

Statistics' dark past? History of eugenics still haunts American universities

[University College London] was an epicenter of the early 20th-century eugenics movement—a precursor to Nazi “racial hygiene” programs—due to its ties to Francis Galton, the father of eugenics, and his intellectual descendants and fellow eugenicists Karl Pearson and Ronald Fisher. In response to protests over the conference, UCL announced this June that it had stripped Galton’s and Pearson’s names from its buildings and classrooms.

...

Unlike tearing down monuments to white supremacy in the American South, purging statistics of the ghosts of its eugenicist past is not a straightforward proposition. In this version, it’s as if Stonewall Jackson developed quantum physics. What we now understand as statistics comes largely from the work of Galton, Pearson, and Fisher, whose names appear in bread-and-butter terms like “Pearson correlation coefficient” and “Fisher information.”

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Ideally, statisticians would like to divorce these tools from the lives and times of the people who created them. It would be convenient if statistics existed outside of history, but that’s not the case... Statistical thinking and eugenicist thinking are, in fact, deeply intertwined, and many of the theoretical problems with methods like significance testing—first developed to identify racial differences—are remnants of their original purpose, to support eugenics.

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