
Chris Woodhead: a new champion of eugenic theories

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ABSTRACT Eugenic Theories are clearly alive and well in present-day society – or this is at least true of those theories relating to the passing on of abilities and talents from one generation to the next. This depressing thought was prompted by a reading of Chris Woodhead's latest book *A Desolation of Learning*.

Kristy Young is fond of asking her guests on the BBC Radio Four programme *Desert Island Discs*: 'do you think you've inherited your talent for ...from your mother or your father?' And in an article published in *The Times* on 23 July 2009, designed as a contribution to the on-going debate as to whether society is 'mobile enough', political commentator Danny Finkelstein argued that 'even in the most mobile society possible', the effect of genes means that there has to be a relationship between achievement in one generation and achievement in the next'. This article prompted a letter to the newspaper from the author of this piece which was published two days later and in which I pointed out that Francis Galton would have been really proud of Mr Finkelstein. As Charles Darwin's second cousin, Galton believed fervently in the idea that 'talent' and 'character' were inherited and in his book, *Hereditary Genius*, published in 1869, argued that 'genius' or 'high ability' was confined almost exclusively to members of the upper and upper-middle classes. In my letter, I put forward an alternative scenario: 'There may be something loosely described as 'innate potential' (although I'm never too sure what this means), but in reality, we all begin life as a virtual 'blank cheque'. What we become depends on everything that happens to us, to whom we relate and what we strive to achieve from the second we are born' (*The Times*, 25 July 2009).

Now we have a sparkling new contribution to the so-called 'nature/nurture' debate from the former Chief Inspector of Schools and self-proclaimed education 'expert' Chris Woodhead, who has just published *A*

Desolation of Learning: is this the education our children deserve? In the words of a report in *The Guardian*: 'just when you thought the Mr Gradgrind *de nos jours* couldn't get any more lovable, he adds a little light eugenics to the mix What a relief to find someone who will finally speak the truth. School should be the place where the gilded few are buffed to an even higher sheen, and the rest can be taught to whittle turnips. Oh, the time state schools have wasted with their foolhardy belief in the limitlessness of human potential' (*The Guardian*, 16 May 2009).

In his new book, Woodhead quotes approvingly a number of important passages from D.H. Lawrence's 1918 work *The Education of the People*, available in a 1973 collection of essays *Lawrence on Education*, edited by Joy and Raymond Williams. It is not clear whether Lawrence knew much about Francis Galton; but he discovered the works of that other great hero of twentieth-century Fascists, Friedrich Nietzsche in Croydon Public Library in 1908.

Chapter Two of Woodhead's book is called '*Has Mr Balls Never Met Timmy Shepherd?*', a reference to the passage in Lawrence's book where he talks about the futility of 'educating' a working-class lad like Jimmy Shepherd:

We have assumed that we could actually *educate* Jimmy Shepherd and make him a Shelley or an Isaac Newton. At the very least, we were sure we could make him a highly intelligent being. And we're just beginning to find our mistake. We can't make a highly intelligent being out of Jimmy Shepherd. Why should we, if the Lord created him only moderately intelligent? Why do we want always to go one better than the Creator?

Woodhead tells with great pleasure the story of how he upset the then Secretary of State David Blunkett and many in the audience at an education conference by quoting the following paragraph from Lawrence's *The Education of The People*.

Every teacher knows that it is worse than useless trying to educate at least 50 per cent of his scholars. Worse than useless: it is dangerous; perilously dangerous. What is the result of it? Drag a lad who has no capacity for true learning or understanding through the processes of education, and what do you produce in him, in the end? A profound contempt for education and for all educated people. It has meant nothing to him, but a feeling of irritation and disgust. And that which a man finds irritating and disgusting, he also finds odious and contemptible.

Woodhead comments that while 'one might dispute Lawrence's statistic', if he had to choose 'between Lawrence's honesty and Tony Blair's political opportunism in suggesting that 50 per cent of 18-30-year-olds should go to university, it would be Lawrence he would back every time' (p. 44).

Having achieved notoriety and great unpopularity as Chief Inspector of Schools from 1996 to 2000, Mr Woodhead is now professor of Education at the University of Buckingham and Chairman of the Cognita Education

Company which owns and runs fifty private schools. It is reassuring to know that the espousal of outrageous educational theories is no bar to a successful career in the private sector.

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