

Disability Studies: An Introduction
Prof. Hemachandran Karah
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture 15

Eugenics

Hello, welcome back to our course on disability studies. Today's topic is "Eugenics", the theme of the lecture today is eugenics, what the hell it is. That's how I have titled it. Well it is really hell. And that's the reason I got you the title this way. What is it then eugenics. Well eugenics is a modern phenomenon, modern in the sense for it has been invoked for at least two hundred to three hundred years, more so as the technology progressed and we entered technological modernity eugenics became more aggressive. What is it then? Well eugenics is based on the idea that by improving or deploying technologies of various kinds, including annihilation basically killing people you can improve human race. Perfect people, people with perfect body, perfect mind, perfect energy, perfect IQ, now perfect EQ, emotional quotient they say and so on. So in other words, it is in some sense an attitude and a science of making human race perfect. That can be the working definition of eugenics. What's wrong with it?

First of all, there is the idea that we can create human communities which are perfect is a myth, it cannot happen, then why does this impulse exist in the first place. You can ask me. My answer is this, human communities, whether it is families, neighbourhood, town, city or a clan or a tribe, they always had some logic about they always created some story logic or discourse about their community being perfect. You know, I'm good, you're not that good. My family is great. Your family is not that. I look fair, but you don't. My city is beautiful yours is not, my country is great and my neighbour's country is not. They create this kind of ideas to achieve internal cohesion sometime, to achieve pride sometimes. So the idea that the other, somebody out there is lesser human dehumanize, dehumanisation in other words, always existed. Make no mistake, people were killed and annihilated, war between tribes, communities and nations always

existed and the idea that one's own community is superior to others, also existed, so eugenics as an idea is not new, it always existed. The idea of dehumanisation also existed all the time. But with the arrival of scientific modernity something has happened. Look, if we have to annihilate people we have to put them under the knife, but if we have science behind the crudeness of annihilation, the crudeness of mass killing the crudeness of erasing the humanity in the other person can go. It can make it appear mild and objective and that's precisely happen with the genetic movement. If you like eugenics is the pursuit of the wellborn, it is a scientifically sanctioned idea that human race can be perfected.

Eugenics as the term was coined in the year 1883 by Francis Galton. Ever since its coinage it got the imagination of science, technology and modernity and connected with science and technology. First Darwin's theory of evolution that human species compete with each other to survive. And only that which can breed well and that which breed successfully will succeed. And in the competition only the survival of the fittest, fittest will make it to the limelight actually was the driving force and cultural force behind this eugenics movement. What does science have to do with it? Let's tease it out, scientific rationalism, technological pragmatism and ideology of progress can be grouped together to discuss science's backing. Let's take scientific rationalism, to be rational, one would say one should read out, as it were, should remove irrationality, example, take a concept like quality-of-life, somebody who is having ill-health may be disabled elderly person, a person with stunted growth and all the rest a person who cannot make much sense of himself or herself, say a person with dementia and all that and all the rest.

There are a million other conditions, one can keep citing them. Quality of life viewed rationally and based on scientific principles and orientation on that parameter the above-mentioned people categories of people can be said to be having lower quality-of-life. So what to do with them? Well stop life sustenance on them, and stop supporting them. One may even think that resources of the nation of community is spoiled if you unnecessarily support, say people with dementia, elderly people so stop supporting

them, let them perish because they're not fittest anyway. Technological pragmatism, one would say if technology is there, if it ensures quality-of-life, then better make use of it. If I choose not to use a technology then I may be called a moron for example. Let me give a solid example, take deaf communities for example, people who were born deaf and that do not much miss the sense of sound, but people who do not understand this may insist well wear Cochlear implants. Cochlear implants are those devices that you stick inside in between brain and ear and therefore it can improve some hearing. Well, it may be successful with others. Some may need it, the above-mentioned people, people who are born deaf and they are use to sign language will not prefer it because it is a very poor substitute for a rich sign language through which they flourish as people, so those who resist cochlear implantation for example, will be called by eugenics those who invest too much on technology and its interventionist potential will say, look, you are a moron, you're resisting scientific route to good life. You're refusing good life in other words.

Well much more can be said, I'll give you one more example, take urban planning. All you need to do is look around. Okay, when you look around you see how our modern cities are shaping up, suppose there is going to be an Asian game in my city, the first thing what people do you know, chuck out all the beggars, weed out not so good looking houses, get rid of all those people who look and behave deviantly, make the city polished that everything be perfect. All houses look like houses in Singapore, make no mistake we have such impulses. So scientific rationalism, technological pragmatism and the ideology that only progress matters that which drags on progress counter narrative to progress keep them out. You may say, oh, well this all this may exist but we do have the annihilation of humankind orchestrated removal of humans that doesn't happen in the way you are describing. Wait a minute this is not true. We had nasty history that demonstrates ably eugenics did exist and does exist in myriad forms. In the first lecture I am just concerned about how things are happening, for example, how does eugenics practically work? Who are its target audience? For example, like I mentioned before, people who look different racial and ethnic minority, people who have different sexual orientation, says such as homosexuality, behavioural deviance, having wrong behaviour

at the wrong place. Chronic illness and atypical temperaments. All this can attract the focus of a eugenicist well then, in which case, whom does eugenics want people with high IQ, so that their offspring are great. People with hereditary superiority it is like pedigree, my father was this, my grandpa was this, remember I'm excluding women here, and therefore I will be like this, and my children may be potentially better because my pedigree is that and so on.

Now having all this orientation in place how does eugenics work? To put it precisely, it works as a method of social engineering, little drops of water make a mighty ocean. They say little, little microscopic genes eugenic ideas can gather as a momentum to aid a larger project of social engineering. Nazi Germany, people who are affected their hands they even shudder when one mentions the word Nazi Germany. Hitler ordered Jews, mad people, racial minorities and other racial minorities, and so on to be killed in gas chamber. We lost millions in the early part of the 20 century to this impulse. Hitler and his cohort believed that the presence of Jews, mad people, disable and so on will corrupt superiority and therefore they were killed like kittens or rats and and this led to mass and hellish. This madness went on until the Second World War, after which people realise that eugenics doesn't have an end because the idea of perfection is a symbolic idea. There is no scale. How can I say I am perfect than you or vice versa there is no scale. My grandma used to say all figures are not the same. Therefore, brothers and sisters siblings in the same family will not be the same. Well, this is an ancient grandma wisdom that unfortunately will not work for eugenics. So where do we go from now on? Eugenics did create havoc and how do we understand eugenics, in the contemporary time. That's a question that we need to ask now. While eugenics as an idea exist in many ways, because the idea that one can perfect human race via science and technology has not yet died. We have no advances in medicine, genetics, surgical intervention, pharmacological intervention. Now we are beginning to understand that eugenics will penetrate, the idea does penetrate modern interventionist technologies such as genetics, for example let us take prenatal testing.

In India the story is very different, India is notorious for female infanticide, even in Tamil

Nadu where I am living a famous movie, "Karutamma" graphically depicts how little infants, female girl children were just nudged by poison and they were annihilated because they will grow up to be a woman who will again burden their parents because they have to pay the dowry. Get them married, face social violence against women, all that will follow why face all that so just finish them, so the female infanticide in many ways is a contemporary manifestation of eugenic idea that womanliness femininity is actually a burden to human race that the idea and it worked so much havoc in our society. It is improving now, female infanticide is illegal in our society, but misogyny, hatred of women and violence against women do exist in many other shapes that's the truth. Prenatal testing and now technology allows to test the quality of foetus and when disability is detected one is permitted to terminate pregnancy.

Tom Shakespeare, have a problem with this approach. That is why because you basically say, well you as a disabled person you live because prenatal testing did not exist at your time or somehow prenatal testing went wrong. That is why you are here, basically making a statement that one is alive because technology went wrong. I recall Michael Sandel in the famous Reith lecture series, he was saying basically like this. He does not advocate drugs for, say, athletic competition say Olympics and so on. Because of the because of an important reason, says people have always been taking vitamin E is special dietary supplements and all that to do great in athletics so what is the problem in using drugs. Sandel says, well, you cannot use drugs, not because I will be advantaged than somebody else here are not because of that reason but because when somebody wins and athletic competition we will end up asking what drug did you use, so it'll be a competition between one drug company as opposed other company than to human people who you know with great vigour and human confidence won a grand competition like the Olympics. So now what is the idea. The idea that the human race will become perfect with interventions such as drugs, technologies and all that is a counter-productive idea. Likewise, the idea that you can annihilate without violence very mildly passively using modern technologies science and rational thought is also equally violent. The idea of eugenics captures this problem very bad. Hope it was a useful. Thank you.