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"The task of Sisyphus?

Biological and Social Temporality in Maurizio Meloni's

Political Biology"

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In 1869 Francis Galton (1822-1911) published a book called *Hereditary Genius* in which he argued that human intellectual capacity was inherited much like hair or eye colour. Building on a series of more speculative articles four years earlier, the book was the beginning of the British eugenics movement. As Galton's numerous critics pointed out, though, the family pedigrees that filled page after page of *Hereditary Genius* did not demonstrate conclusively what he claimed they did: that clever and successful people were often related to other clever and successful people because of nature rather than nurture. Galton, however, thought he might be able to call on support from his cousin, Charles Darwin, who had a tentative new theory of heredity. According to Darwin's account of "pangenesis", offspring inherited characteristics from their parents via "gemmules", which were swirling around in animal's bloodstreams (Darwin 1868: 340-404). Enthused by the idea that this theory might solve his problems, Galton devised a test and asked Darwin to collaborate. They acquired two groups of rabbits – one with white fur, the other black – and swapped their blood, reasoning that their offspring's fur would be a different colour as a result. Within weeks it was clear their interventions had made no difference. Nevertheless, the two men carried

on, finally bringing their gruesome experiments to an end five years later (Renwick 2012: 53-6).

Galton and Darwin's enthusiasm for pangenesis was important for a number of reasons. The experiments' failure to yield positive results persuaded Galton to focus on proving his argument with statistical tools – a process that would culminate with his landmark book, *Natural Inheritance* (1889), which would be revered by both biometricians and Mendelians at the start of the twentieth century (MacKenzie 1981). Yet the experiments, and in particular their failure, despite Galton and Darwin's optimism, were emblematic of something more general when it comes to the history of biosocial science: the gap between theories and the reality. Just five years earlier, in his first speculations on what he would later name "eugenics", Galton (1883: 17) had written about his belief that the ultimate purpose of research on heredity was to create a "galaxy of genius" (Galton 1865: 165). Pangenesis was certainly an indication of how important those dreams have been as motivations for studying heredity. But it also gave an insight into the kinds of problems that Galton and Darwin's successors have run into since the early 1870s.

Maurizio Meloni's *Political Biology* (2016) reminds us of this episode because the founding moment of his own story of more than a century of debates about heredity is the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's work on plant hybridization and its transformation into the foundations of modern genetics. The suggestion there was an identifiable, albeit still unobserved, physical unit for the transmission of characteristics and that the process followed a quantifiable pattern fuelled the idea that social questions had answers that were to some degree biological. Debates were focused on different issues, from immigration and race to class, in different places as the eugenics movements grew rapidly throughout Europe and North America during the first three decades of the 1900s. However, there was a

common thread running through all those discussions. The idea of the gene provided hope for people who believed that interventions at the biological level were necessary to either reverse processes like degeneration or to improve society further (Kevles 1985; Paul 1998; Soloway 1990).

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, Mendel's work did not stir in Galton the kinds of feelings he had experienced before the pangenesis experiments more than 30 years earlier. Galton (1883: 305) continued to believe that eugenics was at best a "Sisyphian task", as he had described it for the best part of two decades. Mendel's findings suggested to Galton that humans might be able to know more about their biological constitutions but their hopes of changing them permanently and rapidly according to some rationally designed plan were as weak as they had always been. The reason for Galton's pessimism was not simply the knowledge deficit between the idea of genes and their real-world expression, it was a sense that biological and social temporalities might never be synchronised in the way that eugenicists' hoped. Although he believed biological change could drive social progress he also thought that there were all kinds of challenges for anyone who claimed it was possible to eliminate "feeblemindedness" through practices such as sterilization. On the one hand, he argued there were legitimate questions about whether there the things considered defects today might turn out to be useful adaptations at some point in the future. On the other, he was convinced that the biggest problem was the idea that significant results could be achieved within a normal human life span.

Galton was far from the only biosocial thinker to see things in these terms, of course. There was a significant gap between the eons of time biologists thought with, especially after 1859, and the timeframes that social reformers and politicians contemplated. Even the late nineteenth century's most famous social evolutionist, Herbert Spencer, a utopian who,

as his life-long project, the *Synthetic Philosophy*, demonstrated, painted on a canvas as broad as anyone and struggled with the wilder expectations of his readership (Francis 2007). He argued that natural selection had severe limitations because its primary function was to serve as a reality check on groups and societies that tried to outgrow their natural limits. Instead, Spencer believed that real evolutionary progress came from processes underpinned by the Lamarckian mechanism of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which provided more scope for innovation and complex behaviour. The end point for Spencer – one that was countless generations away – was a state-less free society where order would be maintained by the mutually dependent relationships between individuals motivated by, among other things, a deep moral sense and altruistic social instincts (Dixon 2008).

The question of the distance between biological and social temporalities is one of the biggest shadows cast by the late nineteenth century over the story told in *Political Biology*, which draws out the complex alignments between different ideas about evolutionary change and a range of political programmes since the late 1800s. As Meloni explains, biosocial science before the Second World War – the first half of the era he refers to as that of "hard heredity" – was dominated by eugenics, both in the "mainline" form that proved most popular in Germany and the USA and the "reform" strands that introduced greater sophistication into understandings of the relationship between nature and nurture. This was an era when there were divisions, particularly in political terms, over the question of the how to integrate biology into programmes for social reform. Yet there was also general agreement that nature had an important part to play (Kevles 1984; Paul 1998). Individuals were understood in terms of the groups they were a part of; thinkers on the left and right grew confident that they would soon possess the knowledge they required to reshape society and humankind according to their own goals (Meloni 2016: 32-135).

The realignment of biology, social science, and politics, captured in the famous UNESCO (1969) statements on race, after 1945 have usually been portrayed as the abrupt but timely end to those ways of thinking. According to the received view, widespread knowledge of what the Nazis had done in the name of racial hygiene served as the most prominent and disturbing example of a trend towards reductionism before 1939 and the idea that there was a quick biological fix to whatever problem people with power chose to see in the world. But, as Meloni suggests in his depiction of what he calls the second era of hard heredity, things were not quite so simple. On the one hand, ideas that proved important to the new sense of what society is, such as that race is a social rather than biological category, had been articulated clearly before 1939 (for example: Huxley and Haddon 1935). On the other hand, the continuation of hard heredity, seen most obviously in the fusion of genetics and natural selection in the modern evolutionary synthesis, meant that much of biology remained unchanged. What emerged as the settlement between those two points was in many ways indebted to Galton's attitude to biological and social temporality at the start of the twentieth century.

As Meloni points out, this settlement did not mean that interest in improving humankind via biology went away. Nevertheless, projects such as transhumanism, promoted by the likes of Julian Huxley, who was both an enthusiast for reform eugenics before the Second World War and one of the leading authors of the UNESCO statements on race, were configured in ways that were different to biosocial projects of the recent past (Renwick 2016). Echoing Galton's concern that it was impossible to know what was and was not a useful adaptation, transhumanism married the new evolutionary biology's view of diversity as the engine of progress with a belief that society could compensate for, rather than eliminate, the challenges that diversity created. Contrary to the thrust of criticisms

from the likes of Steven Pinker (2002), who targeted the straw man of a "standard social science model" in *The Blank* Slate, many social scientists, social reformers, and politicians were comfortable with hard heredity because its implication was that each generation started from scratch in biological terms. They channelled their efforts into constructing an environment where equality of opportunity, not outcome, might be achieved, with some kind of long-run biological pay off taken for granted.

This new division of intellectual labour between biology, which focused on nature, and social science, which assumed authority over nurture, during the second half of the twentieth century was, as Meloni (2016: 23) argues, less a rejection of heredity as an important factor in politics and society and more a new political economy of biosocial science; a biopolitics with the kind of historical dimensions that Michel Foucault's successors have often been happy to do without. Biosocial science was shorn of its most politically problematic branches, most obviously eugenics, but as Diane Paul (1998: 133-56), among others, has argued, this was done by devolving eugenic matters to individuals, who were asked to make decisions that earlier generations of eugenicists, working in Meloni's first era of hard heredity, had imagined the state would need to take in the interests of the group. Progress would come with the help of tools such as genetic counselling but, as a consequence, it could not be expected to conform to predetermined political timeframes.

One of the most important questions, from a British perspective, at least, is what we should take from Meloni's account of this shift, in light of the fact that the three decades after the Second World War were also the golden age of the welfare state. The answer – and an important challenge to received views of Britain during the second half of the twentieth century – is that the welfare state was not based on a rejection of biosocial science but a genuine and considered political economy indebted to a Galtonian perspective

on the relationship between biological and social temporalities. This is a historiographic point with the potential to link the history of biosocial science with other big picture histories, given that historians of modern Britain have been asking challenging questions about where the 30 years after 1945 fits into narratives of the century as a whole. Whereas historians of science have come to call the 1900s "the century of the gene" (Keller 2000), political, social, and economic historians have pondered what has been described as "the brief life of its social democracy", which was ended by the rise of neoliberalism from the mid-1970s onwards (Vernon 2010). Although Pinker's sympathisers might argue that we should be writing the "short life of the standard social science model", *Political Biology* makes clear that we should be making sense of how hard heredity persisted throughout these broader political and economic changes and what that teaches us about the current moment in biosocial science.

It is in these respects that Meloni's discussion of epigenetics takes on particular significance, both as the latest example of the contingent alignments between politics and biology and a field that, if history is any guide, will be the site for fresh battles amongst those who see biology as a root for social reform. Epigenetics has reopened the barrier between the biological and the social that had been closed during the two eras of hard heredity Meloni describes and, in the process, put the area of intersection up for discussion again. One possible consequence, according to some observers, is that social scientists will no longer be able to reason without biology, as they were able to throughout most of the twentieth century. Yet the political economy of that potential way of working is still very much emerging. There is a school of thought that suggests epigenetics could be the basis for a new social democracy, given its emphasis on the environment as a factor in development. But, as Meloni (2016: 188-223) warns, epigenetics does not rest on the idea of infinite

malleability or the idea, held by thinkers working in the lineage begun by August Weismann, that each generation starts afresh, freed from its parents' mistakes. As such, epigenetics has the capacity to reintroduce eugenics, primarily by legitimating the idea that some people belong to groups that have been damaged through heredity.

Once again, temporality is central to the discussion. With fluid boundaries between the environment and the genome, biological and social temporality have been fused into "development", with the genome "subject to time and biography", as Meloni (2016: 194) puts it. Although there is doubt about how stable some changes are in terms of transmission across generations, there is the kind of hope for epigenetics that usually accompanies such ambiguity. And it is with that hope that we reconnect with Galton and Darwin's pangenesis experiments almost a century and a half ago, when a different theory of heredity encouraged interventionist thinking. As Meloni shows, what we are seeing with epigenetics is not the re-emergence of the idea that biology is a source of social progress but a renewed expectation that humans might be able to reshape biology within a politically convenient timeframe.

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