

Viewpoint: ‘Unnatural selection’? The troubling past — and present — of eugenics

Ideas of selective breeding are almost as old as philosophy. Plato proposed a utopian city-state in which elite men and women would be matched for their qualities, and “inferior” citizens would be discouraged or prevented from breeding. In modern biology, such ideas were first explored and popularised by Darwin’s half-cousin Francis Galton and his follower Karl Pearson at University College London.

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[In his new book *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*, Adam] Rutherford traces a clear line from these racist theories – widely acted upon in US prewar sterilisation programmes – to the genocidal atrocities of nazism. He also shows that though the “doctors’ trial” at Nuremberg effectively banished the word “eugenics” from any curriculum, the science – and in some cases the politics that exploited it – persisted. [newsletter

The idea that scientists are capable of remodeling more complex inherited human traits is, he argues, as far-fetched and politically dangerous as ever.

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The most pernicious of these claims inevitably involves the belief, resurgent in extremist political groups, that we might genetically select for IQ. In the largest studies, inherited intelligence has been associated with the variable interaction of more than 1,000 places in the human genome. That does not stop a few scientists and pseudoscientists repackaging Galton’s “positive eugenics” for the 21st century.

[This is an excerpt. Read the original post here.](#)