

BOOK REVIEW

Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics *by Adam Rutherford*

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Adam Rutherford, a scientist, author, broadcaster and honorary senior research associate at UCL, explores the history of eugenics from its origin as an academic discipline in England to its current status and beyond. Eugenics was promoted by the Victorian polymath Francis Galton (1822-1911) at UCL and arose from the concept of selective breeding in animals. Ronald Fisher (1890-1962), the esteemed statistician and theoretical biologist, was also at UCL. Fisher developed the concept of ANOVA but also served on a committee on sterilisation which advocated neutering the feeble-minded. Fortunately, despite England's role as an intellectual birthplace of eugenics, it never enacted a eugenics policy. However, population control at that time was developed in the USA and Canada, leading to the establishment of a eugenics office in Long Island specifically aimed at immigrants.

In the 1920s there was staunch support for the concept of Nordic purity, which Rutherford posits is a non-existent term. Furthermore he argues that Hitler's admiration for the concept of racial hygiene arose from the works of Galton and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) the German scientist, promoting the view that white Europeans were superior to all and introducing the term Caucasian, which Rutherford asserts is scientifically meaningless. Later, in Germany in the 1930s, this led to the Nazi programme of extreme genocide. Rutherford declares that eugenics is not only morally repugnant as a political ideology but is a scientific phony.

In the second part of the book Rutherford as a geneticist describes the concept of the genome and DNA sequencing and explains how mutations can occur. There is a comprehensive discussion on the future of gene editing and screening of embryos for treating diseases such as Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy and he makes the relevant point that although editing with CRISPR is extremely useful it is not always perfect and mutations can develop. Rutherford explores the recent story of the Chinese girls who were created by physician Dr Jiankui and are named Lulu and Nana. This was an illegal activity as work on human embryos is not permitted internationally after more than 14 days.

This book evaluates what began as an idea for an improvement of the population by removing undesirable characteristics ended up promoting racial purity and indeed produced a monster. Rutherford makes clear that a good society is one that protects its most vulnerable members. This is a really pertinent book full of fascinating information. I would thoroughly recommend it to anybody who wishes to learn more about eugenics. Dr Rutherford is to be congratulated on producing an authoritative book on a subject of great importance and many will find this book both instructive and provocative.

Sean P Hughes
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