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## “THE EUGENIC VOTE”

### EUGENICS AND SUFFRAGE RHETORIC IN THE EDWARDIAN PERIOD

VÉRONIQUE MOLINARI

**Pre-print version**

On 31<sup>st</sup> August 1911, as the issue of the postponement of the second Conciliation Bill by the government<sup>1</sup> was still being debated in Parliament and suffrage militancy was reaching its peak, an article appeared in the national organ of the main suffragist organisation (the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies). Its title, “The Eugenic Vote”, brought together two apparently antagonistic terms, one essentially related to women’s subordination to motherhood, the other to female emancipation. Its contents, however, was a forceful argument that, among the current controversies about “free feeding, vaccination, education, care of the feeble-minded, claims of the old”, women’s suffrage was essential to eugenic aims and that it was “significant”, in this respect, “that this new outburst of eugenic energy [was] coincident with the new woman’s movement” (Stevenson, 356).

Eugenics, “the study of agencies under social control which may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations” in the words of its founder (Galton: 1909, 81),<sup>2</sup> had, by the turn of the century, become increasingly popular among British intellectual circles and, as already illustrated by a number of studies (Bland; Robb; Richardson: 2001, 2008; Jones: 1995), appealed to a large number of women. That some feminists among them should have adopted some of the very ideas that had been —and continued to be—used against female emancipation (including women’s access to higher education and to political rights) and which they had tried to challenge remains, however, somewhat difficult to understand. Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> A first Conciliation Bill to extend the parliamentary franchise to women householders had been introduced by a Labour MP, David Shackleton, in June the previous year and had passed its second reading by a large majority but Parliament had been dissolved before it could be enacted. A second Conciliation bill was introduced following the return of the Liberals to government and passed its second reading in May with an even larger majority. A few weeks later, on May 29, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that, owing to the conditions of business, the government could not allot the bill the amount of time it required but would do so in the next parliamentary session.

<sup>2</sup> The term eugenics was coined by Galton in 1883 from the Greek word “eugenes”, ie “good in birth”.

this article, although noticeable because of its title, was far from being the only one to use eugenic arguments to support the cause of women's suffrage.

To understand this process, and to determine whether the adoption of eugenic arguments in suffrage rhetoric stemmed from genuine adherence to eugenic concerns or corresponded to a process of instrumentalisation, one needs to take a closer look at eugenic arguments and, more particularly, at the points of convergence with the feminist movement which made this reappropriation process possible.

### **Eugenics and the women's movement**

Although eugenic theories appeared in the 1860s with the works of Francis Galton,<sup>3</sup> it was in the early twentieth century that, in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1870s and as a result of a combination of factors that seemed to point to the decline of Britain's economic and imperial pre-eminence, the movement truly gained a large following. The steady decline of the fertility rate that had taken place since 1851,<sup>4</sup> the 40% rejection rate among the urban military recruits that was reported during the second Boers War (Jordan, 168) and corroborating statistics that demonstrated the diminishing size, weight and health of the recruits were all taken up by both imperialists and eugenicists to raise the question of British military strength and racial efficiency. The looming threat of Germany, which was widely seen as a much more efficient nation, added urgency to the issue after 1902, as fears about a possible physical deterioration were coming to a climax. While no evidence for such a thing as a "degeneration of the race" or "physical deterioration" was found by the inter-departmental committee on physical deterioration that reported in 1904 (*The Times*, 29 August 1904), these fears contributed to a surge of interest in eugenics<sup>5</sup> and to its transformation from a relatively obscure, neo-Darwinist, statistically-based science into an organized propaganda movement<sup>6</sup> which influenced the social policies led by the Liberal

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<sup>3</sup> Galton believed that "a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world." (*Hereditary Genius*, 1869); "if talented men were mated with talented women, of the same mental and physical characters as themselves, generation after generation, we might produce a highly-bred human race, with no more tendency to revert to meaner ancestral types than is shown by our long-established breeds of race-horses and fox-hounds".(Galton, 1865).

<sup>4</sup> From 304 births/1,000 married women aged fifteen to forty-five in 1851 to 234/1,000 in 1903 (Soloway 1990, 6-7).

<sup>5</sup> Among its recommendations, originating from Pr. D. J. Cunningham, was an anthropometric survey of the British population (Report of the Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, 95-102).

<sup>6</sup> The Eugenics Education Society was created in the Winter 1907-8 under the impulse of Sybil Gotto to spread the new science and soon launched its own journal, *The Eugenics Review*. It could boast a fast-growing

government between 1906 and 1911 in the fields of free school meals, free medical care and old age pensions. On the grounds of a belief in hard heredity, as propounded by Galton, most eugenicists proposed to improve the biological traits of the British race through “positive” eugenics, which implied the promotion of procreation of those deemed “fit”.<sup>7</sup>

Because they came to the fore in public debate among growing fears of the threat to national health and efficiency that the urban poor might represent, it is not surprising, then, that female demands for expanded educational, professional and political rights should have raised concerns about the impact of women’s emancipation on the production and nurturing of the British race. The growing militancy of the suffrage movement after 1905 added fuel to the debate, all the more since the peak years of militancy (1907-1913) corresponded both to the years when the Liberal Governments of Bannerman and Asquith introduced the most important reforms of their welfare programme and to a period when eugenic publications multiplied (Saleeby: 1909, 1911; Murray Leslie: 1910-11; Scharlieb: 1912). Thus, the year the article entitled “The Eugenic Vote” was published, 1911, was the year the National Insurance Act was passed and when Caleb Saleeby and Murray Leslie respectively published *Woman and Womanhood* and “Woman’s Progress in Relation to Eugenics”.

The preoccupation of eugenicists with motherhood and the hereditary worth of families and classes certainly made them alert to the social characteristics of the women’s movement and, in particular, to the involvement of middle-class women –presumably among the best candidates for motherhood. Central to the debate was the question whether women’s demands for greater emancipation were compatible with the needs of the race. “There is no doubt that the new woman is a more interesting companion than her predecessor, and that she has made great progress in the arts and sciences, in trades and professions”, Dr Murray Leslie wrote in 1911, “but the question of questions is –is she a better mother of the race?” (283). On this issue, not all shared the same view. For many eugenicists, who saw women as primarily

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membership (had risen to 634 by 1914 and affiliated branches in Belfast, Birmingham, Liverpool, Oxford... ) but, more important than the size of the Society’s following, Searles notes, was “the intellectual caliber and the social prestige of its membership”, which led to the Society being called to give evidence to the Home Office Inebriates Enquiry and before the Royal Commission on Divorce, and obtained from the government the setting up of a Royal Commission of Enquiry into Syphilis. Searle writes : “given the nature of the Society’s work, and the hostility it aroused in some quarters, and the giggling embarrassment in others, it was essential that the organization attract men of weight, gravity, and established reputation. By and large, it did so. Almost the entire biological establishment joined the E.E.S., and many of the most distinguished geneticists took an active part in its day to day work”(Searle, 11)

<sup>7</sup> “Negative” eugenics, which implied the active reduction of the fertility of the lower-classes through curtailment or prevention, was deemed at the time both politically and legislatively impossible. In 1913, The 1913 Mental Deficiency Act was to propose the mass segregation of the "feeble minded" from the rest of society but sterilisation programmes (even voluntary ones were never legalized).

created for the reproduction and nurture of the race and initially even positioned them essentially as “breeders” (in Galton’s theories, women were to function as a medium for the transmission of “genius” from father to son), the vote, higher education or work were likely to divert middle-class women from their primary tasks of childbearing and childrearing and might even have an impact on their maternal capacities. Emancipated women would not only become unwomanly (and unattractive, therefore, to men of their “stock”), they would have less time, if married, to bear and raise their children, and would therefore leave to women of the lower grades of society the responsibility for the reproduction of the race.<sup>8</sup> Francis Galton thus voted against granting degrees to women in Cambridge in 1897 (Rowold, 52) and later became a committee-member of the Anti-Suffrage League.<sup>9</sup> He was later joined by several other eugenic opponents of women’s suffrage. In “Woman’s Progress in Relation to Eugenics”, Dr Murray Leslie confirmed : “We wish for the fit, not the unfit, women of England to be the mothers of its future sons and daughters [...] it is a noteworthy fact that in Finland and Australia –two countries which enjoy women’s suffrage- the birth-rate is almost the lowest in the civilized world”. France and the United States were provided as examples of countries where women had access to education or took an active part in the business of the country and where the birth rate was low by comparison with Germany, where people, “in an overwhelming majority share the Kaiser’s view that woman’s place is in the home” (283, 291-292). Mary Scharlieb –praised by Murray Leslie as “one of the ablest of the modern of school of women doctors”, even though a product of higher education herself, also warned against intellectual overexertion for women in her essay on *Womanhood and Race Generation* (7).

### **“Eugenic feminism”**

Others, however, took a different line –even though not radically opposed. That was the case of Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), Caleb Saleeby (1878-1940) and, to some extent, Karl Pearson (1857-1936). These preeminent members of the Eugenics Education Society believed

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<sup>8</sup> William Ralphe Inge (later Dean of St Paul’s), inaugural lecture to the Cambridge University Eugenics Society, 1911, quoted in Soloway 1990, 129.

<sup>9</sup> This decision proved an embarrassment for Karl Pearson, who wrote to Galton in 1908: “*Among the fourteen workers in the Biometric and Eugenics Laboratories at present we have five women and their work is equal at the very least to that of the men. I have to treat them as in every way the equals of the men. They are women who in many cases have taken higher academic honours than the men and who are intellectually their peers. They were a little tried therefore when your name appeared on the Committee of the Anti-Suffrage Society* (Pearson was probably referring here to the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League which had been founded the same year). 15 December 1908, in Karl Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*, p. 359.

that women were not simply vehicles but *agents* of reproduction who, to fulfil their mission, needed to be educated and economically independent (Soloway: 1990, chapt. 6), thus establishing a ground for what would become, in Saleeby's words, "eugenic feminism" (1912, 6). In that respect, they found an –unwilling– ally in British naturalist, anthropologist and biologist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913)<sup>10</sup>, who, although strongly opposed to eugenics himself, had, as early as 1890, defended the idea that women needed to be free from the artificial economic constraints that forced marital choices upon them for a "truly natural selection" to take place. In 1913, in *Social Environment and Moral Progress*, he reasserted his belief that economically independent, educated and politically active women would be in a stronger position to freely select their partner in marriage<sup>11</sup> and would naturally opt for the best men, leaving aside the weaker sort which they were frequently made to marry:

Broadly speaking, I think we may trust the cultivated minds and pure instincts of the women of the future in the choice of partners. The idle and the selfish would be almost universally rejected. The coarse and sensual man, the diseased or the weak in intellect, those having a tendency to insanity or to hereditary disease, or who possess any congenital deformity, would rarely find partners, because the enlightened woman would know that she was committing an offence against society, against humanity at large, in choosing a husband who might be the means of transmitting disease of body or of mind to his offspring. Thus it will come about that the lower types of men, morally, and the physically diseased, will remain permanently unmarried, and will leave no descendants; and the advance of the race in every good quality will be ensured.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, at a time when the suffragette movement was at its peak, Dr Caleb William Saleeby, one of the most prolific eugenic writers in the pre-war period, wrote that he could

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<sup>10</sup> "When men and women are alike free to follow their best impulses; when idleness and vicious or useless luxury on the one hand, oppressive labour and starvation on the other, are alike unknown; when all receive the best and most thorough education that the state of civilisation and knowledge at the time will admit; when the standard of public opinion is set by the wisest and the best, and that standard is systematically inculcated on the young; then we shall find that a system of selection will come spontaneously into action which will steadily tend to eliminate the lower and more degraded types of man, and thus continuously raise the average standard of the race". Human Selection. *Fortnightly Review* 48 (n.s.; 54, o.s.): 325-337 .Wallace, however, was himself an opponent of eugenics and opposed all efforts at social "improvements" by lending natural selection a "helping hand." "The world does not want the eugenicist to set it straight. Give the people good conditions, improve their environment, and all will tend towards the highest type. Eugenics is simply the meddlesome interference of an arrogant, scientific priestcraft" (quoted in John R. Durant, 31).

<sup>11</sup> "While she will be conceded full political and social rights on an equality with man, she will be placed in a position of responsibility and power which will render her his superior, since the future moral progress of the race will so largely depend upon her free choice in marriage. As time goes on, and she acquires more and more economic independence, that alone will give her an effective choice which she has never had before" (148).

<sup>12</sup> "Woman and Natural Selection", Interview With Dr. Alfred Russel Wallace. (S736: 1893), *The Daily Chronicle*, 4 December 1893, <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/wallace/S736.htm>

see no good reason why women should not be granted the right to vote, going as far as saying he believed women's suffrage would be "eugenic":

The present concentration of feminism in England upon the vote, sometimes involving the refusal of a good end—such as wise legislation—because it was not attained by the means they desire, and arousing all manner of enmity between the sexes, may be an unhappy necessity so long as men refuse to grant what they will assuredly grant before long. But now, and then, the vital matters are the nature of womanhood; the extent of our compliance with Nature's laws in the care of girlhood, whether or not women share in making the transitory laws of man; and the extent to which womanhood discharges its great functions of dedicating and preparing its best for the mothers, and choosing and preparing the best of men for the fathers, of the future. The vote, or any other thing, is good or bad in so far as it serves or hurts these great and everlasting needs. *I believe in the vote because I believe it will be eugenic* (my emphasis), will reform the conditions of marriage and divorce in the eugenic sense, and will serve the cause of what I have elsewhere called "preventive eugenics," which strives to protect healthy stocks from the "racial poisons," such as venereal disease, alcohol, and, in a relatively infinitesimal degree, lead. These are ends good and necessary in themselves, whether attained by a special dispensation from on high, or by decree of an earthly autocrat or a democracy of either sex or both. For these ends we must work, and for all the means whereby to attain them; but never for the means in despite of the ends. (1911, 12)

It is in fact very likely that the choice of "The eugenic vote" as a title for the article published in *The Common Cause* in 1911 was motivated by Saleeby's essay, which had been published a couple of months before.

The fact is that while the eugenic movement needed the support of women as a whole to grow (its members did not hesitate to claim that "It is to the women of the country we must look in this great eugenic movement... Could anything be more philanthropic than to stamp out degeneracy? ", as Mrs Alec Tweedie wrote in the *Eugenics Review* in 1912)<sup>13</sup>, the success of their aims depended to a large extent on the role played by those who were now taking part in the suffrage movement. Thus, for Saleeby, those whom it was most necessary to win over to their cause were clearly "the best women, those favoured by Nature in physique and intelligence, in character and their emotional nature, the women who are increasingly to be found enlisted in the ranks of Feminism, and fighting the great fight for the Women's

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<sup>13</sup> *Eugenics Review*, vol. 9, January-June 1912, p. 857, reproduced in Richardson: 2008, 6-33, p. 20. Scharlieb wrote that same year: "It is no exaggeration to say that on woman depends the welfare of the race" (7)

Cause” and whom he invited to “furnish an ever-increasing proportion of our wives and mothers, to the great gain of themselves, and of men, and of the future” “instead of increasingly deserting the ranks of motherhood and leaving the blood of inferior women to constitute half of all future generations, shall on the contrary.” (Saleeby: 1911, 8).

Montague Crackanthorpe, co-founder (with Sybil Grotto) and President of the Eugenics Education Society, shared Saleeby’s belief that it was the new, emancipated woman both physically and mentally healthier as well as better educated and economically independent, that was to be encouraged to take on her responsibilities now that she had “wamed her hands at the fire of life” and “been permitted to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil”. Woman’s suffrage was not only inevitable but desirable, insofar as, once enfranchised, women could contribute through politics, to reforms that would strengthen marriage and the family (116-117).

By “winking at” the women’s movement and opening the door to a possible compatibility between eugenic aims and feminist aims, some eugenicists thus made it easier for members of women’s organisations to re-appropriate a discourse which had so far been dangerous (insofar as it implied a restrictions of women’s freedom of movement as well as of work and educational opportunities) but now could prove useful to serve their cause by bringing increasingly popular (pseudo-)scientific arguments into suffrage rhetoric and helping to legitimize their demands. The difficulties which the suffrage movement was facing at the time probably proved an encouragement to do so.

### **Re-appropriating eugenic arguments**

As widely illustrated in the works of Bland, Soloway and Richardson, eugenics certainly proved appealing to many women in the early twentieth century: almost half the membership of the Eugenics Education Society in 1914 were women, the London branch counted a majority of female members (Bland, 229) and the Eugenic Laboratory founded by Galton in 1904 also counted, in 1908, 5 women out of 14 members (Brown, 295-307; Rowold, 50). Many of these were active in the suffrage movement and, as Lucy Bland also notes, many served as “visiting lecturers” for the Eugenics Society to various organizations, including women’s groups.



That eugenics should have appealed to women is not surprising. Through its fight against alcoholism and venereal disease, it seemed to offer the promise of a new morality. Social purists in particular, Bland explains, “saw in eugenics the potential of scientific validation and reinforcement of moral purity beliefs” (230). Probably as important was the fact that it placed woman –as a reproducer– in control and at the centre of the scheme as the topics of lecture of the Eugenics Education Society illustrate (“Eugenics and Womanhood”, “The New Woman and Race Progress”, “Women and Eugenics”, also positioned women centrally in the movement). Considering the limits it imposed to women’s freedom of action in the interest of the race, that it should have appealed to feminists comes more as a surprise. Yet, by the turn of the century, the concept of women as “mothers of the race” had also become a recurring feature of the feminist discourse and of suffrage literature, even though the idea sometimes carried different meanings. Many feminists re-appropriated the notion that the welfare of the race depended on women and did not hesitate to resort themselves to (pseudo-) scientific arguments about reproduction to show why it was essential to the future of the race that women should gain access to the decision-making process. What had been used as an argument against the women’s vote (taking part in politics would divert them from their domestic duties and harm their bodily maternal functions) was now turned to their advantage. Thus, members of both the NUWSS and the WSPU justified their demand for women’s suffrage with the argument that women’s participation to politics was necessary to ensure Parliament paid proper attention to the maintenance and survival of a healthy race<sup>14</sup> through the care of children, the sick and the elderly. Similarly, the argument of the fall in the birth rate was reversed so that it was no longer attributed to middle-class women’s selfishness (a common accusation) but instead to women’s reluctance to give birth to children who would be condemned to poverty and disease. Thus, concerns about the future of the race were used to ask for infant and child welfare programmes that involved well-baby clinics, pure milk centres, low-cost lunches and medical programmes in schools, educational centres for mothers and maternity homes. Finally, as for political power, access to higher education, which had been and remained decried by many eugenicists,<sup>15</sup> was now presented as a means to turn

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<sup>14</sup> “If women had parliamentary votes, they would try to alter the bad land laws which cause these bad housing conditions and result in such wicked waste of life... Give women votes to protect the children”, *1907 election poster* (in Farly and Hodgson, 26).

<sup>15</sup> See Rowold. Dr Arabella Kenealy was to write in 1920 in the explicitly entitled *Feminism and Sex Extinction*: “The women intellectuals who have done great work have been women who inherited talents so far above the average, as spontaneously to have reached high mental levels, without need to have sacrificed those womanly traits which gave the noblest values to such work [...] The woman of average brain, however, attains the

women into better mothers (which Mary Wollstonecraft had already argued in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*) and, as a consequence, contribute to racial improvement.

The idea that women's suffrage was necessary to politics as it would bring a special expertise on motherhood and children matters was not a new one. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who had been at the head of the NUWSS since the 1890s, had argued, ever since the beginning of her involvement in the campaign for women's suffrage, that women's knowledge and experience of motherhood, far from being an impediment to participation in politics, was on the contrary an excellent argument in its favour.<sup>16</sup> Eugenics, however, now provided suffragists with "scientific" arguments at a time when concerns about the future of "the race" (a word which became a recurring feature of suffragist literature) were running high. The basic argument of eugenic feminism—that if women were to bear the responsibility of "guardians of the race",<sup>17</sup> then society had to empower them, through the vote, to fulfil that role—could then prove both persuasive and pervasive, both among constitutional suffragists and suffragettes. Thus "The Eugenic Vote" published in the *Common Cause* linked women's suffrage with race preservation while some contributors to *The Vote* (the organ of the Women's Freedom League) presented race as a female instinct, predicting an acceleration of national decline and "race suicide" if women were not emancipated (Mrs Edward Francis, "Race Suicide" 21 January 1911, p. 152). Among militants suffragists, Christabel Pankhurst, also argued that women had "a service to render to the state as well as the home, to the race as well as the family" (*Votes for Women*, 21 January 1909, p. 208) and that, when they obtained the right to vote, they would contribute to improve "the condition of the children, the housing of the people... the care of the sick and aged, the preservation of the family" (1911, quoted in Garner, 50). More explicitly, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, who had left the WSPU to join the Women's Freedom League the year before, claimed in 1913 that the suffrage campaign aimed

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intellectual standards of the man of average brain only at cost of her health, of her emotions, or of her morale. (155)

<sup>16</sup> "The motherhood of women, either actual or potential, is one of those great facts of everyday life which we must never lose sight of. To women as mothers, is given the charge of the home and the care of children. Women are, therefore, by nature as well as by occupation and training, more accustomed than men to concentrate their minds on the home and domestic side of things. But this difference between men and women, instead of being a reason against their enfranchisement, seems to me the strongest possible reason in favour of it; we want the home and the domestic side of things to count for more in politics and in the administration of public affairs than they do at present" (Millicent Garrett Fawcett, "Home and Politics, An Address Delivered at Toynbee Hall", London: London Society for Women's Suffrage, 1890).

<sup>17</sup> Another member of the WFL and regular contributor to *The Vote*, writer and journalist Constance Hartley, also stressed woman's "racial duty" to breed, presenting her as "the Guardian of the Race-body and the Race-soul" (in Bland, 233).

at helping women “to rear a healthy race” (*Votes for women*, 5 August 1913, p. 9). In 1908, already, she had written, in the same magazine:

without the vote and the equality symbolized by the vote, and the power given by the vote to women, to work out their own salvation, and to express what is their own conception of human life, these new powerful life-impulses can never be given, nor can the terrible physical and moral diseases from which the social body suffers to-day ever be cured. The life of the world cannot be renewed or purified until the Soul of the world’s Womanhood is released (January 1908, 49)

These ideas were also conveyed through fiction, in works such as those of Sarah Grand, social purity feminist, suffragist (she was President of the Writers’ Suffrage League) and novelist,<sup>18</sup> who used her novels to advance the eugenic cause (Henson, 278) and depicted women as having the power to solve what she termed “the population difficulty” (quoted in Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, p. 104). Echoing Karl Pearson’s essay on “Woman and Labour” (1894, 561-77), she made her point of view even more explicit in an interview for *Humanitarian*:

women are the proper people to decide on matters of population. Men have not managed to regulate either the population or the social question at all satisfactorily, and it would be well to give us a chance of trying what we can do. We could do much if we had the suffrage; the want of electoral power cripples our efforts (Tooley, 168).

In addition to “acting” in the interest of the race through legislation, enfranchised women, some suffragists argued, could simply “be” more favourable to the race in their choice of a partner. At that stage, the fact that ideas such as those of Alfred Russel Wallace were now being taken up and expounded by some prominent eugenicists made it easier to hold such a discourse. The emancipated new woman, as Eugenia Newmarch wrote in the *Englishwoman* in 1910, would be “instinctively attracted to the best sort of man and would choose him for her husband rather than the dullard or wastrel who had nothing but wealth or family connections to recommend him” (33-40) Not only would emancipated women be devoted to the improvement of the race, they would also be “eminently fitted” to reproduce it through eugenic marriages. The argument was shared by suffragists such as Alice Vickery Drysdale and Mabel Atkinson, who felt modern feminists were more attractive than their predecessors, more likely to be married, and less likely to marry the wrong man out of

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<sup>18</sup> Author of *The Heavenly Twins* and eugenic short story “Eugenia: a modern maiden and a man amazed”, in *Our Manifold Nature*, 1894)

necessity. Feminism, Atkinson argued, was the ally of eugenics as it gave independent women the possibility to select their mates carefully and eugenically (Atkinson, 51-56)

When one looks at the other writings of some of the suffragists that have just been mentioned, it seems very likely, however, that the argument of a fit motherhood was used by some as a kind of Trojan horse to let eugenics enter the suffrage discourse while what was aimed at, in the end, was not fit motherhood but purer social standards for both men and women. Christabel Pankhurst's 1913 pamphlet, *The Great Scourge and how to end it*, in which male vices and the resulting venereal disease were held responsible for the degeneration of the race, is probably the best example of such an instrumentalisation of the eugenic discourse. Because men's immoral behaviour, by causing sterility and infant mortality, was responsible for the degeneration of the race, it should be reformed and men's moral standards raised to those of women. If men did not reform, Pankhurst wrote the following year, "the worst fears of the eugenicists will be fulfilled and the race bred entirely from inferior stock" (in *The Suffragette*, 1914). Giving women the right to vote would ensure that such a thing did not happen. Equal and higher moral standards were thus no longer a goal in themselves<sup>19</sup> —and the vote the instrument to reach it— but the means through which the race could be saved, which turned women's suffrage into an instrument at the service, no longer of the social purity movement but of the nation. Double standards of morality,<sup>20</sup> which had for so long been condemned by feminists, had thus been transformed from a feminist issue into a matter of national interest. This kind of discourse was probably made easier by the fact that the idea that venereal disease and prostitution (its main vector) as well as alcohol (which was another object of reform for many women campaigners because of its link with domestic violence) conducted to race suicide had already been defended by eugenicists such

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<sup>19</sup> In 1896 already, discussing the female franchise in an interview published in *The Humanitarian* (a journal edited by Victoria Woodhull – staunch eugenicist and author, among others, of *The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit* (1891)), Sarah Grand declared: "our influence would be chiefly felt upon questions of morality, and would, I believe, tend to purify the political atmosphere" (Tooley, 164).

<sup>20</sup> What seemed to make it necessary to have access to the legislative process to fight the double standards of morality was the fact that these had, throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, been embodied in government policies and legislation, such as the 1857 Divorce Act (which made adultery by a wife grounds for a divorce while a husband's adultery was not sufficient grounds in itself and had to be combined with cruelty, desertion or some other offence for the wife to ask for a divorce), the Contagious Diseases Act of the 1860s or, again, in a 1870 Royal Commission report on the working of these Acts, which stated that "there is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the men who consort with them. With the one the offence is committed as a matter of gain; with the other it is the irregular indulgence of a natural impulse" (Royal Commission upon the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Disease Acts: Volume 1, London: HMSO, 1871, §60, quoted in Hall, 39).

as Caleb Saleeby, who had listed them among what he termed “racial poison” (as it could be transmitted to the next generation) (Saleeby: January 1911, 30-52).

The context in which these articles were published was one of huge tension as far as the issue of women’s suffrage was concerned. Between 1906 and 1910, the Liberal government had not given high priority to electoral reform (see Pugh, 1970) and, although private members’ bills were introduced almost annually by supporters of the NUWSS, none had ever got beyond their second reading. Early in 1910, an attempt to obtain an agreed inter-party solution to the question had led to the creation of a Conciliation Committee<sup>21</sup> and the introduction of a new private member’s bill<sup>22</sup> but, although it had passed its second reading by 299 votes to 189, the bill had not been allowed further time in the session. Faced with such opposition, members of the Women’s Social and Political Union had stepped up their militancy: the first hunger strikes had begun in June 1909, and had led to the forcible feeding of imprisoned militants; in November 1910, a suffragette march to Parliament square had met with spectacular police brutality and degenerated into what came to be known as “Black Friday”; more recently, the 1911 census had been boycotted by suffragettes following calls of the Union (interestingly, the 1911 census was to include for the first time, an extensive enquiry into women’s fertility) (White, 6). Considering the situation, adopting eugenic arguments to ask for the vote, and asserting that enfranchised women would contribute positively to the preservation of the race, could certainly prove a wise move as it followed the Liberal government’s concern for national efficiency (see Searle) and could therefore contribute to curb the latter’s reluctance to grant any measure of female franchise.

### **The limits to the strategy**

If eugenics could appear compatible with an essentialist kind of feminism and appeal to social purity feminists, the danger which the adoption of its discourse represented did not escape those in the women’s movement who held different views. Even though the ideology could be considered as empowering mothers, the fact remained that they implied some measure of control over women’s bodies as a whole and, as such, were as a dangerous ally. As Richard Soloway concluded in *Feminism, Fertility and Eugenics in Victorian and*

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<sup>21</sup> The Conciliation Committee was chaired by Lord Lytton as chairman and consisted of 25 Liberal MPs, 17 Conservative, six Irish Home Rulers and six Labour.

<sup>22</sup> Most of the women who qualified (about one million) were believed to be middle or upper class. These provisions were favourable to the Conservatives and did not have much Liberal and Labour support.

*Edwardian England*, whatever eugenicists believed about “the woman question”, they all supported the same view that “female emancipation... must not interfere with reproduction of numerous progeny” of the fit (1982, 141). As it was, even Karl Pearson, who publicly sympathized with women’s demands for education, working opportunities and the vote, had declared in his inaugural speech to 1885:

We have first to settle what is the physical capacity of woman, what would be the effect of her emancipation on her function of race-reproduction, before we can talk about her "rights", which are, after all, only a vague description of what may be the fittest position for her, the sphere of her maximum usefulness in the developed society of the future. The higher education of women may connote a general intellectual progress for the community or, on the other hand, a physical degradation of the race, owing to prolonged study having ill effects on woman’s child-bearing efficiency (Pearson, 1885).

For these reasons, while articles and essays defending eugenic ideas and associating feminist aims with eugenic aims multiplied between 1911 and 1913, so did those denouncing the movement and placing the freedom of the individual and women’s rights to education above duties to the race. Dora Marsden, founder and editor of *The Free Woman*, and Helen Winter, a regular contributor to the magazine –both described by Swedish feminist Ellen Key as “extreme feminists”– were among those who chose to assert “personality in opposition to, instead of within, the race”.<sup>23</sup> “As a freewoman... I care nothing for the continuance of the race nor the reproduction of any man,” Helen Winter wrote; “my desire is to continue myself” (Helen Winter, “The individualism of motherhood, *The Freewoman*, 7 March 1912, p. 312, in Lucy Bland, p. 234).

Interestingly, this defence of the rights of the individual over the interests of the race, and the rejection of woman’s reduction to her reproductive functions, were not only to be found among radical feminists but in some of the feminist and suffragist publications which, only a couple of months before, had not hesitated to put forward eugenic arguments to ask for the vote. In a 1913 article of *The Englishwoman*, Minnie Taylor thus argued:

We are often warned that nothing but disaster can result if the good of the individual is placed before the good of the race. But what other than disaster can result if the good of the individual is sacrificed to the good of the race? The

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<sup>23</sup> Ellen Key, *The Woman Movement*, New York and London: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1912, quoted in Fernihough, 114.

individual is more real than the species. If the welfare of the species is inimical to the welfare of the individual, then the species had far better die out (in Rowold, 61).

*Votes for Women* also derided Saleeby's discourse on the "celebrated queen bee, who does nothing but breed", suggesting to produce, instead, "the lady spider —she eats her husband". "Would this not be a simple solution to the whole question?", the magazine provocatively asked (*Votes for Women*, 25 oct. 1912). More vehemently, Beatrice Hastings denounced, in the pages of *The New Age*, "the cloying sentimentalization of motherhood", Rebecca West condemned, in 1913, in *The Clarion*, "the animal life that the Eugenics Society orders women to lead"<sup>24</sup> and Cicely Hamilton, in a contribution to H.G. Wells' *Socialism and the Great State*, summed up the issue in the following way:

The entire question now at issue, not only between Woman and the State, but between Woman and Society in general, can be narrowed down to this: has she, like the other half of the race, a primary, individual, and responsible existence? or is she what may be called a secondary being [...]? Is she, in short, a personality, or merely the reproductive faculty personified (Hamilton, 226).

These examples tend to show that the women's movement was not united in its support of eugenics and that, even among those who chose to use eugenic arguments to ask for the vote, some were aware of the danger that those could represent and were not ready to accept the whole ideology unquestioningly. The fact is that the adoption of eugenics arguments by part of the women's movement undoubtedly added to the blurring of the lines that already existed (see Delap) between an essentialist kind of feminism and anti-feminism. That Charlotte Haldane, who described herself as a feminist and a suffragist —and is still often referred to as such, should have been able to accuse feminists of having "fomented "sex antagonisms" by competing with men economically and refusing to conform [...] to the masculine ideals of sex-relationships" (Haldane, 168)<sup>25</sup> provides an excellent example of the confusion entailed.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Clarion*, 4 April 1913, in Fernihough, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Sheila Jeffreys rightly refers to this essay as an "antifeminist classic" (*The Spinster and Her Enemies - Feminism and Sexuality 1800-1930*, London: Pandora, 1985, p. 174)

## Conclusion

The re-appropriation of the eugenic discourse by part of the suffrage movement in the pre-war period can certainly be understood as a strategic measure to secure the vote at a time when national efficiency was a priority for the Liberal government and opposition to women's suffrage ran high, leading increased militancy to be met in turn with increased violence. If many feminists chose to take up the eugenic discourse and put forward, as part of their campaign for suffrage, race preservation, racial purity and motherhood, this was partly because they had to, one of the most regular attacks made against the case for female emancipation being that it would lead to a less numerous and "weaker race." Although it makes no doubt that some suffragists were seduced by the rhetoric of the promise of social agency for women —whether what they had in mind was the interest of the race or equal (purer) social standards between men and women, it seems that eugenics was, more often than not, a means to an end. Whether this strategy worked is more than doubtful if one considers the failure of the new attempts, between 1912 and the outbreak of the war, to obtain votes for women.<sup>26</sup> As for the links between feminism and eugenics, even though they continued, in far less obvious way, into the inter-war period, they were still, in Clare Makepeace's words, more of a "flirt" than "a marriage of convenience" (Makepeace, 66).

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<sup>26</sup> In 1912, a third Conciliation Bill (Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill), failed to pass its second reading by 14 votes, largely because of the lukewarm attitude of the government and the government's own manhood suffrage measure – the Franchise and Registration Bill – introduced that same year was rapidly withdrawn, leading the suffragettes to resume and intensify militancy



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