



## Book Review

*Quality and Quantity. The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France* by William H. Schneider. CUP. 2002. 383 pp.

Reviewed by Jack Parsons

This book, one of the Cambridge History of Medicine series, was first published in 1990. The author says the inspiration for it, in the early 70s, came from a graduate seminar on comparative eugenics movements at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was working on a dissertation on French views of Africans during the period of colonial expansion. For a number of years he was unable to pursue the theme, but, when he finally was to return to it, he uncovered:

a vast interconnection of movements that quickly took me in several new directions. Although race was not at the root of these movements – demography and health were – it was always present, and later became an important component. ... I have written this book to set forth the French experience in its broadest context ... [but not as] ... the last word on the subject, it will, I hope, prompt others to add, correct, and above all complete the study of the topic. (p. ix)

The writing of the book is said to have been generously supported by the American Philoso-

phical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Archives Center, and three other prestigious bodies. The completed work consists of a Preface, an Introduction (as chapter 1, by the author), and ten other chapters, starting with ‘Degeneration & regeneration’ and going on to ‘From puericulture to eugenics’; ‘The French Eugenics Society up to 1920’; ‘Postwar [WW2] eugenics & social hygiene’; ‘The campaign for a premarital examination law’; ‘French eugenics in the 1930s’, (ch. 7); ‘Eugenics, race & blood’; ‘Race & immigration’; ‘Vichy & eugenics’; and, ch. 11, ‘Conclusion’.

In addition there are 60 pages of collected notes for the individual chapters; a 30-page Bibliography; and a 10-page combined Index. These are all printed in a small font so that a very large amount of material is squeezed in there. The work also contains a handful of tables and rather faint photographic reproductions, none of which, however, are listed under ‘Contents’.

Professor Schneider’s story starts with a visit by a leading anthropologist of the Third Reich, Eugen Fischer, to German-occupied Paris in December 1941. His mission was to deliver a

lecture on Nazi views about racial matters, the main goal being to dispel ‘the greatest incomprehension by foreigners’. He warned of the allegedly great dangers of racial intermixture – putting Jewish Bolsheviks at the lowest point on the scale of humanity – this category revealing ‘a mentality so monstrous that one can only speak of inferiority and beings of a different species than ours.’ (p.2)

However, another important part of his address was directed at the French failure to deal – though they had long recognised the alleged problem – with their low birth-rate. The Germans were convinced that a policy of negative eugenics was not enough; it must be pursued in parallel with a policy of positive eugenics and overall pronatalism. It did little good to eliminate undesirables ‘if the people no longer had the will to survive.’ (p. 2) The people had to play their part through ‘the creation of large numbers of healthy children in all families.’

Schneider argues that Fischer spoke as though he was bringing to Paris an entirely new set of ideas and policies, seemingly quite ignorant of the fact that for more than 30 years the French Eugenics Society had been advocating both eugenics and pronatalism, i.e., the pursuit of substantial increases in both quality and quantity of population. Schneider goes on to claim that:

this incident is very telling about perceptions of France and the history of eugenics that persist to this day ... if one mentions the word “eugenics” to a Frenchman, he will shake his head either in ignorance or with a knowing disdain. “Yes”, he will agree ... “those Germans and Anglo-Saxons certainly did some nasty things in the name of eugenics. Fortunately, in France we did not succumb to such folly.”

This view has been reinforced in recent years by scholars ... who had taken a keen interest in the history of eugenics ... it was the English who invented eugenics,

but the Americans and the Germans who were most enthusiastic in [applying it] ... in the case of the Nazis ... to the ultimate and horrible extreme of the death camps. France enjoys a reputation for having been strongly anti-eugenic in its history.’ (p. 3).

The author strongly disagrees with this complete myth, as he sees it. He says that the record ‘of French views ... (both scholarly and popular) shows almost no evidence of opposition to eugenics.’ (p. 3) and he provides a lot of evidence in support. However, he accepts that there are many factors which have fostered this lopsided interpretation: the myth does not by any means stem solely from Gallic gerrymandering of the facts, (and here I must stress that this work is by no means an anti-French diatribe). He notes, for instance, the widely accepted pre-eminence in this sphere of the Englishman, Francis Galton, and the facts that America and Germany took it all much further than the British. He argues that Galton was not even the sole inventor of this line of thinking:

Ideas comparable to Galton’s were developed simultaneously and independently both in Germany, “race hygiene”, [die Rassenhygiene?] and in France “puericulture” [spelt “puériculture” and defined as ‘child-welfare’ in my modern French dictionary] (p. 4)

At this point he devotes half a page to the firm statement that the ‘major purpose of this book’:

is to show that what the English and Americans called eugenics was only one manifestation of a far more pervasive trend at the time, and that there is a serious risk of distorting the record by defining eugenics narrowly, based on peculiar English or American circumstances ... eugenics [was] a widespread phenomenon found at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

in most industrial societies.

Its roots lay in the social class differentiation and conflict that was endemic to those societies, as well as in the economic cycles, and increasingly scientific view of the world. [It] was a reaction to the perception that society was in a state of decline and degeneration. Its novelty was in the self-proclaimed scientific means proposed to resolve this decline ... common to [many] countries in ... 1900. ...

... eugenics in France provided a broad cover for a variety of movements that aimed at the biological regeneration of the population, such as natalism, neo-Malthusianism, social hygiene, and racist immigration restrictions ... it ... lends further evidence to the increasing number of studies on countries from Russia to Brazil and Norway to Japan. (p. 4)

A few pages later, he amplifies this by saying, 'the thesis' of this book:

is that eugenics in France provided a theoretical framework linking together several different movements for the biological reform of society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries ... [it] is not meant to be the last word ... on the contrary, it is a first attempt to set forth the major components of French eugenics. (pp. 8 & 9)

The author then (p. 4 on) sets out the two main strands in evolutionary theory, the Mendelian and the Lamarckian, before examining the notion of state 'biopower', as proposed by Michel Foucault, who, he claims, 'offers an even broader perspective on the history of eugenics.' (p. 7)

Sexuality, which had previously been a private matter, now became a tool of the state and society [and] procreative behaviour ... a legitimate area of state concern, to be protected from pathogenic in-

fluences, and ... increased, limited, or re-generated according to the needs of the state. (p.7)

He draws attention to the incompatible goals of the 'quality' and the 'quantity' schools of thought. Those mainly orientated to quality – since their proposed measures would tend to reduce numbers by excluding the unfit – found themselves in conflict with the pronatalists, whose main goal was number-power. An uneasy but fairly successful coalition was achieved through the adoption by the eugenicists of a policy of the simultaneous pursuit of the two contradictory goals, quantity and quality.

As a student of human population dynamics I was particularly interested in his section 'Regeneration through birth control'. (Ch. 2, pp. 32-46). This commences:

Of all the movements aimed at the regeneration of France at the turn of the century, none was written or talked about as much as birth control. ... the two extremist groups ... natalists and neo-Malthusians ... developed diametrically opposed ideas about controlling births ... Although the term "birth control" is usually applied to neo-Malthusianism, it is important to note that both groups had similar responses to degeneration – "controlling" the quantity of population; and both groups either ignored the question of quality or assumed it would naturally follow from ... their programs.

In a broad sense, therefore, both movements are examples of what Foucault identified as increasing bio-power in the modern world. (p. 32)

On similar grounds – notably because it enters the field of my speciality, human population competition – I was interested in his section (Ch. 7, pp. 174-177) on 'The Depression and the Population Question.'

The most important reason why the harsher negative eugenics program displaced the mild positive one in the 1930s was the coming of the Great Depression. Although for a time France was spared its effects, by late 1931 ... unemployment and economic decline ... arrived ...

Whereas in England or America these developments undercut eugenic arguments that presumed that the conditions of lower, poorer classes were the result of biology – how could the ranks of the poor be multiplying faster than their birth rate – there was no such contradiction in French eugenics. One reason is ... that neo-Lamarckians presumed the opposite relationship between poverty and biology – that the lower classes were worse off biologically because they were poor, and not vice versa. An increase in their numbers only raised the fear of more rapid biological decline because of the effects of deteriorating environment.

The conclusions drawn by many French eugenicists ... were therefore Malthusian ... the problems were the result of demography and economics ... a world with too many mouths ... and too few resources. A new word entered [their] ... vocabulary, ‘overpopulation’... a cause not only of economic – and therefore biological – woes, but of wars, as well. (pp. 174-5)

Schneider then draws attention to a ‘convenient example at hand’, the 1931 invasion of Manchuria by Japan. He refers to two authors who deal with this at some length and who were widely quoted at the time, Etienne Dennerly and Gaston Bouthoul. The latter criticized the Japanese preoccupation with numbers in a manner, he claims, ‘that could just as easily have applied to the French natalists of the 1920s’:

They are intoxicated with the dizziness of figures. “Tomorrow we will be. One

hundred million” is the theme of exaltation ... in the Japanese newspapers. No matter that the difficulties and miseries will grow in proportion, the essential thing is that the numbers make them proud. (P.175. This quotation is from Bouthoul).

He then quotes Dennerly’s conviction (via Bouthoul), ‘what such a growth of population brings’:

To whoever has traversed these overpopulated countries, it is incontestable that overpopulation is a cause of their malaise, disorder and fundamental weakness. The abundance of the miserable, the unemployed, and those without skills makes a country anemic rather than reinforced ...

The number of inhabitants does not necessarily increase the power of a country if it diminishes the output of each inhabitant. (Schneider, p. 175)

An interesting passage in Chapter 9 (on ‘Race & Immigration’) concerns the activities of several strongly racist authors, such as Martial, whose arguments ‘enlarged the scope of the thinkable’, making it more respectable to publish such views as this:

There are four different blood groups in the world which coincide absolutely with the ethnic characteristics of the principal races. ... One can predict without great fear of error that a child of group B will be more apt at retail trade than bearing arms. (p.254. From *Mercure de France* )

In the conclusion to the penultimate chapter (10, ‘Vichy & Eugenics’) The author makes the disturbing claim that:

Nazi atrocities, instead of ending eugenics in France, gave a new impetus to the

study, discussion, and even the implementation of eugenic measures ... primarily because the war destroyed most of the entrenched positions and institutions of the Third Republic, which had hindered if not openly opposed most change, eugenic or other. The Vichy leaders did not have a detailed eugenic program that they were ready to implement as soon as they took power, but they certainly were sympathetic to the goal of biological regeneration. ... Many eugenically inspired or ... justified proposals found their way into the "National Revolution" of Vichy France. (p.281)

The final chapter (11, 'Conclusion') argues that external factors had a powerful effect in changing French attitudes in this sphere. One of these was a major change in the policy towards eugenic ideas on the part of the Roman Church, from attempts to accommodate them, the second to mount formal opposition to them. Another was the Great Depression of the 1930s:

Increasing unemployment changed perceptions of the problem and produced calls for the elimination of anti-Malthusian legislation and the implementation of negative eugenic measures such as immigration restriction. (p. 285)

It also contains another surprising claim, that:

eugenics was a part of the vocabulary of groups ranging from the far left to the extreme right in the French political spectrum. The ... communists' family program deliberately picked up eugenic ideas as part of remaking its image of respectability. Right-wing eugenicists were hard-headed and deliberately provocative in proposing sterilisation and immigration restriction. (p. 285)

The last few pages deal mainly with the power-

ful emphasis which the French placed on pronatalism after the end of World War II. Legislation on premarital physical examinations, which survived the war, still contained the words:

At a period in its history when France has the vital need to increase its population, the first duty of public authorities is to safeguard ... its children. (p. 288)

Alfred Sauvy, the doyen of French demography is quoted, to the effect that:

Numbers create pressure and pressure increases the quality. In turn the exceptional qualities of the few are reflected in the quality of the masses ... The formation of an elite depends upon numbers and contributes to the improvement of the whole. (p. 290)

In the setting up of French National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), the very idea of an objective study of the merits and demerits of various possible population regimes and policies was abandoned in favour of the overt pursuit of French biopower: Although it was nominally charged with 'studying demographic problems in all their respects', its detailed instructions narrowed this down to:

To this end the Institute collects useful documentation, conducts enquiries, undertakes experiments and monitors experiments conducted in foreign countries, *studies all the material and moral means capable of contributing to the quantitative growth* and qualitative improvement of the population. (p. 291. Emph. added)

Not much there to help society know about and understand any possible population pressures, over- or optimum population, possible need at some stage to stabilize or even reduce numbers, population-environmental balance, resources, pollution, carrying capacity, environmental im-

pact, or anything whatever reflecting ecological or other constraints.

The closing paragraph sums up as follows:

Certain broader continuities are apparent from this examination of eugenics in France that fit the general observations of Foucault about biopower since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the perception of biological (and related social) problems in the population, increased attention to and knowledge of science ... and a persistent desire by the government to use that knowledge to correct biological problems.

To the extent that eugenics is the product of these longer-range trends, it is not surprising that eugenic thought in France survived even so traumatic an episode as the Second World War. (p. 292)

### Critique

I hope the above analysis shows clearly enough that I think this is a very good book, tackling a very important subject, the relationship between human quantity and quality – which in my view cannot ever be finally resolved as it is a tracking-task – in a deeply committed and informed way. Nevertheless, I do have some reservations.

The first of these concerns a more or less permanent theme in my book reviewing. The Combined Index, though good – better than most – is still not good *enough* – in that it leaves out a lot of important links – for a book of this quality and breadth of cover. For instance, there are no entries for “Biopower” Demography”, (both mentioned many times in the text), or for “Competition” or “Conflict” – even for “Population”, a vital theme running throughout the book. In these days, when efficient computerised search/indexing systems take much of the donkey-work out of indexing, this is not good enough.

A more substantial criticism centres on the absence of a deep anthropological/historical

consideration of eugenic concerns and practices. Admittedly the book is explicitly about France in a narrow historical period, but surely it is essential at least to acknowledge the existence of the deeper past and some of the close parallels between, say, tribal eugenics and the present day.

This book gives no hint of the widespread – near universal – practices in our evolutionary history, such as initiation rites, tests of ‘quality’, of manhood, hunting/fighting ability, wealth-acquisition, dowry, bride-price, initiation rites, infanticide (often by exposure) of infants with real or imagined birth-defects, one or both members of a pair of twins, breach-births, or those born on inauspicious days, etc., ad nauseam before mating and procreation is allowed. Weren’t the Spartans rather noteworthy in their concerns about human quality, as were those Europeans who – up to fairly recent times – practised dreadful ‘child-hardening’ techniques?

The absence of this dimension permits the author to hint – without actually saying so and taking the consequences – that all these distinctly unpleasant eugenic goings on constitute a modern aberration stemming from social disruptions from such cause as industrialisation, economic instability, population explosions, migrations, racial/ethnic prejudice and the like. Once we get our act together and settle down in a civilised way it will – or should – disappear.

In the opinion of the present reviewer this is highly dysfunctional. Modern states are exercising many eugenic functions and should continue to do this in a thoroughly scientific, open, democratic, non-oppressive fashion. It is OK for societies and their governments to be actively concerned about – and, where appropriate, to legislate for – genetic counselling, gene-pools, designer babies, cloning, obesity and healthy diets, drug, alcohol, and tobacco abuse, the possible long-term effects of GM foods, etc., just as it is more than OK – it is a basic necessity – to overcome the near-paralysing taboo on the whole idea of balancing human

numbers against resources over the long term.

In the opinion of the present reviewer, this already excellent work would have been even more impressive had its author acknowledged this wider and deeper perspective. These recommendations will no doubt sound quite outrageous to many contemporary ‘liberals’<sup>1</sup>, but to the present reviewer a lot of the material refers to harsh realities that most of us prefer to pretend do not exist.

Eugenics deals with the really basic issues of quality and quantity which have exercised our species from time immemorial. They must continue to exercise us and lead to appropriate and effective policies indefinitely far into the future if we are to continue to survive with a decent quality of life as far as humanly possible for

everyone.

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### Notes

1. I put the word ‘liberals’ in quotation marks as I am loath to use the term at all with respect to those who persist in acting as though thinking high-flown moral thoughts – with little or no regard for the nitty-gritty ecological and other basic facts of human existence – is all that is required to put the world to rights.