

Street-Arab Literature:

A lens to study eugenics as a class-based movement

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towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of eugenics, which was perceived to be a "science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race" dominated intellectual and academic debates of the period (Galton 1904:1). Theories and articles relating to the study of eugenics were popular subjects in British and American press. Amidst the increasing acceptance of eugenic principles, G.K. Chesterton was one of the few detractors who condemned the movement as a "modern craze for scientific officialdom and strict social organization" (Chesterton 1922:4).

In his book *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922), Chesterton analyses the flaws of eugenic thinking. He suggests that the eugenics movement was designed by the upper classes to control the lower classes. Commenting upon the attitude of the upper and middle society towards the lower classes, Chesterton states that there is "the strange new disposition to regard the poor as a *race* as if they were a colony of Japs or Chinese coolies" (1922:143). While conforming to eugenic ideas about other races, Chesterton was an outlier as regards the lower classes.

More contemporary scholars such as Lyndsay Farall (1970), G.R. Searle (1981), Donald Mackenzie (1976) and Pauline Mazumder (1992) effectively demonstrate that the eugenics movement emerged as a study of the relative differences in class and class factions. Farall, Searle and Mackenzie analyse the membership of the Eugenics Education Society and demonstrate that the members held eminent roles such as university professors, biologists or social scientists. Pauline Mazumder adds to this scholarship by highlighting the goals of the Eugenics Education Society that wished to regulate "eu-

genic marriages". Just as Chesterton suggested years ago, the aforementioned scholars conclude that the eugenics movement was organized by the upper-class elite to discipline and control the lower classes.

Building on the existing scholarship on eugenics and class, I argue that "Street-Arab" literature provides an additional source of information in understanding the socio-political climate that favoured the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century. I explore a plethora of fictional and non-fictional sources from the late nineteenth century to demonstrate that the poor were already treated as a separate race before the advent of the eugenics movement. Rather than offering a thorough analysis of the texts themselves, I consider instances from the sources that cast the lower classes as the Other to the middle class.

While the eugenics movement and street-Arab literature have been studied individually, scholars have overlooked the value of Street-Arab literature as a means to study the development of the eugenics movement in Britain. In this article, I propose that street-Arab literature was part of a propaganda that shaped the class-based narrative of the eugenics movement. Contrary to popular beliefs that eugenics was rooted in race, an examination of the street-Arab literature reveals the class-based origins of the movement.

Street-Arab literature typically portrays street-children in late nineteenth century London. Both street-children and their parents are cast as the Other to the upper classes through racial epithets such as "street-arabs", "hottentots" and "kefirs". In these stories, the child is either orphaned or the parents are cast as degenerate alcoholics and therefore, rendered incapable of taking care of their children. As

Elizabeth Thiel observes, stories of the genre are "genuinely philanthropic in their desire to elicit sympathy" for the street children but they also communicate that "destitute children must be wrested from the gutter, and by implication, from their families" for the spiritual and moral betterment of the street-children and greater society. (Thiel 2008:44)

THE LOWER CLASSES AS THE OTHER IN STREET-ARAB LITERATURE

Social anxieties regarding the lower classes were well-established in England before the onset of the eugenics movement. As Gareth Stedman Jones discusses in *Outcast London* (1971), London saw a rise in pauperism in late nineteenth century because of various factors such as the cholera epidemic and a bad harvest (Jones 1971:241–2). Writing in *The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (1867–8), Thomas Begg expresses a fear for personal safety because London was submerged by a "plague of beggars" where "no one who lived in the suburbs could help feeling that they were in circumstances of considerable peril" (qtd in Jones 1971:242).

Begg's picture of London is corroborated by Thomas Booth, who, after a tour of the slums in 1891, wrote about the inhabitants as thus:

The lowest class consists of some occasional labourers, street sellers, loafers, criminals and semi criminals, I put at ...1.25 % of the population ... Their life is the life of savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and occasional excess. Their food is of the coarsest description and their only luxury is drink... They degrade whatever they touch, and as individuals are perhaps incapable of improvement (Booth 1969:291).

Booth's report on the urban slums is

harsh, critical and unsympathetic. He also goes on to state that "it is much to be desired and to be hoped that this class may become less hereditary in its character. There appears to be no doubt that it is now hereditary to a very considerable extent. The children are the street-Arabs and are to be found separated from the parents in pauper or industrial schools, and child rescue homes.

Booth's comments indicate that the poor were already being considered as a separate race before the eugenics movement. Social commentators of late nineteenth century believed that conditions of pauperism and crime could be transmitted to future generations. In this commentary, adults are "residuum" and "savages" and their children are "street-arabs", "waifs and strays", "hottentots", and "kaffers" or "children of the English savage" (Cunningham 1991:108). As Lydia Murdoch suggests, by employing these disparaging terms, reformers, philanthropists and journalists used the rhetoric of class, race and nationality to segregate street-children from their local communities (2006:25).

The term "street-Arab" was coined by Thomas Guthrie in his *First Plea for Ragged Schools* (1847) where Guthrie heavily draws from colonial stereotypes of the Middle-East to describe the street-children: "These Arabs of the city are as wild as those of the desert" (Guthrie 1847:8). Anxieties regarding the "savage nature" of the street-children were periodically expressed by various self-employed philanthropic reformers. Robert Raikes, the founder of Sunday Schools observed that "multitudes of children" prowled the streets in the "shapes of wolves and tigers" (qtd in Cunningham 1991:37). Then in 1850, Lord Ashley who went on to be-

come the Earl of Shaftesbury, describes them "as bold and perty, and dirty as London sparrows, but pale, feeble and sadly inferior to them in plumpness of outline" (qtd in Himmelfarb 1985:381).

While Guthrie compares the street-children to the "inferior foreigners" of the desert, Raikes and Ashley go a step further and dehumanize them by comparing them to animals of prey. This presents the children as outcasts and marks them as the Other to the middle and upper classes. Judith Plotz defines this manner of Othering as "Domestic Orientalism" in which members from the lower classes are deemed to be inferior to the upper classes (Plotz 2001:37). Just as the colonial enterprise justified England's rule over the "weaker races", domestic orientalism legitimized the control of the lower classes by the upper classes.

The "degeneracy" or the Otherness of the lower classes also bestowed a sense of superiority upon the upper classes. As Anne McClintock suggests, the "degenerate" classes could be construed as departures from the established order:

The degenerate classes, defined as departures from the normal human type, were necessary to the self-definition of the middle class as the idea of degeneration was to the idea of progress, for the distance along the path of progress travelled by some portions of humanity could be measured only by the distance others lagged behind (1995:46).

Establishing the lower classes as "degenerates" or the Other not only cast them as the colloquial scapegoats who were responsible for the nation's decline but it also enabled the middle and upper classes to retain their sense of respectability in a deteriorating nation. Reforms to improve, and consequently, control and discipline the lower orders emerged in an atmo-

sphere of national decline. Examples of these reform organizations include Sunday Schools, The Ragged Schools and child emigration societies organized by philanthropists such as Maria Susan Rye, Annie MacPherson and Thomas John Barnardo.

The central goal of these organizations was to rescue the street-children from their parents, who were perceived to be a bad influence. In writing the book, *Street Arabs and Gutter Snipes: The Pathetic and Humorous Side of Young Vagabond Life in the Great Cities, With Records of Work for Their Reclamation* (1884), George Needham makes a "plea on behalf of neglected and destitute children" who are "too often educated in crime by unnatural parents or vicious guardians; or who through the stress of circumstances, are forced into a course of life which tends to the multiplication of criminals and the increase of dangerous classes" (Needham 1884:iii). Further emphasizing the dangers of what he perceives to be "sinful environments", he writes:

Go into the low quarters of Glasgow, the filthy back streets of Liverpool, the foul-fever slums of almost any of our great cities, and there you will see bright-eyed, tattered, ill-fed children growing up amid the reek of gin and amid scenes of blasphemy, in low infamous rooms, and in low, infamous streets, dirty, dissolute and depraved – the very seed-plot of our future criminals ... many a drunkard's child in England is being trained up deliberately in the habits of sin (1884:464).

Needham's description of the lower classes is rife with the imagery of disease, filth and rot that add a sense of urgency to the issue of the children on the street. Left unchecked the "contagion of the lower classes" could spread rapidly. Like various child-reformers from his time such

as Lord Ashley, Guthrie and Barnardo, Needham suggests that the children should be relocated to better homes. Stories based on street-Arab children express a similar ideology, perpetuating the notion that these destitute children should be taken away from their families and consequently, relocated in good Christian homes or alternatively, emigrated to colonies such as Australia and Canada. Common themes in street-Arab literature include graphic descriptions of squalid living conditions, alcoholic or absent parents or relatives who induce the child protagonist into a life of crime.

Examples of street-Arab literature are Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) and *Lost Gip* (1873), Georgina Castle Smith's *Brenda's Froggy's Little Brother* (1875), Silas Hocking's *Her Benny* (1879), Robert Michael Ballantyne's *Dusty Diamonds Cut and Polished: A Tale of City Arab Life and Adventures* (1884) and Maud Battersby's *Gaspar; or, The Story of a Street Arab* (1891). Although the writers of these tales seem to empathise with the piteous conditions of their central protagonists, the street-child is invariably represented as belonging to a separate race.

To illustrate, in Battersby's *Gaspar*, the narrator describes the first meeting between the street-Arab Gaspar and the woman who will eventually become his saviour in the following manner:

She looked at him fixedly, speaking as though he were a strange and somewhat interesting animal, not belonging to the same race as herself. Probably she did not feel as if he were; but Gaspar did not mind, he had not been educated in fine feelings, and it was enough if she noticed him for any reason (1891:8).

The above excerpt suggests that Gaspar not only belonged to a different race but also another species; he is described as an

"animal". In *Dusty Diamonds*, the protagonist Bobby Frog is introduced to his readers in the following manner: "To a Londoner any description of this boy would be superfluous, but it may be well to state, for the benefit of the world at large, that the class to which he belonged embodies within its pale the quintessence of rollicking mischief, and the sublimate of consummate insolence" (Ballantyne 1884:4). Yet again, the "street-child" is classified as a member of a separate class wherein he is characterized by his mannerisms of "consummate insolence".

Child reformers and philanthropists often juxtaposed images of the idealized Victorian childhood with the street-Arabs. While the Victorian child was safely ensconced in the nursery, the street-child was exposed to the dangers of an inappropriate domestic environment where he would eventually grow up to become a criminal himself. For example, in *Dusty Diamonds*, Bobby Frog's father attempts to induce his son into committing a crime in the household that employed him. Bobby is described to be an "honourable" street-Arab who did not resort to petty crime. Thus when his very determined father attempts to force Bobby into robbing the employer's household, the child decides to emigrate to Canada, away from the clutches of his "degenerate" father.

In Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer*, the eponymous protagonist is completely neglected by her alcoholic mother. As a consequence, Jessica wanders through the streets of London with a "tattered frock, scarcely fastened together with broken strings, was slipping down the shivering shoulders of the little girl" (Stretton 1882:8). Stretton's portrayal of Jessica's state of undress is in keeping with contemporary descriptions of street-girls where

the frequent emphasis on the children's nakedness suggest that these children would soon turn to prostitution (Murdoch 2006:20).

Street-Arab literature, therefore, highlights these images of degeneracy where the street-children are exposed to dangerous situations and furthermore, eventually perpetuated criminal activities themselves.

EUGENICS, CLASS AND DEGENERACY

By the end of the 1890s, the London public was disappointed with the efforts of philanthropists, charitable organizations, and government committees to deal with the problems of poverty, theft, prostitution and alcoholism (Mangum 1999:198). Thus, when Karl Pearson, endorsing eugenic proposals, called for stronger measures to curtail the population of the urban poor, a surprising number of middle-class elites supported his views (Mangum 1999:198). Pearson writes that:

The bad man can by the influence of education and surroundings be made good, but bad stock can never be converted into good stock – then we see how grave a responsibility is cast at the present day upon every citizen, who directly or indirectly has to consider problems relating to the state endowment of education, the revision of the administration of the Poor Law, and above all, the conduct of public and private charities (qtd in Mangum 1999:198).

The discourse of eugenics heavily rests on claims that social problems such as poverty and crime could be spread through heredity and could therefore, weaken the fabric of the whole nation. The term eugenics was coined by the British scientist Francis Galton (1883) in his book, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* where he derives the term from the

Greek word *eugenes*, which means "good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities" and, therefore, affords a "brief word to express the science of improving stock" (1883:17). Galton frames his "science" of eugenics by drawing upon Charles Darwin's theory of evolution; that is the practices and principles used to genetically improve the qualities of plants and animals could be applied to "human breeding" as well.

To quote Galton, similar methods implemented on humans "might introduce prophets and high priests of civilisation into the world, as surely as we can propagate idiots by mating cretins" (Galton 1865:166). He argues that "superior" members of the society should be encouraged to have more children – an ideology that was later termed "positive eugenics". Contrastingly, "negative eugenics" discouraged the lower classes from reproducing by detaining the men and women in separate camps or alternatively, enforced sterilization.

The belief that the upper classes were superior to the lower classes and should therefore be encouraged to procreate was endorsed by numerous social reformers from Galton's time. For instance, Pearson, Francis Galton's protegee proposes that heredity is directly related to class position:

If we look upon society as an organic whole, we must assume that class distinctions are not entirely illusory; that certain families pursue definite occupations, because they have a more or less specialised attitude for them. In a rough sort of way we may safely assume that the industrial classes are not on the average as intelligent as the professional classes and that distinction is not entirely one of education (Pearson 1912:33).

Pearson contends that the class distinctions between the upper and lower clas-

ses are based on their respective abilities. By formulating a pseudoscientific relationship between heredity and class, contemporary eugenists from Galton's period attempted to support their theories through contemporary works on heredity and Darwinian biology (Mackenzie 1976:499). That is, the innate qualities of human beings were believed to be established at birth as a result of heredity rather than the individual's surroundings.

According to early twentieth century eugenists, characteristics that could be transmitted genetically not only included mental ailments such as insanity, mental deficiency and epilepsy but also external quantifiers such as pauperism and criminality (Woodhouse 1912:127). As Jayne Woodhouse observes, by eugenic definition, almost the entire population of the lower classes could be considered "degenerate" and therefore, unfit to produce children of "good stock" (1912:127).

Early critics who challenged the inherent flaws in eugenic ideas include figures such as G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936), key geneticists such as William Bateson (1861–1926), Lancelot Hogben (1895–1975), Raymond Pearl (1879–1940), social scientists such as Franz Boas and Prince Petr Kropotkin (Bashford and Levine 2010:17). Like Chesterton, the aforementioned critics were concerned that the eugenics movement would enable the state to become a dictatorship.

An example of state intervention that concerned critics of the eugenics movement was the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act (1913). Directly influenced by the Eugenics Education Society, the Mental Deficiency Act called for the segregation and institutionalization of the "feeble-minded". The primary subjects of the Mental Deficiency Act were the "feeble-

minded" members of the society. However, the eugenists had no scientific means to define the state of "feeble-mindednesses". Attacking the eugenists' lack of scientific evidence to corroborate the term, Chesterton (1922) quips:

I will call it the Feeble-Minded Bill, both for brevity and because the description is strictly accurate. It is, and quite simply and literally, a Bill for incarcerating as madmen those whom no doctor will consent to call mad. It is enough if some doctor or other may happen to call them weak-minded (1922:25).

As Chesterton suggests, the lower classes could easily be classified as being "feeble-minded" as the term was loosely defined and yet, they could be persecuted. Although the practice of eugenics threatened freedom and democracy, the movement was supported by literary giants such as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and Virginia Woolf. For example, George Bernard Shaw writes that "There is now no reasonable excuse for refusing to face the fact that nothing but a eugenic religion can save our civilization from the fate that has overtaken all previous civilizations" (Sociological Society 1904:74–5). As Woodhouse suggests, by declaring the lower classes to be the cause of national and racial decline, the Eugenics Education Society presented the not only "acceptable explanation of Britain's decline, but also a scientifically-founded means to recovery" (Woodhouse 1982:103).

Examples from street-Arab literature demonstrate that the authors of these texts systematically use racial epithets to connote the degeneracy of the lower classes and thereby, attempt to separate the street-children from their parents. While street-Arab literature aims to convince the readers that unlike their parents, the lives of street-children can be saved by

relocating them to a safer environment, the eugenics movement went a step further and asserted that the street-children, like their parents, were also irredeemable. Therefore, the eugenics movement offered radical measures to curtail the population of the lower classes.

In conclusion, street-Arab literature is a viable source to study the inception of the eugenics movement. While street-Arab literature presents a literary propaganda to cast the lower classes as the Other, the eugenics movement offered a "scientific" framework to characterize the lower classes as the Other. Thus, the discourse of degeneracy and racial otherness ascribed to the lower classes is a common feature in street-Arab literature and the eugenics movement. A more thorough examination of individual texts on street-Arab literature will perhaps reveal a greater insight into the inception of the eugenics movement as a class-based theory in Britain.

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SUMMARY

Street-Arab Literature: a lens to study eugenics as a class-based movement

(Street-Arab Literature: en lins för att studera eugenik som en klassbaserad rörelse)

In his paper, "Eugenics and Other Evils" (1922), G.K Chesterton condemns the eugenics movement and argues that eugenic laws were designed by the upper-classes to control and discipline the lower-classes. Building upon the existing scholarship on eugenics and class, I argue that 'Street-Arab' literature provides an additional source of information in understanding the socio-political climate that favored the eugenics movement in early twentieth century. I explore a range of fictional and non-fictional sources from the late nineteenth century to demonstrate that the poor were already treated as a separate race before the advent of the eugenics movement. The article establishes that the understanding of eugenics, one of the defining movements of the twentieth century which in part led to the great wars, can be furthered by the study of Street-Arab literature.

Keywords: eugenics, street-Arab fiction, Chesterton, social class, race.

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