

“Africa, Race and Institutional Failure”

by

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NOBEL LAUREATE James Watson’s forced retirement, after venturing from biology to social policy with disparaging remarks about the intelligence of Africans, suggests that the public is less tolerant these days of such utterances. But his observation that he is “inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa” because “all social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours” also hints that, whether in debates about immigration or aid to the developing world, his eugenics-rooted analysis is perhaps more prevalent than one would like to believe.

Taking heed of George Santayana’s warning —“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” — we look at what we have forgotten.

Watson’s remarks call to mind debates in the 19th Century over Ireland and the West Indies. There, too, the debate centered on the seemingly simple question of whether the Irish (or the former slaves in Jamaica) were as intelligent as the English. In “What is to be Done with Ireland” and other articles, the philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill argued that the Irish were inherently no different from the English. The soon-to-be forgotten co-founder of eugenics, W. R. Greg, argued that the Irish were inherently different, “idiosyncratic.” For Greg, different meant inferior.

On the policy side, the debate fits with Watson’s statement as well — if the Irish were inferior to the English, then English social and economic policy wouldn’t work there. Something else had to be devised.

Eugenics was one answer that gained currency for well over a century. Not surprisingly, Watson has also come out in favor of eugenics.

Think of this simple framework as a way to talk about impoverished nations, populated by poor people and governed by some sort of institutional framework. We can explain their poverty by saying the people are inferior; or by saying the institutions (government) is inferior. If the people are inferior and we agree that they’re still basically human, then a policy response to somehow look after them follows. We should send them money (better yet, goods) and tell them what to do with it. They’ll never do quite as well as we do but we can all feel better by looking after them as best we can. Of course, as Watson points out, eugenic policy might be used to do something about this as well: allowing deaths among the very poor, preventing immigration of the wrong sorts of people, encouraging the right sorts of births.

On the other side of this, if the people in the country are poor because their governments function poorly, because markets don’t work to allow people to use the

resources they have to make and trade things, then the policy response (from the West) would be to try to ensure that trade flows are opened up and function well. Eugenics has no role.

In the 19th Century debate over Irish and West Indian poverty, this was exactly how the “experts” lined up. Mill and a number of other political economists argued that West Indian former slaves and the Irish were poor because the incentive to work, trade and save were messed up.

The writer and historian Thomas Carlyle argued that the former slaves were poor because they were lazy and no amount of money would get them to work like white English folks. For the Irish, the case was made, as well, that they’d simply always be poor because they drank and danced too much.

Then eugenics entered, taking an immigration twist. A famous British statistician, Karl Pearson, tried to show “scientifically” that the English ought not let Jews emigrate to England, as this would degrade the gene pool. In America, immigration limits were influenced by eugenic thinking, and many states practiced “negative eugenic” policies of forced sterilization.

What is to be done with Africa? In a different context, Mill made the case that it’s not good science to conclude that a policy isn’t working until you know all the underlying conditions are the same. In the case of the African nations, we know that underlying conditions are different from those in America. Why would we expect Africans to behave as ordinary Americans do, when they face extraordinary insecurity of property and life? Inflation rates in Zimbabwe are reported to be something like 8,000 percent this month!

Economists need to take much of the blame for failed attempts to raise African living standards. We have tended to make the case that we can impose Western policies on African nations without taking into account that the overall institutional structure — the system of governing and buying and selling — are extraordinarily different from ours. Giving money and telling Africans how to spend it — directing African governments or U.N. agencies on how to spend it — simply won’t work very well when markets are ill-functioning. And the policy failure isn’t because, as Watson claims, the people in Africa are stupid. Instead, it’s largely — as Mill said about Ireland — an institutional failure.

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