

ANNIVERSARY

Britain's first birth control clinic, 100 years of eugenics and racism

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

17_03_2021

*Patricia
Gooding-
Williams*



One hundred years ago on March 17, 1921, Britain's first family planning clinic was opened at 61 Marlborough Road, Holloway, London. Centenary celebrations will certainly pinpoint the event as one of the greatest humanitarian successes of the last

century. But critics say this catalytic event can only be understood if the Eugenics movement, which was key to the opening of the first Mother's Clinic, is acknowledged and confronted at the same time. They admit that unpacking a chapter in British history which is as shameful as it is painful could dampen festivities, but more importantly it would open the much needed debate on what influence eugenics has had on the population control practices diffuse today.

The Eugenics movement became a force in Britain at the start of the 20th century. Its mission was to take control of the birthrate and create a superior race through selective breeding. Britain's overall birth rate had been declining since 1876, the problem for eugenicists was that the reduction was not evenly spread across all social classes. The poorest people in Britain were the most prolific and this implied a "national deterioration" of the race, a disaster for future generations and the British empire. Their solution was redress the imbalance by eliminating the poor, sick and disabled. The introduction of family planning in 1921 served this purpose.

Eugenics, which means 'well born', was considered a respectable science by the elite. The movement counted some of the most notable and influential Britons of that era. They included: John Maynard Keynes, Lady Constance Lytton, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells as well as senior members of the political establishment such as Winston Churchill and influential medical professionals like Sir James Barr, ex-president of the British Medical Association. Sir James Barr was to become a vice-president of The Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress ("CBC") the Mother's Clinic's support organisation. Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945, (during the Second World War) and again from 1951 to 1955.

A letter written by Winston Churchill in 1910, to the Prime minister Henry Asquith, captures how he and many members of the Eugenics movement assessed the population imbalance at the time. "The unnatural and increasingly rapid growth of the Feeble-Minded and Insane classes, coupled as it is with a steady restriction among all the thrifty, energetic and superior stocks, constitutes a national and race danger which it is impossible to exaggerate."

By 1921 the Eugenics Society had started to make an impact on society. The CBC's manifesto targeted those considered unfit for parenthood. It stated: "AS REGARDS THE POPULATION AT PRESENT. We say that there are unfortunately many men and women who should be prevented from procreating children at all, because of their individual ill-health, or the diseased and degenerate nature of the offspring that they

may be expected to produce. These considerations would not apply to a better and healthier world.”

It was no coincidence, therefore, that the first birth control clinic and those opened subsequently, were clustered in poor and disadvantaged areas of London. The Mother’s Clinic, opened and funded by Dr Marie Stopes and her second husband, Humphrey Roe - both active members of the Eugenics Society - aimed at reducing the birth rate of the lower classes. Ironically, **the clinic** was furnished in ‘friendly blues and whites, with a vase of fresh flowers on the front desk and wallpaper showing smiling infants’ to reassure the women [they had nothing against families] who sought its council and services. An all-female staff provided instruction in birth control and supplied contraceptive devices free of charge to poor and working-class women. For those who did not avail themselves of the service, Stopes campaigned for laws to have them compulsorily sterilised and in the meantime advocated women be fitted with the abortion inducing **Gold Pin**. Despite this, Britain’s first attempt to impose selective breeding passed successfully under the guise of women’s rights and reproductive freedom. Marie Stopes walked off with the credit and a prize position in feminist history for having liberated women from sexual slavery to enjoy a life of sexual equality.

Even after her death, in 1958, Marie Stopes’ eugenics has continued to have an impact on society. In her name, **over 600** Marie Stopes International clinics have been opened around the world and its website proudly boasts 31 million abortions to date. But, when Stope’s extreme racist eugenic views finally caught up with her and her name became more of a hindrance than a help, the organisation dropped her name and called itself MSI Reproductive Choices instead, last November 2020. Yet, Pro-life organisations claim that MSI Reproductive Choices continues to employ the same eugenic-minded principles masterminded by Marie Stopes whatever they decide to call themselves. They argue, that what started as an experiment to control Britain’s poorest population, has spread and developed into an **authoritarian control** over the world’s poorest citizens.

Since its origins, the eugenics movement has prompted pockets of criticism, non so fiercely as from the Catholic Church. Yet, it wasn’t until it became associated with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust after WWII, that it lost most of its influence. Lawyers at the Nuremberg trials of 1945 to 1946 legitimately pointed out there was little difference between the Nazi eugenics programs and the programs in practice in European countries as well as America during the same period. And even though eugenics policies were largely abandoned in the following decades, eugenetic thought survived by making itself palatable to a modern audience. Post -1945 eugenicists found that by adapting

eugenic messaging and targets the methods it advocated could remain in tact. They started by removing the word eugenics from common use and replaced it with medical terminology or popular slogans like 'choice' and 'freedom'.

A prime example of this strategy in operation takes us back to Britain. In 1989, the Eugenics Society also saw the advantages of giving itself a new label and is now known as The Galton Institute. Yet, Francis Galton, not unlike Marie Stopes later, played a key role in launching the eugenics movement in Britain and USA . He even coined the term eugenics. The use of his name has permitted the institute to continue its work and influence today cloaked in academia.

It's a serious mistake, critics say, that contemporary thought relegates eugenics comfortably to the past, when the values underpinning it are alive. At least, the racial discrimination that women have been and are still subjected to as a result of population control programs, they argue, merits more than a passing nod. And, there are other hard questions that urge answers, like what influence eugenics and birth control technologies have had on the size, composition and well-being of society, even if that means **delving into** a controversial chapter in British history. These are the knotty issues these centenary celebrations need to address, if it aspires to be worthy of any serious consideration or respect.