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## **Book Section:**

Renwick, Chris orcid.org/0000-0001-9672-6671 (2019) Richard Titmuss, Eugenics, and Social Science in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain. In: Panayotova, Plamena, (ed.) *The History of Sociology in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan , pp. 137-160.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19929-6\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19929-6_5)

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“Richard Titmuss, Eugenics, and Social Science in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain”\*

Chris Renwick

Department of History

University of York

**Abstract:** Richard Titmuss (1907-73) was far from the only social scientist working in mid-twentieth-century Britain to have an interest in eugenics. Yet, as I show in this chapter, he is a particularly instructive case study for helping us understand the impact that biosocial science had on many social scientists’ identity and sense of purpose during that period. Focusing on his early career, from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, this chapter traces Titmuss’ underappreciated personal and intellectual connections with the eugenics movement and shows how his interests in issues such as inequality and welfare services were shaped by them. As the chapter argues, acknowledging these connections is necessary if we are to appreciate the complex origins of British sociology’s concern with issues such as waste and potential, particularly at the bottom of the social structure.

In January 1942 the *Eugenics Review* carried a review of *Poverty and Progress* – Seebohm Rowntree’s report on his second survey of York (Rowntree, 1941). The review had been written by two men who would go on to establish stellar reputations in the social sciences – and social policy in particular – after 1945. One was François Lafitte (1913-2002), who had recently published the widely-read Penguin paperback, *The Internment of Aliens*, a short book about the British government’s panicked treatment of foreign nationals during the

early stages of the war, and who would later become Professor of Social Policy and Administration at the University of Birmingham (Lafitte, 1940).<sup>1</sup> The other was Richard Titmuss (1907-1973), who, just a year earlier, was still formally employed by the country fire insurance offices in London, but whom the social anthropologist Edmund Leach – perhaps apocryphally – would later call the ‘high priest of the welfare state’.<sup>2</sup>

Titmuss and Lafitte began their review with a long reflection on what, exactly, they believed eugenics to be. ‘Eugenics is the use of scientific means to attain an ethical end’, they explained.

The end is a higher level of mental and physical health, an increase in the biological efficiency of human beings; the means are such measures as tend to improve the inborn qualities of future generations, to raise the proportion of those who are “well born”. Eugenists seek a higher level of health—i.e. of “wholeness”—as an end in itself, because the human personality is an end in itself, and because they wish to see human beings in the mass become more completely human. They wish to bring about an increased inborn *capacity* for “wholeness”, and also a fuller *realization* for that capacity by creating conditions in which inborn qualities can attain full expression (Titmuss and Lafitte, 1942: 106. Original emphasis).

Titmuss and Lafitte used this definition to frame Rowntree’s careful mapping of the social environment in York and to draw out for their readers the significance of and problems with his efforts to measure the impact of social reform during the previous four decades. Yet, in so doing, Titmuss and Lafitte also highlighted a fundamental split between

two groups in the British eugenics movement: a conservative audience that thought about heredity in narrow terms and a more progressive and largely younger faction who were much more interested in thinking about how the environment shaped human beings and social outcomes. As this paper will show, Titmuss is an incredibly useful figure for thinking about not only that tension in the eugenics movement but also the role played by the second of those two groups in shaping British sociology during the mid-twentieth-century.

Appointed Professor of Social Administration at the LSE in 1950, Titmuss is one of the towering figures in late twentieth-century British social science: someone who both made his living out of writing about the country's new social services and was able to influence the development of those services under the Labour governments of the 1960s. Indeed, as the sociologist Ann Oakley has stressed in her writings on her father's life and work, an important part of Titmuss' legend is the fact his biography appeared to be inseparable from the developments he studied. Having left school at 14 to undertake a short book-keeping course, he had no formal academic qualifications. By ascending to a chair at one of the country's most important universities during a period of significant expansion for higher education – and the social sciences in particular – and then establishing a line in to Whitehall, all, it seemed, through his own entrepreneurial efforts, Titmuss appeared to have lived concepts, such as social mobility, which he and his contemporaries were putting at the heart of their fields of research (Oakley, 1996, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Following Oakley's lead, this paper will link Titmuss' ascent, from the late 1930s through to the eve of his appointment at the LSE, to the eugenics movement (Oakley, 1991). In so doing, it will draw on a number of recent historiographical developments to flesh out a picture of Titmuss and the British eugenics movement that allows us to appreciate both a

number of distinctive features of his social science and their origins in interwar biosocial science. Indeed, and influenced by not only the sociologist Mike Savage's analysis of 'gentlemanly' and 'technical' identities but also work by historians such as Ben Jackson and Phillipe Fontaine, the paper will draw attention to the moral framework for social science that Titmuss developed during his engagement with eugenics (Savage, 2010; Jackson, 2019; Fontaine, 2002).<sup>4</sup> The aim will be to show how the eugenics movement provided an important context in which social science – and sociological – agendas, methods, and practices were developed during the middle decades of the twentieth century in Britain. In particular, and building on some of my own earlier work on the history of social mobility studies, I want to emphasise how – perhaps counter-intuitively – eugenics helped to make the environment, rather than heredity, the focus for sociology, and social science more generally, after 1945 (Renwick, 2016).

### **Eugenics and Social Science in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain**

In the early 1930s Richard Titmuss was employed as an insurance official in the County Fire Office in London, where he had worked since he was 19, after his mother had written to them to enquire about openings for her son, who needed a better paid job to help pay off his recently deceased father's debts. It was not a high-profile job and Titmuss did not seem set for a high-flying career but it was well paid and secure. Twenty years later, however, he was Professor of Social Administration at the LSE. How had this happened? Received views

direct our attention to *Problems of Social Policy*, Titmuss' official history of Britain's social services during the war, which was published shortly before he was appointed to the chair he held until his death in 1973 (Titmuss, 1950). Yet the conventional focus on *Problems of Social Policy* seldom includes much examination of how he came to be employed by the government to write that book in the first place. As Oakley has observed, eugenics – and the Eugenics Society in particular – are essential to understanding how Titmuss made the journey from the County Fire Office to the LSE, specifically by enabling him to compensate for his lack of both academic qualifications and the social and cultural capital we might have expected him to require to travel on that path (Oakley, 1996: chs 5-7).

Titmuss joined the Eugenics Society in 1937, during the period when he was actively trying to leave the world of provisional insurance behind. He had been using his spare time to write letters, articles, and books on politics and what we would now call social policy for a number of years, hoping that he would earn enough in fees and recognition to resign his post. The reasons for his restlessness are unclear. Titmuss certainly had a broadly liberal and progressive outlook, albeit one that would shift leftwards after the war, but there was initially little about it – in either content or strength – that made him stand out. The answer, however, is most likely to be the effect of Kathleen Miller, whom he met while on holiday in 1934 and married three years later. Miller was Organizing Secretary of the Fulham Fellowship for the Unemployed – a charity that was founded to provide workshops, training, and activities for local unemployed people during the Great Depression – from 1932 to 1940. In this capacity, as a member of the country's amateur and largely female army of social workers, who worked in a tradition dating back to philanthropic organisations of the late nineteenth century, including the Charity Organisation Society, Miller had first-hand

knowledge of the struggles and injustices the poor faced on a daily basis (Oakley, 1996: ch. 3).<sup>5</sup>

Joining the Eugenics Society made sense for Richard Titmuss as a way of both developing his research interests and advancing his career (Oakley, 1996: 75). Created in 1907 and originally called the Eugenics Education Society, the organisation was an important part of the largely middle-class and professional movement that Donald MacKenzie analysed in his work on the history of statistics (Mackenzie, 1981). Membership offered the potential to make connections with London-based social reformers, social scientists, biologists, medics, and politicians, whom he had few other ways to meet thanks to his modest family background and occupation.

The Eugenics Society was, however, a complex institution with a troubled history. The likes of Francis Galton, the coiner of the word 'eugenics', and Karl Pearson, biometrician and Galton Professor of Eugenics at University College London, whom one might have expected to be among the greatest enthusiasts for the organisation, had been deeply suspicious of what they considered to be the amateurism and populism of much of its membership (Mazumdar, 1992: chs 1-2). Divisions of this kind had persisted throughout the 1910s and 20s, meaning that while the society achieved neither the status nor the financial security of its American equivalent, it also struggled to make the kind of legislative impact its founders had hoped for, particularly in a context in which a growing Labour Party was understandably unenthusiastic about the class dimensions of its work (Hart, 2012; Mazumdar, 1992: chs 4-5; Thomson, 1998).<sup>6</sup> It was therefore no surprise that for around two decades from the mid-1920s onwards there was a drive to put the society on a new footing, particularly under a new secretary, the psychiatrist C. P. Blacker (1895-1975), who

wanted to make the organisation more politically and scientifically respectable (Mazumdar, 1992: chs 3-4; Soloway, 1995: ch. 9).

Central to these developments was what came to be known as 'reform' eugenics: a well-documented turn against what is often referred to as 'mainline' eugenics, the idea that heredity was at the root of all social problems (Kevles, 1984: ch. 11; Paul, 1998: 117-20; Searle, 1976: chs 2, 4, 5, and 7; Soloway, 1995: ch. 8; Renwick, 2016). This movement had a number of different origins. On the one hand, a growing segment of the eugenics movement were uncomfortable with policies such as sterilization – a discomfort that only grew during the 1930s with the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. On the other hand, though, a new generation of often liberal and sometimes leftwing scientists, including Julian Huxley, Alexander Carr-Saunders, and Lancelot Hogben, believed that eugenics, as it had been practiced since the early decades of the twentieth century, was methodologically and conceptually out of date (Renwick, 2016; Mazumdar, 1992; Soloway, 1995; Thomson, 1998; Macnicol, 1989; Werskey, 1978).

Chief among the concerns for reform eugenicists were the family pedigrees that had featured in eugenics research since Galton's first speculative writings on the subject during the 1860s and found a new lease of life in work on the 'social problem group' – a label for the section of society previously referred to by names such as 'the residuum' (Welshman, 2013). These pedigrees were dismissed as simplistic, especially when married with vague and ill-defined conditions such as 'feeble mindedness'. As Alexander Carr-Saunders – a former student of Karl Pearson and the first Charles Booth Professor of Social Science at the University of Liverpool, appointed in 1923 – most famously explained in a Galton Lecture to the Eugenics Society in 1935, these critics believed that eugenics only had a future if it



became a population science: one that focused on large groups, rather than individuals, and made use of statistical tools and evidence (Carr-Saunders, 1935).<sup>7</sup>

Carr-Saunders' advice found a receptive audience, in part because it was rooted in the long-standing biometric research tradition that went back to Galton but also thanks to its resonance with the growing sense that there was more to biosocial science than the reproductive behaviour of small number of people at the bottom of the social pyramid. New organisations, such as the Population Investigation Committee, were created during the 1930s, providing an interface between the Eugenics Society and a new generation of researchers, such as the demographers Enid Charles and David Glass, then working under Lancelot Hogben in the short-lived Department of Biology at the LSE. These people and organisations, which helped refresh the eugenics movement's professional and middle-class credentials, constituted an emerging network in which elements of eugenics were brought into discussions about modernising Britain, especially those to do with concepts such as 'planning' (Renwick, 2016; Ritschel, 1997; Overy, 2010: ch. 2).

Titmuss entered this emerging network and the pay-off was almost immediate. Having struggled to find a publisher for much of what he had produced in his spare time, he was able to find a taker for the manuscript of *Poverty and Population*, which had been rejected by numerous publishers, in 1938. David Glass was central to this breakthrough. Impressed by Titmuss' work, which not only cited Glass' *The Struggle for Population* throughout but shared many concerns with studies being carried out by his colleagues at the LSE, Glass convinced Lord Horder – the royal physician and president of the Eugenics Society – to write a preface for the book, which convinced Macmillan, the book's eventual publisher, that it had the organisation's approval (Oakley, 1996: 77; Horder, 1938).

This endorsement would not be the last helping hand Titmuss received from the society and its members. While the society would sponsor the publication of his book *Birth, Poverty and Wealth* during the war, meeting the social reformer and principal of Morley College, Eva Hubback, put him in touch with Sir Keith Hancock, who would commission him to write *Problems of Social Policy* as part of his multi-volume history of the civil service during the war (Titmuss, 1950; Oakley, 2014: 114). Indeed, Titmuss also met Carr-Saunders, who, as director of the LSE, would appoint him to the chair of social administration in 1950. In fact, such was the relationship between Titmuss and the Eugenics Society that he stood in for Maurice Newfield as editor of the *Eugenics Review*, the society's journal, when Newfield fell ill in 1942 and many of its members were otherwise engaged with government work (Oakley, 1996: chs 5-7).

Titmuss, however, was not the only party to benefit from this relationship. The Eugenics Society was keen to have Titmuss on board, with Blacker seeing him as another young liberal and progressively minded individual whose association with eugenics might help remove some of the stigma that surrounded it in public and political life (Ramsden, 2009). And it was in the context of Titmuss' part in the movement to shape a new intellectual agenda for eugenics that we can see how a range of questions, methods, and assumptions became central to British social science during the middle decades of the century.

### **Eugenics, Social Science, and the Environment**

Titmuss was not only an editor of the *Eugenics Review* during the war; he published regularly in the journal too (see, for example: Titmuss, 1940, 1942, 1943a, 1944). Though his contributions were often short – a product of wartime paper rationing as much as anything else – they were also controversial, with some members of the Eugenics Society uncomfortable with the direction Titmuss seemed to be taking the journal (Oakley, 1996: 186). Yet in addition to being a development of arguments he had set out in the late-1930s, those articles were a logical extension of positions that had been staked out by reform eugenicists and population researchers before the war. Together, those strands would be weaved together to create the tapestry on which he would later embroider a conception of the welfare state as a nest of privileges, including the tax system, from which the middle classes derived substantial benefits.

Titmuss had set out forceful but blunt versions of arguments he would later become well known for in his first book, *Poverty and Population*, which was published in 1938. Focusing on health statistics, particularly mortality and disease rates, the book gave a stark account of the contrasting outcomes that people in different regions of the country could expect after almost two decades of economic difficulty. The starkest divergences were between a prosperous south east and the north of England and Wales, where people simply died earlier and endured a much more difficult existence, as measured by things such as rates of illness, while they were alive. Titmuss' analysis led him to a powerful and uncompromising conclusion: the cause of these problems was to be found in the social structure. To be more specific, the cause was poverty, which led to 'the unnecessary and untimely deaths of 150 men, women and children every day in the North and Wales

throughout at least the last ten years, culminating in a total social waste of over 500,000 human beings' (Titmuss, 1938: 301).

Although Titmuss' emphasis on the structural causes of disease and mortality seemed contrary to the central tenets of eugenics – an early example, perhaps, of the 'standard social science model' that Steven Pinker, among others, has critiqued – it echoed arguments being made by reform eugenicists (Pinker, 2002: 17).<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, Titmuss' focus on the social environment was an exemplar of the approach the biologist and popular science writer Julian Huxley (1887-1975) had recommended in his hugely influential Galton Lecture of 1936 – the year after Carr-Saunders' (Huxley, 1936; Renwick, 2016).<sup>9</sup> Huxley had suggested to his audience at the Eugenics Society, and the readers of the *Eugenics Review*, where the lecture was published, that the lesson of more than half a century of eugenics research was that it was impossible to distinguish between the effects of heredity and the environment, especially when it came to complex social phenomena.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, Huxley claimed that eugenicists should be working on a form of sociological eugenics: 'equalising' the social environment so that each person had an equal opportunity to express their inner potential and thus enabling eugenicists to identify the strongest biological material in the population (Huxley, 1936: 27).

On the other hand, Titmuss' use of language such as 'waste' reflected a discourse that had emerged at the intersection of eugenics and population science, particularly under the socialist geneticist Lancelot Hogben in the Department of Social Biology at the LSE (Renwick, 2014, 2016). Deploying quantitative methods on the results of large surveys, as well publicly available statistics, Hogben's team, which included the radical feminist demographer Enid Charles, the eminent demographer and refugee from Nazi Germany R. R.

Kuczynski, and David Glass, had been the most prominent researchers to marry biological and social science in the name of progressive – often socialistic – politics. In so doing, they created a framework – set out most coherently in the edited collection *Political Arithmetic* – in which differential outcomes across social classes, in particular those relating to educational achievement, were understood as failures of governance (Hogben, 1938a). Titmuss' talk of 'wasted' lives among the country's poor was clearly connected to the Department of Social Biology's arguments about the 'wastage' of human potential when bright working-class children were forced to leave school earlier than middle-class children of equal, or even lesser, ability (Hogben, 1938c; Renwick, 2016).

Titmuss developed these ideas further in his book *Birth, Poverty and Wealth*, the result of research funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which was published in 1943 thanks to a grant from the Eugenics Society. A 'study of inequality... written in the strutted basement of a London house during the bomb-littered winter of 1940-41', the book carried a message every bit as serious as *Poverty and Population* (Titmuss, 1943b: 9). In fact, so stark was the message that his wife, Kay, suggested he simply name the book 'Poor Children Die' – an alternative that goes some way to explaining the belief among some members of the Eugenics Society that the society should not be publishing it (Oakley, 1996: 185). Setting out the statistical picture in relation to differential infant mortality, which Titmuss considered the best measure of a society's willingness to utilise their capacity to control their surroundings, *Birth, Poverty and Wealth* built a powerful argument about people Titmuss called 'casualties of the environment' (Titmuss, 1943b: ch. 9). The results were, once again, depressing, with significant inequalities between the north and south of the country.

Aside from the focus on a single factor, the major difference between *Poverty and Population* and *Birth, Poverty and Wealth* was temporality. *Poverty and Population* had a historical dimension but, for the most part, it was a description of inequality as it existed within the borders of a specific nation and at a particular point in time.<sup>11</sup> In *Birth, Poverty and Wealth*, however, Titmuss sought to develop his arguments about that state of inequality in two quite specific directions. The first was by showing how the inequality between rich and poor children widened during the first 12 months of their lives. Improvements in public health over the previous century had made a significant impact on mortality at birth, Titmuss explained. But from that point onwards the mortality rates for rich and poor children diverged – a consequence, he argued, of cumulative advantages. This point was connected to the second direction of development. It was frequently believed that public health inequalities had improved significantly during the previous century, thanks to both improvements in sanitary infrastructure during the late nineteenth century and then the expansion of social services since the first decade of the 1900s. Titmuss, however, argued that he had

statistical proof that not only has the social differential persisted for at least twenty years but that it has widened greatly. The rigidity of the class structure holds, it seems, in the field of health just as it does in the realm of money. Even by 1931 the risk of death to infants of a considerable section of our population was higher than it was for infants of the peerage during the period 1800-1855. For the period we have covered, the social structure of our community has become increasingly immobilised; yet all the time the illusion of social mobility has been gently fostered.

In 1911 a smaller working population in a poorer nation had to support a larger child population; to-day, more workers, a wealthier community and one and a half million fewer children to care for, yet we maintain a grosser range of health inequality. (Titmuss, 1943b: 99).

Reflecting on the causes of this continuing divergence, Titmuss put it bluntly: 'in all the major causes of death in this country there is little or no evidence of *important* hereditary factors' (Titmuss, 1943b: 68. Original emphasis). Yet, despite the reservations of more conservative members of the Eugenics Society, his argument was actually more sophisticated than the naïve environmentalism it might have appeared to be at first sight. Drawing on Huxley, Titmuss explained that, while he certainly thought nutrition was more important than genes when it came to the things he had been studying, he also believed that social reformers should be aiming to create an equalised social environment so that his theory, as well as the counter view, could be tested properly (Titmuss, 1943b: 68). Indeed, Titmuss claimed that the idea of heredity his interlocutors worked with was itself shaped by social and economic forces. As he put it,

To suggest... that the problem is one of nature versus nurture, as did some early writers, is to misunderstand the whole nature of man. Heredity and environment are not conflicting influences and it is seldom profitable to discuss their complex interaction or their relative influence, except in relation to well-defined characters (e.g. eye-colour) or in studies of defined differences (e.g. in health and intelligence) between limited and precisely differentiated social groups. (Titmuss, 1943b: 62-3).

This argument was most likely to have been derived from Hogben, whose reputation as a biologist was based on his laboratory research that he believed showed, *pace* his great rival Ronald Fisher, that gene-environment interaction is a category distinct from both nature and nurture (Renwick, 2016; Tabery, 2014: ch. 2). While there was a sense in which this argument was a sophisticated dressing for Titmuss' open preference for environmental explanations, it was not incompatible with the thread that ran through his work up until that point and would continue through them for three decades to come: that changing environmental conditions would produce a corresponding effect in the humans that inhabited them. As he put it in an article for the *Eugenics Review* in 1944, entitled 'The Social Environment',

The sciences of nutrition, of psychology and of genetics, are still young; we are only now beginning to grasp first principles. What do we know, for instance, of the significance of the uterine environment and the period of social training before intelligence tests can be applied? What do we know as yet of the inheritance of intelligence; of the transmission of the good genes?... what can we know, in the vastly unequal opportunities offered by a highly stratified society, of the biological endowment and potentialities of the great masses of our fellow men? (Titmuss, 1944: 57).

These ideas were not the only things to link Titmuss' later work with his early engagement with eugenics. Perhaps surprisingly, and as we will now see, the moral framing



to some of his most important post-war writings was also present in his work in the late 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, that moral framing was also connected to the methods he deployed in his influential analysis of social problems.

### **Eugenics, Social Science, and Morals**

In addition to concepts and language, such as 'wastage', Titmuss' work of the 1930s and 40s also shared with reforming biosocial researchers a commitment to quantitative methods as the appropriate means of understanding society. Quantitative methods had a long history in the social sciences, of course, with the 'political arithmetic' and social surveying traditions among those most frequently discussed as the roots of a distinctive British contribution to sociology (Bulmer, 1985; Abrams, 1968). But such methods did not stand in isolation during the interwar years. In many ways, quantitative social analysis was the concomitant of experimental methods in biology, which was unsurprising given Hogben and Huxley were leading figures in the creation of the Society for Experimental Biology during the early 1920s. Like experimental methods in biology, quantitative methods in social science were seen by their promoters as integral to an overarching modernising project – one that professionalised science by making it more rigorous and, in the process, capable of contributing to social and political reform (Erlingsson, 2005; Renwick, 2014).

The association between experimental methods in biology and quantitative methods in social science came about, in part, because many of the social scientists who promoted them saw quantitative research methods as an appropriate substitute for the experiments

that could not be carried out on social science subject matter. The LSE's director, the economist William Beveridge, for instance, had written about the importance of 'observation and detachment' in social science research when establishing the Rockefeller Foundation-funded project that brought Hogben to the college and openly criticised economists including Lionel Robbins and Friedrich Hayek for what he considered to be their insufficiently rigorous philosophical approaches (Renwick, 2014; Beveridge, 1937; Hogben, 1938b). Although Beveridge stood out in his evangelism for a particularly extreme form of positivism, he was not alone in his technocratic belief that data collection and analysis had the potential to both elevate social science to the status of the natural sciences and take the heat out of political debates by providing objective answers to social and economic problems.

Titmuss' approach, which can be broadly be described as a form of social accounting that was closely related to the methods pursued by Glass and his contemporaries, was clearly shaped by his actuarial training. Indeed, unlike his wife, Kay, who had spent the 1930s volunteering as a social worker, Titmuss constructed his view of society almost entirely from documents he viewed in his office at the LSE and in his study at home, first in Chiswick and then, after 1951, Acton. Yet it would be a mistake to see Titmuss as a cold and detached observer of social phenomena. While his writings such as *Poverty and Population* and *Birth, Poverty and Wealth* contained frequent flourishes of outrage at the injustices of modern industrial society, he deployed quantitative methods within a deeply moral framework.

Titmuss' ethical concerns have been explored by a number of scholars. Philippe Fontaine and Ben Jackson, for example, have looked at Titmuss' exchanges with Arthur

Seldon, founder of the neoliberal think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, during the 1960s, in order to throw light on the origins of Titmuss' most famous book, *The Gift Relationship* (Titmuss, 1970; Jackson, 2019; Fontaine, 2002). A comparative study of blood donation, primarily in Britain and the USA, which was first published in 1970, *The Gift Relationship* aimed to explain what made systems that ultimately depended on individuals choosing to handover a pint of their blood for the treatment of complete strangers work. Titmuss argued that systems such as Britain's, in which donors did not receive payments, were superior to schemes in which financial incentives were offered because, contrary to the expectation of Seldon and others, money reduced efficiency, particularly by encouraging donations from people who, thanks to problems such as drug dependency, had transmissible diseases. This was a deeply moralistic view of human action that contrasted sharply with early neoliberal ideas about reforming the welfare state, which elevated self-interest above values such as altruism (Jackson, 2019).

This vision had taken shape more than three decades earlier and been articulated in Titmuss' writings on eugenics and population. Ethical issues were prominent in the debate about eugenics, of course, thanks to the controversy over the Eugenics Society's campaigns for policies such as sterilization – both forced and voluntary – and, from the early 1930s onwards, developments in Nazi Germany. But ethics and morals were also an important part of the explanatory framework in population research – a field that had been constructed in the 1930s as a space in which questions about fertility rates, health, and other related matters could be studied separately from eugenics and all its associated problems. Indeed, the Population Investigation Committee, co-founded by the Eugenics Society following Carr-Saunders' Galton Lecture in 1935, was created with the expressed

intention of getting to the bottom of trends such as the declining birth rate, which Enid Charles had famously suggested might lead to a population as small as five million within a century, which many people believed eugenicists were simply ill-equipped to discuss (Charles, 1935: 6; Charles, 1936; Renwick, 2016; Soloway, 1995: chs 9-11; Grebnik, 1991).

An important point of reference in these discussions was the work of Swedish husband and wife, the economist Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) and the sociologist Alva Myrdal (1902-1986), authors of books such as *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* [*Crisis in the Population Question*], which was first published in Swedish in 1934, and *Population: A Problem for Democracy*, which appeared in English six years later (Myrdal and Myrdal, 1934; Myrdal, 1940). The Myrdals framed demography – specifically the prospect of contracting population numbers thanks to declining fertility rates – as the major challenge for leftwing and centre-left politics. In so doing, they paid particular attention to not only the problems that came with formulating a progressive population policy but also the shortcomings of social engineering as a means of achieving it, specifically when it came to the matter of generating popular support. For the Myrdals, the answer to all these questions laid in the provision of services in kind by the state – an idea that was hugely influential in Sweden and helped initiate the long-running fascination with the Scandinavian welfare model in Britain.

Titmuss – a member of the Population Policies Committee, an offshoot of the Population Investigation Committee, where Francois Lafitte had produced extensive position papers on the expansion of services in kind in Britain before the war – was deeply influenced by the Myrdals' writings, citing them regularly (Oakley, 1996: chs 8 and 11). But he fused their commentary on the political problems confronting the technical dimensions of population policy with a moral analysis that owed a huge debt to the LSE economic

historian and political philosopher R. H. Tawney, whose criticisms of capitalism as a system that corroded people's values and conduct were hugely influential in mid-twentieth-century Britain (Tawney, 1920; Tawney, 1931; Goldman, 2013; Rogan, 2017).<sup>12</sup>

As he and Kay Titmuss explained in their jointly authored book, *The Parents Revolt*, which was published in 1942, and carried the Tawny-inspired subtitle, *A Study of the Declining Birthrate in Acquisitive Societies*, Richard Titmuss believed 'the reality of population is the root of all problems. It is the foundation of all else, the rock on which every social and economic problem is based'. Drawing on the work of a familiar group of researchers, including David Glass, the Titmusses surveyed recent British history to explain population growth during the 1800s and the decline of fertility rates since the 1870s (Titmuss and Titmuss, 1942: 13). Bemoaning an ageing population as a stultifying force, which was ossifying the social structure and preventing young people from advancing in a range of areas, including their careers, they put the blame for declining fertility rates firmly at the feet of the kind of capitalism that had been allowed to develop in Britain since the late Victorian era – specifically 'the psychological atmosphere of a society which places acquisitiveness before children'.

Personal attitudes towards parenthood are conditioned by social values and children are economic handicaps. The environment of the twentieth century is an unpleasant, unhealthy and immoral blend of acquisitiveness and war. It depends on one's status and cultural background—on Mayfair, the City of London or the Public Assistance Committee—whether one strives for more money or whether one struggles to hold on to what one has. The illusion that social success flows from a competitive life still

holds. That it is only an illusion for most is clearly shown by the growth of monopoly. What is true of industry applies also to the individual. Both the non-combine industry and the non-privileged individual batter unavailingly against the brick wall of a highly immobilised society. A ceaseless socio-economic struggle goes on between individuals and groups of individuals in the belief that mobility is possible and unaware of the chains of a static society. There is not breathing space, no rest (as there was when success under free competition was possible for a few), so the struggle for success and for survival becomes more and more demoniac. (Titmuss and Titmuss, 1942: 131).

In this respect, the Titmusses argued, society was not a biological failure, as some biosocial researchers had argued since the early twentieth century, but a moral one, with society's failure to reproduce itself a sign that it was not cultivating the kinds of ethical and social values that encouraged individuals to have sufficient numbers of children.

## **Conclusion**

In many ways, Titmuss' moral view of population science – and the population problem in particular – stands out because of its relationship with the quantitative methods he deployed alongside it and for which he later became widely known. The alliance between morals and quantitative methods makes sense, however, in light of much recent scholarship on the history of British sociology – particularly Mike Savage's concepts of 'gentlemanly' and

‘technical’ identities. Although Titmuss was one of the dominant figures in British social science during the third quarter of the twentieth century, he was not part of the movement that established much of the apparatus that became central to sociology during that period – namely the interview based social survey, which he often criticised as an impressionistic activity (Savage, 2010: 166). Titmuss certainly shared a number of characteristics and preoccupations with those more fully of the technical persuasion, specifically his upwardly mobile biography and his interest in a project shaped by what Savage describes as ‘science, practicality, and technique’, but he also had roots in the gentlemanly tradition, notably the mapping of populations and questions about moral worth, which, as Savage has shown, persisted in British social science through the decade after the Second World War (Savage, 2010: 92). These two strands were fused in Titmuss’ work to create a kind of Janus-faced social analysis that was modernising in obvious ways yet, at the same time, shaped by a set of preoccupations that his successors would not have.<sup>13</sup>

As I have shown these issues were deeply entangled with biosocial science in interwar Britain. While eugenics provided both the network through which Titmuss was able to compensate for his lack of both academic qualifications and social and cultural capital, it was also a genuine intellectual space in which people like him could explore questions about social change that took into account issues including heredity and environment, which would be translated into a related social scientific language including terms such as structure and agency. To be sure, there was an opportunistic aspect to Titmuss’ engagement with eugenics but it would be naïve to suggest that it was entirely so. Eugenics provided an important context in which he worked out ideas, methods, and an overall

approach to society and social systems that would form the basis of his work for the rest of his career.

None of this is an evaluative judgement on Titmuss or his work. It is, however, important in understanding what made Titmuss who he was and how, in turn, he came to shape social policy: a distinctly British branch of the sociological enterprise. Yet, at the same time, it helps us understand more about milieu out of which the discipline of sociology emerged after the Second World War. Few disciplines, especially among the social sciences, recognise eugenics as part their history, primarily because they assume their interests are some way removed from pre-1939 eugenicists. However, as we have seen, eugenics was not only a more complex enterprise than is often recognised, it also helped shape important parts of British social scientific thought and practice.

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\* I wish to thank, firstly, Plamena Panayotova for the invitation to speak at the conference on the history of sociology in Britain, held at the University of Edinburgh in April 2018, where a version of this paper was first presented. The conference was a great success, with thought-provoking questions and lively discussion. I must also thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/L007312/1), whose financial assistance made the research for this paper possible.

<sup>1</sup> Lafitte is a strangely understudied figure, lacking even an *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry. For more on Lafitte see Deakin, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> This description of Titmuss is often quoted but only seldom attributed to Leach, almost always without reference to an original source. See, for example, Kynaston, 2007: 26.

<sup>3</sup> For further accounts of Titmuss' life and work see Gowing, 1975; Reisman, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect, my take on Titmuss' development mirrors some of distinctions Joel Isaac has made in his account of Thomas Kuhn – specifically the idea that there is a difference between the context of production and reception of some of their most important work (Isaac, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the history of social work in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain see Abrams, 1968: ch. 4; Seed, 1973; Shaw, 2014. For a recent study of women's particular contribution to social work in that period, as well as social reform and welfare more generally, see Oakley, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For a comparative histories of eugenics in this period see: Kevles, 1984; Paul, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Carr-Saunders is another figure about whom puzzlingly little has been written, though, unlike Lafitte, he does, at least, have an *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry. For more on Carr-Saunders see: Osborne and Rose, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Though, of course, Pinker seems to have recently changed course, arguing that things really are getting better and that humans respond to a kind of Eliasian civilizing process (Pinker, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> For more on Huxley, see: Waters and van Helden, 1992. See also Smith, 2003 for an excellent contextualization biology and progressive thought in which Huxley is a case study.



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<sup>10</sup> Titmuss would cite Huxley's lecture frequently in the 1940s. See, for example, Titmuss, 1943b: 68.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in this respect, Titmuss' work fits with what David Edgerton has described as the emergence of "the nation" in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century. On Edgerton's account this is to be expected as the post-Second World War welfare state was part of the moment of nationalisation that was itself possible because of a shift to thinking about Britain less as a liberal and global power and more as a coherent and singular entity with its own internal history and logic (Edgerton, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Titmuss later contributed a preface to a new edition of Tawney's *Equality* (Titmuss 1964).

<sup>13</sup> "Janus-faced" is a term deployed by the historian Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs (1991) to describe the natural philosopher Isaac Newton's complex science and character.

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