

DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER...

LEN SHACKLETON on the
folly of rewriting history



The recent furore at University College London – where a committee is considering removing the names of Marie Stopes and Francis Galton from lecture theatres – is typical of today's judgmental view of the past.

Eugenics is the term given to the late 19th/first half of the 20th century belief that some genetic groups are superior to others, and that policy ought to promote a sort of "selective breeding" of the kind which "improved" dogs, cattle, sheep and other domesticated animals.

This could be done by encouraging "superior" genetic stock (perhaps through financial bounties to motherhood) and discouraging "inferior" types from breeding. In the United States, and most notoriously in Nazi Germany, this involved sterilising mentally handicapped people – and in the latter case, actually murdering them.

This seems to us now to be barbaric nonsense.

But this was not the view of many of the most 'progressive' of our great-grandparents. Galton and Stopes were not outliers. They were in distinguished company. Such progressive heroes as George Bernard Shaw, Harold Laski, Lord Beveridge and the editorial staff of the New

Statesman were all keen exponents of the doctrine.

Any witch-hunt of past wrong-thinkers is going to have a busy time, and economists will not be spared. William Stanley Jevons, Alfred Marshall, Irving Fisher and Arthur Cecil Pigou all expressed the view that the white "race" was superior and favoured its promotion.

Most economists, whether on the right or left, would acknowledge John Maynard Keynes as one of the great figures in world economics in the 20th century.

But Keynes was more sympathetic than most to eugenics: he was in fact director of the Eugenics Society from 1937 to 1944. Although he wrote relatively little directly on the doctrine, it is an important sub-text to two of his most famous essays, "The End of Laissez-faire" and "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren" in his *Essays in Persuasion*.

Should we rename the University of Kent's Keynes College, or demand that King's College Cambridge (whose wealth Keynes hugely augmented as bursar) pay reparations to today's young people with learning difficulties?

In one view, perhaps. But I would argue that this attitude to the past is foolish. We are

all influenced by the standards of our times, and most of our current orthodoxies will one day seem as stupid and bigoted as eugenics appears to today's "woke" students.

We see this in our own lives. My own ideas when I was twenty were crass and simplistic, and I've changed them (many times) since.

Francis Galton was a polymath who, amongst many other achievements, developed the concept of correlation on which so much scientific analysis depends. Marie Stopes pioneered the promotion of contraception, which greatly eased the lot of many working-class women.

Their association with UCL deserves to be memorialised.

By all means stick up plaques which explain that some of their ideas were wrong – they were probably big enough people to accept this, and today's students deserve to be able to form a rounded view – but please don't shovel them into the dustbin of history just yet.

We're all on the way there anyway●

Len Shackleton

Professor of Economics
University of Buckingham

len.shackleton@buckingham.ac.uk