


Eugenics refuses to die – and now Andrew Sabisky has put it back in the headlines

 [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/19/eugenics-andrew-sabisky-right-ideas-human-breeding](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/19/eugenics-andrew-sabisky-right-ideas-human-breeding)

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If there's one thing policymakers love, it's simple technical ideas that can solve complex problems at a stroke. They're always on the lookout for what the American nuclear physicist, Alvin Weinberg, in 1965 termed the "technological fix", be it a high-speed rail network to solve regional inequality, or nuclear power as an answer to the climate crisis.

This week, one old and discredited technological fix has reared its head: eugenics, the pseudoscientific belief that humans can be bred to "perfection" in the same way we breed cattle or domestic pets for particular traits. Developed by Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, in the 19th century, it was promoted by politicians and intellectuals in Britain, before becoming the justification for millions of involuntary sterilisations globally, mainly of the poor and disabled, and the Nazis' devastating programme of "racial hygiene" that culminated in the Holocaust.

One might think that such a morally and scientifically vacuous ideology would be behind us by now, yet one of Dominic Cummings' fresh new hires turned out to be something of a fan. The former Downing Street adviser Andrew Sabisky, a self-proclaimed political "forecaster", argued that forced long-term contraception might help tackle the problem of a "permanent underclass", or as early eugenicists termed it, the "residuum". He also suggested that black people had innately lower average IQs. Downing Street initially stood by Sabisky's appointment, with No 10 refusing to comment on whether Boris Johnson agreed with his views. After intense media scrutiny, Sabisky announced on Twitter that he was resigning. Who could have guessed that putting out a job call for weirdos and misfits would have led to this?

Sabisky is joined by the likes of Toby Young, the rightwing journalist who has made the case for what he calls "progressive eugenics", or allowing poor parents to engineer their children in utero with intellectual and physiological capacities that would compensate for their disadvantaged start in life. Cummings has likewise suggested that human capacities are the result of heritable traits rather than external factors such as education or social mobility; he previously stated that 70% of an individual's cognitive capacity is genetic (a wild misinterpretation of how biology works, according to even the most hereditarian of scientists). Even Johnson has displayed a fondness for biologically determinist arguments. In 2013, as London mayor, he suggested that some people would struggle to get on in life because of their low IQs. These ideas reflect a type of thinking that dates back more than a century, when powerful individuals and social reformists pathologised poverty and inequality, framing them as biological problems innate to the poor and oppressed.

This brand of genetic determinism retains its allure for one reason: its political power. If it were possible to claim that entire groups of people are born stupid, lazy or in other ways inferior to other groups, governments would never need to fix their problems. Welfare or social improvements would be redundant because – let's face it – poor families are destined to be poor, and their children are doomed at birth. Eugenics is a way of shirking responsibility for the origins of social problems, by casting blame on the disadvantaged. It suggests there is a natural order underpinning existing social hierarchies. Far better for them and the world, argues the eugenicist, that we let the poor die out. We need only look to the second world war for examples of what can happen when a group of people refuses to die fast enough: eugenicists helped them on their way.

Beneath the policy proposals of leading eugenicists in the 19th and 20th centuries was a thinly veiled disgust for the poor, disabled and foreign. For more than a century the global eugenics movement has been built around the notion that those who are powerful and wealthy are there not because of privilege or good fortune, but because they are genetically better than everyone else. Eugenics was once the driving force behind the modern-day selective schooling system, which sifted children into ability buckets as early as possible in the belief they wouldn't change.

The rhetorical trick of those like Sabisky is to shift the argument away from moral defences of eugenics, which are no longer socially acceptable, and towards pseudoscientific justifications for eugenic practices. Claims that it's possible to breed for beneficial traits in humans the same way we do with cows and dogs sound superficially plausible. But here, too, they are flawed. They ignore the physical price paid in genetic defects by these animals in meeting our demands for milk, meat and domestication. Pure-breed dogs, for example, frequently experience health issues.

Even if we could breed humans for intelligence – itself unlikely given that intelligence involves many thousands of genes, social and environmental investment, and a significant dose of developmental luck – we could never be sure that a more intelligent population wouldn't be genetically compromised in other ways. Animal breeding doesn't create well-rounded individuals, it creates machines – and sometimes monsters.

But, of course, this is not the point. What captivates Sabisky and Cummings is the notion of a fix, the dream that nonconformist geniuses will deliver bold technologies to save us from ourselves. Blinded by this light, they ignore the suffering and misery inflicted upon countless people by eugenicists who imagined they were acting for the national good. The technological fix was always a pipe dream. If policymakers truly cared about improving the lives of the poor and minorities, they would provide everyone with a high standard of nutrition and education, and root out nepotism and inequality of opportunity. It doesn't take a genius to figure that out.

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