



BAD BLOOD: The Story of Eugenics is a six-part documentary podcast from the BBC which was released in November 2022. British Geneticist Adam Rutherford presents the ‘dark history and its troubling present’ of the movement to breed better people.

The term ‘eugenics’ comes from the Greek – ‘good birth’, but a more modern interpretation could be ‘good genes’. It was coined in 1883 by polymath Francis Galton who (influenced by his famous cousin Charles Darwin) became obsessed with selective evolution and the need for ‘race hygiene’. He advocated a system which would allow “the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable”. His theory was based on the belief that our genes determine life outcomes, and it originally developed with the idea of improving society.

The series traces the development of eugenics from Victorian England, where Galton was able to present eugenics as a science (he coined the term ‘nature versus nurture’) which led to the development of the Eugenics Education Society in 1907. The first international eugenics conference, held in 1912, promoted ideas such as the ‘inferiority’ of the lower classes and the need to eliminate ‘defectives’ through forced sterilization. Galton also espoused the need to change the nation’s breeding patterns, by promoting reproduction of ‘superior’ citizens. By World War I, many scientific authorities and political leaders supported eugenics.

The series traces the exportation of these ideas to the USA, where the arrival of millions of poor European immigrants were threatening the ‘old stock’ American establishment. Thereupon programs ranging from sterilisation to contraception were implemented to control who had children, and who didn’t.

Obviously when we think about eugenics, we often come to the eugenic policies of the Nazis. The series explores what drove these programs, and how they developed so quickly. Nazi application of eugenics principles to support the elimination of an entire race is surely the darkest moment in the troubling history of eugenics. But have we really left eugenics behind?

In the latter episodes, Rutherford reviews recent advances in genetic engineering, genetic testing and embryo selection, raising the question of whether current cutting-edge technologies combined with the power of personal choice could achieve the kind of genetic perfection that 20th century eugenicists were after. Are they an extension of the eugenic programs of the past? Or do these technologies open up new opportunities to correct social inequalities? I will leave it to you to decide.

Genetic determinism is the belief that our genes define who we are. It suggests that human health, behaviour and disease are directly controlled by one's genes. Genetic determinism is problematic in that it reduces each of us to a molecular entity, equating human beings, in all their complexity, with their genes. While there are many reasons why this conflicts with a Christian worldview, eugenics goes further to suggest that only those with desirable characteristics should be allowed to reproduce, because society would be improved by removing those with 'undesirable' hereditary traits. This is in contrast to the Christian idea that all human beings are made in the image of God, and as such, all should be treated equally and with dignity, and valued as members of our community (Gen 1:26-27).

While this podcast deals with disturbing subject matter, I was impressed by the sustained tone of factual reporting, which managed to communicate concern for the ideas presented without becoming emotional. It is an accessible history of eugenics, and, while not a Christian production, is recommended for those who have wondered about the direction of modern reproductive healthcare. We need to remain aware of these insidious ideas so that we don't become complacent in the fight against them.

BAD BLOOD: THE STORY OF EUGENICS can be accessed here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001fd36>

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