Dysgenics: Genetic Deterioration in Modern Populations.

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Population and Development Review, Volume 23, Issue 3 (Sep., 1997), 664-666.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0098-7921%28199709%2923%3A3%3C664%3A%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J

RICHARD LYNN
Dysgenics: Genetic Deterioration in Modern Populations
Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1996. vii + 237 p. $59.95.

The alleged genetic deterioration of modern populations is the subject of a new book by Richard Lynn, a psychologist who marshals demographic theory and data as he revisits a familiar argument. The premise of the book is both simple and seemingly correct: If certain valued characteristics, such as intelligence, are determined at least partly by genetic endowment, and if these characteristics vary in positive correlation with social class while fertility levels vary inversely with social class, then some form of genetic deterioration of the population will occur. Preston and Campbell (1993) have challenged this conclusion by means of a mathematical model, but their arguments were questioned subsequently by Coleman (1993). To avoid entering into a long and complicated discussion, I will accept this basic premise of Lynn's argument and focus instead on the validity of his supporting evidence and the relevance of the argument itself.

At the core of Lynn's argument is the process of natural selection, understood in the familiar sense of "survival of the fittest." In classical evolutionary theory, it is considered "natural" that the most fit should survive and reproduce, where fitness is defined, tautologically, as that which yields reproductive success. Lynn begins by observing that natural selection was present in all preindustrial human societies. In these settings, high mortality eliminated the weak or genetically disadvantaged, and competition (especially among males) diminished the reproductive success of less capable members of society. Reproductive success depended on social status, which was attained, allegedly, through intelligence and good character. Thus, before the demographic transition, fitness was defined by intellectual ability and character. (Lynn defines character as "that syndrome of personality qualities comprising self-discipline, restraint, the capacity to work steadily over a period of many years for long-term goals; the ability to cooperate with others and form political alliances; and the integrity required to gain the approval of colleagues and superiors" (p. 20).)

This process of natural selection "broke down," according to Lynn, due to the decline of mortality and fertility, which was accompanied, he claims, by a diminution of social class differences in mortality and a historic reversal of social class differences in fertility. As fertility rates fell historically, it is generally true that the decline occurred earliest and was deepest in the upper and middle classes of a society. Lynn contends, and documents through a variety of evidence, that almost all societies have allowed at least a degree of social mobility. Thus, the argument continues, social class is a universal marker for intelligence and character. This fact, combined with decades of controversial evidence about the heritability of intelligence, leads to the classic eugenic concern over the direction of modern social class differences in fertility.

Many aspects of Lynn's argument merit commentary. Here, I will focus on just a few of them. First, as with many arguments about natural selection (and natural fertility, for that matter), the notion of what is "natural" is advanced without critical comment. There is nothing inherently natural about a society in which the weak are eliminated by high mortality and powerful men maintain a monopoly

over women's reproduction. In a Darwinian sense, any society is natural so long as those who are the most fit have the greatest reproductive success. Since fitness is defined tautologically, all societies (and species) experience natural selection, but the rules of the game—and thus the meaning of "fitness"—change from society to society (and from species to species).

In wealthy societies today, the social circumstances of young, economically disadvantaged men and women are more conducive to reproduction than is the case for older or more privileged members of society. This situation is no less natural than our disease-ridden, patriarchal past, but Lynn yearns nostalgically for the earlier era. "It was a cruel world," he tells us, "but it was a world in which the genes for low intelligence and weak character were constantly being expelled from the gene pool" (p. 33). Thus, avoiding the classical Darwinian tautology, Lynn sanctifies a particular definition of fitness and argues that a demographic regime is natural only if it leads to the elimination of undesirable genes affecting intelligence and character.

Perhaps Lynn is correct that high intelligence and good character are universally desirable human traits. Should we believe, however, that reproductive success in primitive human societies was achieved by the same sort of intelligence that brings social and economic success in today's world? Lacking solid empirical evidence, it seems at least as likely that a man's physical size—more than his intelligence or good character by today's standards—determined reproductive success in early human societies. There is little concern today over the possibility that short, slim men have improved their reproductive success over the course of human development, since physical size has become a less important prerequisite for social success in the modern world. Conversely, concern about the higher fertility of less intelligent couples today should be justified by the value of intelligence for personal and collective success in modern society, not by reference to some mythical, more natural past.

Lynn's empirical arguments are usually well documented but sometimes mistaken. It is certainly true, as Lynn claims, that social class differences in fertility have generally reversed themselves in the course of industrialization. His assertion that social class differences in mortality have diminished is questionable, however. In fact, some empirical evidence supports the belief that these differences may have widened as the level of mortality fell during the past two centuries (Preston 1990; Antonovsky 1967). As noted by Preston (1990: 345), the advantage to one's health of being wealthy or well educated was substantially diminished, until the end of the nineteenth century, by an imperfect and even false understanding of disease causation.

In some cases, Lynn's presentation of factual material raises other issues. It is well known that the eugenics movement has often advanced notions of racial superiority and that its arguments have been used to promote political agendas founded on racism (even though the logical core of the argument itself has nothing to do with race). Unfortunately, parts of Lynn's book recall these unsavory traditions. For example, many readers will grimace at the unsupported (and untenable) assertion that the principal cause of higher infant mortality among blacks in the United States today is their inferior intelligence (p. 38).

Overall, the most puzzling aspect of Lynn's alarmist position is that the deterioration of average intelligence predicted by the eugenicists has not occurred. Chapter 8 examines "the paradox of the secular rise of intelligence," by which Lynn refers to the well-documented increase in IQ levels by about one standard deviation in developed countries from the 1930s to the 1980s. Thus, in spite of the genetic deterioration that is supposedly occurring, phenotypic intelligence continues to rise. Lynn argues that this rise is real (not, for example, an artifact of testing procedures) and attributes it to improvements in physical wellbeing (better nutrition and less disease) and to enhanced mental stimulation. Lynn is convinced, however, that because of (hypothesized) diminishing returns to improving environmental effects on intelligence, these factors will not continue to compensate for the genetic deterioration that is occurring beneath the surface. Although it is worth considering this speculation about the future of human intelligence, Lynn's conclusion seems overly pessimistic in light of emerging information systems, such as the Internet, that continue to challenge and exercise the human mind in ways unimagined by prior generations.

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CARLA MAKHLOUF OBERMEYER (ED.)
Family, Gender, and Population in the Middle East: Policies in Context
Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995. xv + 260 p.

This book, its ambitious title notwithstanding, is basically a collection of articles on fertility and family planning. Out of ten articles, eight deal directly with this subject, the other two somewhat less directly. The regional context is also a misnomer. Except for one article each on Turkey and Iran and one on the Arab World, the articles deal with Egypt in the first place and Morocco and Tunisia (neither of them Middle Eastern countries) in the second. Although the editor groups the articles into three sections (dealing with the political context of population policy, family constraints to individual behavior, and the effectiveness of family planning