

THE POLITICS OF GENETIC INEQUALITY: PUBLIC POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PASTOR

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On the one hand, the church has said in the language of the Bible that we are created in God's image, given the privilege and responsibility of cultivating the garden of the earth, granted a dominion over the rest of nature, bidden to exercise freedom in choosing courses of action.

On the other hand, it has been said that people are creatures, that their ambition tempts them to build self-destructing towers of Babel, that pride and irresponsible exercise of power are sin.

How shall the church relate these two convictions as it thinks about the achievements of genetics?

Human Life and the New Genetics, A (1980) Report of a Task Force Commissioned by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

The Renewal of Malthusian Politics

By most accounts the epoch we have entered is described as an age of scarcity, that is, a time when the value placed on natural resources is higher than the value placed on human life.

A compelling portrayal of this age of scarcity is found in Global 2000, a report rendered in July, 1980, to the President of the United States. The report reads like a science fiction classic, such as Dune or The Empire Strikes Back. The time frame of the report is the year 2000 and the place is the earth, this desolate planet slowly dying of its accumulated follies. Half of the world's forest cover is gone. North and south of the Equator, sand dunes in their inexorable march have encroached much of the fertile land. In the short span of twenty years, nearly two million species of animals and plants have become extinct. And man, the profligate being, has increased by 55% over the 1980 level, pushing the world population to the 6.35 billion mark, with most of the growth taking place in the less developed countries.

This mounting human population is placing a grim pressure on natural resources, which have become increasingly scarcer, more difficult to extract and process, and consequently far more expensive. The report estimates that, in constant 1975 dollars, by the year 2000, the per capita gross national product will rise to \$11,117 in the industrialized countries and that, in the less developed countries, will average \$587. However, these increases are not gains in real income. To the contrary, world-wide competition for natural resources in short supply will produce real price increases well over inflation rates in the food, fisheries, energy, forest, and water sectors. In the end, the report acknowledges its inability to develop a scenario for a world economy in which every one of its major sectors demands a price increase that substantially exceeds the over-all rate of inflation.

In retrospect, it is amazing that, in three brief decades, we should have moved so far from a mythology of abundance to a mythology of scarcity. Politics seem to

have little or no congruence with the natural order, as we are first encouraged to consume by the prophets of abundance and then castigated by the high priests of scarcity.

The increasing difficulty experienced by every single nation state (including the U.S.) to effectively control the global systems through which natural resources flow has spurred a renaissance of the old ideologies of scarcity. Contemporary Malthusians, including those in the Trilateral Commission whose philosophy is embodied in Global 2000, not only restate the old axiom that population growth will ultimately outstrip available supply, but they give to it a peculiarly modern twist. Available supply is adversely affected by the "revolution of rising expectations," now rampant among former colonial nations that are demanding (and, to a lesser extent, obtaining) forms of economic development requiring ever greater quantities of natural resources. Available supply is also checked by the ceiling ultimately placed upon human economic activity by the limited ability of the planet's ecological system to absorb and neutralize matter and energy pollution.

Malthus' contemporary heirs present us with a world of struggle over inadequate natural resources, a world crying for the advent of Hobbes' Leviathan, the authoritarian state. Saying with Garrett Hardin, of The Tragedy of the Commons fame, that injustice is preferable to total ruin, they intimate that we can no longer "afford" the one-man-one-vote system and that, for a world caught in the throes of the problems of allocating limited natural resources, the wave of the future is toward authoritarian society. This Malthusian renaissance again directs its assault to that critical point of the American political system where political vision and economic practice are kept in mutual tension.

In the egalitarian foundation of its one-man-one-vote principle, the American system has held the promise that there would be some measure of equality in the ability of each person to control decisions affecting his or her welfare. On the other hand, our economic system is based on the fundamental thesis that inequality is the abiding mainspring of societal progress. The bottom line in our economic system is that society should not reward the non-producers. In fact, much of the conservative criticism heard recently tends to equate inflation and our economic difficulties with the so-called "transfer society." By that term, they refer to that complex of legislation (especially taxation) which, since the New Deal, has sought to place a floor under national poverty and disease.

The era that began in the New Deal was rooted in the Keynesian thesis that the prospects for political democracy in modern industrialized societies are predicated upon unrestricted economic growth. This gross national economic growth would make possible some measure of egalitarian distribution of the commonwealth's resources among the citizens. The new ideologies of scarcity, by tending to invalidate the very basis of Keynesian liberalism, have brought to a close an era that began in the New Deal.

The solution advanced by the New Malthusians for organizing the world's resource systems is but a variation on the theme proposed in 1798 by the English mathematician who took the cloth: warfare against the world's "surplus population" and renewed technological assault against nature.

Old ethics are revived to give comfort to the rich. These self-serving myths for the privileged are wrapped in the prestigious mantle of science. They speak of "lifeboat ethic." Triage ethic, an ethical scenario from World War One, is refurbished. New images are forged as ideological tools in the political warfare. We hear of "spaceship earth." The deceptive character of the slogan is in that, while

accurately rendering the image of the one world in which we live, it strongly intimates the necessity of a technology of social control and of a highly centralized authoritarian structure.

Malthusian ethics undercut the possibility of human community and human solidarity. More importantly, these ethics are in contrast with the basic biblical axioms of the goodness of the created order, the harmonious intermeshing of humanity and nature in the covenant of creation, and the unity of the human family in God.

The Legacy of Scientific Racism

Our efforts to understand human nature are often frustrated by our propensity to self-deception. Because the rich and powerful tend to identify "the nature of things" with their own self-interest, they are prone to read biology as destiny and see in it the justification for their privilege.

The Industrial Revolution failed to distribute its benefits with any measure of equity. In the ugly non-cities that sprang up around the new production centers in industrializing Europe and North America, the poverty, filth, and squalor of the many stood side by side with the opulence and comfort of the few who alone could avail themselves of the new safeguards provided by science and technology, such as sanitation, indoor plumbing, and vaccination. Poverty and squalor had existed long before the Industrial Revolution. The novel thing now was the fact that entire social classes, entire ethnic and racial groups, were fast becoming "subject races" in a world which was being carved in colonial enclaves. The largest part of humanity became "subject races," perhaps to be uplifted and civilized, but certainly to be made to work for the benefit of the masters.

It was in this historical context that Scientific Racism arose, born in England of Malthusian parentage and given theoretical structure by Herbert Spencer and Sir Francis Galton, the inventor of eugenics. Reinterpreting Darwin's theory in terms of conflict in man-made environment, Scientific Racism created that intellectual aberration known as Social Darwinism, which retained the phraseology rather than the substance of the original theory. Natural selection was portrayed as the outcome of what T. H. Huxley in his famous Romanes Lectures of 1893 called "the gladiatorial theory of ethics," in which Darwin's "struggle for life" became Hobbes' warfare of one against all. Scientific Racism never had sound scientific roots, but it was and still is widely used as a prop to justify laissez-faire capitalism. The heirs of Malthus' legacy see themselves not just as the winners in the permanent context for survival but also as self-appointed guardians of the best genes of the race.

As an artifact of the Industrial Revolution, Scientific Racism absolves the function of defining for each recurring tide of Malthusian politics (the politics of scarcity) the individuals and groups to be targeted as "surplus population": the poor and near-poor of all nations who are portrayed as a race of chronic pauper stock. Scientific Racism seeks to "blame the poor," by ascribing to their genes their chronic infectious and hunger diseases, their illiteracy, and above all their poverty. It sees as the fiscal responsibility of the state not to throw good money after bad, not to underwrite measures promoting the general welfare of the common people. Scientific Racism seeks to perpetuate and defend that type of social arrangement which the writers of the Constitution of the United States of America sought to put to an end, when they defined as the functions of the state the establishment of equal justice for all and the promotion of the general welfare.

Challenges Past

When E. O. Wilson's Sociobiology: The New Synthesis appeared in 1975, it soon found itself engulfed in widespread controversy, which drew not only geneticists, but also sociologists, political scientists, historians and philosophers of science. While Sociobiology was undoubtedly a scientific treatise, it was also a political and social manifesto unequivocal in its intent to persuade and move to action. The debate focused on the profoundly conservative implications of Sociobiology which, in its theoretical structure, reflected the social arrangements and ideology of classical economic theory. This theory is the generalization of a data base derived from the economic institutions and social processes of English and European societies of the last two centuries. The "selfish gene" (to use Richard Dawkins' now classical phrase) in Sociobiology behaves exactly as that abstraction known as "homo economicus" does in the basic theorem of classical economic theory, according to which out of the selfishness of each economic actor an "invisible hand" brings out an improbably common good.

While the validity of Sociobiology will be tested at the end by its durability, its present difficulties exemplify a problematic character common to all scientific theories. These theories are not immune to the social climate in which they develop, nor are they so "value-free" as not to carry a social vision and a political purpose of their own. One must realize the extent to which the scientific enterprise as a whole has come to be identified with the purposes of the state and how the scientific result has become an "industrial product" manufactured to the specifications of its military or civilian, public or private buyer. Robert S. Morison has commented (Dedalus, Spring 1978) on the reversal in our time of the historical roles of religion and science, with science now having taken religion's older role of ideological buttress of the ruling class.

Genetic knowledge is especially susceptible to this bending by the socio-political climate of the time, because it easily lends itself to become an instrument of social exclusion for those to whom it is adversely applied. A sampling of the historical fortunes of genetic knowledge in American society will illustrate that predicament and offer learnings as we look to the future.

Following the rediscovery of Mendel's work, there was in the first two decades of this century a rapid accumulation of genetic data which tempted extrapolation to more complex traits, including human behavior. The temptation proved to be irresistible when those beguiling conclusions came to fit so well the political temper of the time. Those were the turbulent years of massive influx of immigrants and bitter class conflict in the United States. Genetic theories of racial inferiority were a ready-made tool to label and punish the newer immigrants. The labor riots were quickly translated into biology by the contemporary popularizers of eugenics. The "bad blood" of the newer immigrants was seen as the cause of the social strife. By translating social problems into biology, by resorting to the tactic of blaming the poor for their genes, these myths for the rich served the purpose of diverting public attention from the real causes of the social conflict and offering in the name of science a ready justification for repressive measures.

Between 1913 and 1930, thirty-three states passed laws requiring sterilization for a variety of behavioral traits, ranging from criminality and alcoholism to a feeble-mindedness defined on the basis of IQ tests. The American Civil Liberties Union reported in 1974 that in North Carolina alone, from 1960 to 1968, the state had sterilized 1,620 persons, mostly young black women. Many of those statutes are still on the books. Expunging them has been resisted by the U. S. Supreme Court on

the rationale expressed in a 1927 decision by Oliver Wendell Holmes that a society which called the best and brightest to sacrifice their lives in war, could well call for a smaller sacrifice on the part of those who were already sapping the strength of the state by their incompetence. It was not until 1967 that the U. S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional those statutes making "miscegenation" a criminal offense.

The impact of Scientific Racism upon the nature of American society has been pervasive and enduring. Perhaps the single most visible influence of these theories in shaping U. S. public policy can be seen in the premises that lay behind the immigration legislation of 1917-1924 and the McCarran- Walter Act of 1952.

Legislated into the immigration quota system, these premises held that some people, because of their racial or national origin, were more capable of "becoming American" than others. These statutes enforced the value judgment that the "old immigrants," who had come before 1880, were drawn from the superior stock of northern and western Europe, while those who came after that date originated from the inferior stock of southern and eastern Europe. This legislation gave governmental and scientific legitimization to the racist beliefs privately held by many that the people of the Mediterranean area were biologically different from those of northern and western Europe, and that the difference expressed a genetic inferiority that could be visibly observed in certain social characteristics. These two pieces of legislation were perhaps the last major accomplishment of the American eugenic movement.

As we reflect upon the ebb and flow of Scientific Racism in American society, we are amazed by the fact that the best scientific minds of the time, when not outrightly supportive of the eugenic movement, did so little to combat it. One notable exception was the great Columbia University anthropologist, Franz Boas, whose studies were ignored by the Dillingham Commission that presided over the Acts of 1921 and 1924. It is also a source of learning to observe that the rise and fall of Scientific Racism underpinning the eugenic movement reflected more the socio-political condition of the time than the state of the art in genetics. It was the socio-political conditioning of the scientists that made them pursue the kind of questions they did.

Challenges Present

A key problem facing us today is the question of the adequacy of society's wisdom in dealing with the new explosion in genetic knowledge and technology, especially because this quantum jump occurs at a time when world-wide socio-economic and political dislocations foster authoritarian politics. Old Axioms are being refurbished. The new mood is expressed in the fear that current welfare politics (the legacy of the New Deal), unaided by "eugenic foresight," could lead to the "genetic enslavement" of a substantial segment of our population.

Most recently, this view has been made popular by William Shockley, the Nobel laureate engineer from Stanford University who dabbles noisily in population genetics and who is the president of the Foundation for Research and Education on Eugenics and Dysgenics. That these fears should be expressed now after thirty years of discredit of Scientific Racism is no surprise, because these fears are timed with a national mood of conservative backlash that fosters racist ideologies. In the present resurgence of the Ku-Klux-Klan and public manifestations by the Neo-Nazi Movement there are the troublesome signs of a society heading into a racist direction. After World War Two until recently, in reaction to the Nazi atrocities and to the struggle for political equality of the Blacks, biological factors had been

played down and the role of education and equality of opportunity had been stressed. In recent years, with the conservative backlash, the question of whether certain races are inherently inferior has been resurrected.

The first inroads into public confidence in the educability of all followed the publication of the 1966 Coleman Report, at a time when the Civil Rights Movement had begun to weaken. The study's main conclusion was that schooling, by itself, is neither a source of differences in scholastic achievement nor is it the great equalizer. While the Coleman Report is subject to several interpretations, the one that gained currency in the shifting political climate of the time was a new pessimism about education. More indirectly, it led to a renewed openness to considering racial differences in educability as having a measure of permanence and a genetic base.

Subsequently (1969 and 1971), Jensen and Herrnstein published articles arguing that intelligence was largely determined by genetic factors. In particular, Jensen claimed that 80% of the variance is due to genes and 20% to environmental factors. Shortly after, a plethora of reports appeared attributing to genetic causes problems and defects that had previously been considered of social or psychic origin. This societal shift toward biological determinism has been ideologically amplified in the writing of neoconservative intellectuals, such as Nathan Glazer and Irving Kristol. For all accounts, these self-serving efforts to establish a meaningful correlation between skin color and intelligence appear to have been no more conclusive than if that correlation had been sought, for example, between the shape of the teeth and intelligence.

This revival of Scientific Racism is a troublesome sign. The mythology of abundance, embodied in the "New Frontier" or "Great Society" rhetorics of the fifties and sixties, did much to defuse racial tension and facilitate social change. For nearly fifty years, social progress in America came to be seen in terms of incremental socio-economic mobility consequent upon periods of gross national economic expansion. That did not mean necessarily that the relative distances among classes changed appreciably, but it provided for a gain in absolute terms for those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. As that vision of abundance recedes from our horizon, we are confronted with the prospects of intensified internal strife posed by a sluggish economy. The situation is a fertile ground for racist ideologies. Because genetic fix remains a powerful ideology in our society, we are ever prone to explain social problems in terms of biological defects of individuals and groups.

As we consider these prospects, the road ahead beckons us to a renewed appreciation of our common creatureliness. It beckons us to value every human being for the very fact of being human. In a moment of profound insight, Thomas Aquinas said that every creature in itself, "in what it itself is," is from another. This "being from another" is really what genetics is all about. From the perspective of the Christian faith, this definition of creatureliness, this being from another, means being from God. This being from God determines the nature of every creature: the more a creature is with God, the more it exists in its own particularity or finitude. It is this character of human life which makes relationship (the being with nature, with other humans, and with God) the essence of what it means to be human, as Karl Barth so eloquently states in Church Dogmatics (iii.4). From the perspective of biblical faith, the specific particularity, the special finitude of human life is that this life is a loan or gift from God to whom it is to be returned. Because the Giver is gracious ("Your love is better than life itself," Ps. 63:3), this

finitude is a blessing and not a curse. Human life as a gift to be returned implies that the gracious Giver (in relation to whom we are defined as human beings) will sustain us in an abiding relation invested with meaning and joy. In Jesus Christ, this power of God to maintain relationship (and therefore life) beyond death is made manifest.

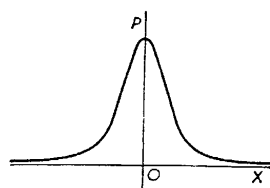
Genetic knowledge, in that paradoxical mixture of determinism and free will that appears to characterize gene-directed development, is perhaps the most telling parable of our finitude. This finitude we share with the rest of the created order. It is this ambiguous character of the human condition which keeps pushing biology in the center of social sciences and humanities, and makes of genetic diversity a fundamental challenge for public policy.

How do we then respond, from a public policy level, to the genetic diversity of a population as composite as ours, as this diversity is unequally impacted by the many variations of educational and industrial environments present in our highly differentiated society? How shall we address, from a policy level, the ethical questions of genetic risk assessment in a genetically, socio-economically and environmentally diverse population such as ours?

All that a good public policy can and must do is to provide optimal enabling structures for the investment of human life with meaning and dignity. Malthusians notwithstanding, it is within the realm of public policy to provide the opportunity for each human life, within a given society, to be informed by the greatest possible measure of meaning and dignity. But the actual discovery and appropriation of meaning and dignity cannot be socially organized. They remain a highly personal and spiritual experience. They are a biographical experience.

A realistic and humane model for a public policy of genetic diversity is suggested by Marc Lappe, in Genetic Politics (1979).

Recognizing that the range of human potential, disability, and vulnerability for a wide variety of traits can be plotted according to the bell-shaped curve of normal distribution, a different approach is proposed for the bulk of the population falling within the bulge of the curve from the one for the individuals falling within the tail ends of the curve. With the bulge of the curve, where the largest part of the population is to be found, we ought to proceed on the assumption of environmental causes. Not that genetic causes may not be involved, but merely because an environmental hypothesis (over against a genetic hypothesis) provides us with the greatest freedom to institute educational, social, and therapeutic options. Eventually, the most productive analysis will be one at the interface between environment and genes.



Normal (Gaussian)
Distribution Curve

However, at the tail ends of the curve where known genetic factors may be found to predominate, the difference principle, from John Rawls' A Theory of Justice, becomes operative by prompting us to rectify unequal conditions in favor of the least favored persons. It is at these tail ends of the bell-shaped curve that the very handicapped or the very gifted are to be found, who deserve special policy consideration.

There appears to be an uncanny parallelism between modern genetics and modern physics, expressed by Heisenberg's indetermination principle. In a population of the size of ours, genes appear to have the same ambiguous quality as the speed and position of electrons. Even if we tried, it may be at the end impossible to

dissect and sort out the bulk of the distribution curve, not because of problems of measurement but because of the molding of genetic expression by random environmental events.

It is in this indetermination that we find a great reservoir of freedom. It is in this indetermination that we find elbow room for public policy. At the end, it is this ambiguous character of our finitude, this special nature of our human creatureliness, which gives substance to the words of a great geneticist and man of faith, Theodosius Dobzhansky: "Genetic diversity is not tantamount to inequality. Human equality and inequality are not biological phenomena but sociological designs; genetic diversity is a biological reality. Equality before the law, political equality, or equality of opportunity, stem not from genes but from religious, ethical, or philosophical wisdom or unwisdom" (Social Biology, 1973). It is this basic difference between genetic diversity and genetic inequality which keeps tossing the "genetic ball" into the court of theology and social ethics.