally worrying to discover that such a person is the establishment’s ‘preferred’ bioethicist.” Harris remains entirely unrepentant about his remarks.

There is, of course, a history to such views. In the United States in the 1910s, as historian Martin Pernick has documented, Chicago physician Harry J. Haiselden became a minor celebrity after admitting he was an eager practitioner of infanticide. Haiselden went so far as to make and star

in a propagandistic film, *The Black Stork*, extolling the virtues of infanticide for severely deformed infants. And Haiselden was not alone: Progressive leaders such as Judge Ben Lindsay, Clarence Darrow, and even Helen Keller approved of the practice of letting severely handicapped infants die.

Today, eugenics clearly has not died. And Harris is not the only contemporary figure offering modern twists on that old, pernicious science. This fall, in Denmark, a leading psychologist, Professor Helmuth Nyborg of Aarhus University, declared that “the 15 to 20 percent of those at the lower levels of society—those who are not able to manage even the simplest tasks and often not their children—should be dissuaded from having children.”

Nyborg was criticized for encouraging an idea with such a dark past, but he pooh-poohed the comparisons to Nazi Germany. “Hitler didn’t believe in eugenics,” Nyborg said, “He just wanted to exterminate individual groups.” But Nazism was based on the belief that some human beings are not fit to live; so is modern eugenics of the Harris-Nyborg variety. It is the belief that some people are so sick, so weak, or so stupid that we have the right (or obligation) to screen and destroy them. It is barbarism with a less barbaric face.