

EUGENICS, POPULATION RESEARCH, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY STUDIES IN EARLY AND MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN*

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ABSTRACT. *Eugenics and sociology are often considered polar opposites, with the former seen as a pseudo-science that reduces everything to genes and the other a progressive social science focused on the environment. However, the situation was not quite so straightforward in mid-twentieth-century Britain. As this article shows, eugenics had a number of important formative intellectual, institutional, and methodological impacts on ideas and practices that would find a home in the rapidly expanding and diversifying discipline of sociology after the Second World War. Taking in the careers of leading individuals, including Alexander Carr-Saunders, William Beveridge, Julian Huxley, and David Glass, and focusing on the relationship between eugenics, ‘population research’, and the emerging field of social mobility studies, the article highlights the significant but underappreciated influence interwar biosocial thinking had on intellectual, scientific, and political cultures in post-war Britain. In so doing, the article draws on recent scholarship on the ‘technical identity’ embedded in mid-century British social science, which, it is suggested, provided the link between the research under consideration and the progressive politics of those who carried it out.*

On the evening of 17 February 1936, the biologist and popular science writer Julian Huxley (1887–1975) stood before a meeting of the Eugenics Society at the Waldorf Hotel in London. He was there to deliver the Galton Lecture, a prestigious highlight of the society’s calendar and an annual event that had been established eighteen years earlier to commemorate Francis Galton,

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Charles Darwin's cousin and coiner of the word eugenics. As Huxley explained to his audience – including his brother, the novelist, Aldous Huxley, and the Labour MP and later first female minister of education, Ellen Wilkinson – his lecture, entitled 'Eugenics and society', addressed one main issue: 'the next step towards the graduation of eugenics into the dignity of an established science'.¹ Julian Huxley argued that this process contained a number of related challenges. One was tackling the misuse of eugenics in science and popular culture. Another, however, was emphasizing a crucial yet frequently overlooked aspect of the eugenics project.

Eugenics is not, as some of its devotees have perhaps unconsciously assumed, a special branch of natural science: it is a branch of social science. It is not merely human genetics. True that it aims at the improvement of the human race by means of the improvement of its genetic qualities. But any improvement of the sort can only be realized in a certain kind of social environment, so that eugenics is inevitably a particular aspect of the study of man in society.²

Huxley's analysis is intriguing and informative in equal measure because it challenges a number of received views that have been shaped profoundly by late twentieth-century responses to the idea of applying biology to society. Given that Galton derived the word eugenics from the Greek *eugenes*, meaning 'good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities', and the strong links between early twentieth-century eugenics and late twentieth-century genetic science, scholars have paid most attention to the leads eugenicists took from biology and how their ideas were disseminated amongst social and political scientists.³ As a consequence, observers have often concluded that eugenicists reduced everything they saw to heredity. Moreover, they have seen eugenics as shorthand for opposition to serious structural reforms to society and pseudo-scientific cover for reactionary and conservative political ideas.⁴ Yet scholarship on eugenics in the UK and elsewhere has always painted a much more complex picture. For example, whilst Donald MacKenzie's pioneering work drew attention to the wide range of political commitments, underpinned by powerful social and class assumptions, that were key

¹ Julian Huxley, 'Eugenics and society', *Eugenics Review*, 28 (1936), p. 1

² *Ibid.*, p. 3

³ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into human faculty and its development* (London, 1883), p. 17 n. 1; Daniel J. Kevles, *The code of codes: scientific and social issues in the Human Genome Project* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Diane B. Paul, *The politics of heredity: essays on eugenics, biomedicine, and the nature-nurture debate* (Albany, NY, 1998), ch. 8.

⁴ For an example of a recent debate that touched on many of these issues, see John Scott and Christopher T. Husbands, 'Victor Branford and the building of British sociology', *Sociological Review*, 55 (2007), pp. 460–84; Maggie Studholme, 'Patrick Geddes: founder of environmental sociology', *Sociological Review*, 55 (2007), pp. 441–59; Steve Fuller, 'A path better not to have been taken', *Sociological Review*, 55 (2007), pp. 807–15; Maggie Studholme, John Scott, and Christopher T. Husbands, 'Doppelgängers and racists: on inhabiting alternative universes: a reply to Steve Fuller's "A path better not to have been taken"', *Sociological Review*, 55 (2007), pp. 816–22.

features of the British eugenics movement, more recent studies have drawn attention to the important influences the social sciences had on eugenics research during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵

Historians have often attempted to make sense of these dynamics by distinguishing between ‘mainline’ and ‘reform’ eugenics. Mainline eugenics is a label that has been attached to the scientists, politicians, and social activists who saw heredity at the root of all social problems, focused on negative eugenics – preventing particular groups of people from reproducing – and were closely associated with causes such as the campaign to sterilize people whose physical and mental health they believed was a risk to the nation.⁶ Reform eugenics, on the other hand, has been used to refer to a reaction against those ideas during the interwar years. Emphasizing positive measures – that is, efforts to encourage reproduction among specific social groups – reform eugenicists, including the ‘visible college’ of British scientific socialists, such as J. B. S. Haldane, highlighted value-laden assumptions about the biological origins of social behaviour. In so doing, they worked hard to articulate more sophisticated models of nature and nurture as well as alternative proposals for social reform, including interventions into and assistance with human reproduction.⁷

Whilst Julian Huxley’s suggestions sit at the intersection of these historiographic tracks, his argument about the social scientific dimensions of eugenics alludes to another important set of developments that will be the focus for this article. Building on the work of scholars including Richard A. Soloway, Simon Szreter, and Edmund Ramsden, the three sections that follow explore interwar research at the intersection of biological and social science and one of its underappreciated legacies for British sociology: social mobility studies, which became an important feature of the rapidly expanding and diversifying discipline after

⁵ Donald MacKenzie, *Statistics in Britain, 1865–1930: the social construction of scientific knowledge* (Edinburgh, 1981); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the name of eugenics: genetics and the uses of human heredity* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); Diane B. Paul, *Controlling human heredity: 1865 to the present* (New York, NY, 1998); Pauline M. Mazumdar, *Eugenics, human genetics, and human failings: the Eugenics Society, its sources and its critics in Britain* (London, 1992); Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the history of eugenics* (Oxford, 2010); Michael Freedon, ‘Eugenics and progressive thought: a study in ideological affinity’, *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), pp. 645–71; Chris Renwick, *British sociology’s lost biological roots: a history of futures past* (Basingstoke, 2012).

⁶ Mathew Thomson, *The problem of mental deficiency: eugenics, democracy, and social policy in Britain c. 1870–1959* (Oxford, 1998).

⁷ Kevles, *In the name of eugenics*, ch. 11; Paul, *Controlling human heredity*, pp. 117–20; G. R. Searle, *Eugenics and politics in Britain, 1900–1914* (Leyden, 1976), especially chs. 2, 4, 5, and 7; Gary Werskey, *The visible college: the collective biography of British scientific socialists of the 1930s* (London, 1978); Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and degeneration: eugenics and the declining birth-rate in twentieth-century Britain* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), ch. 8; Simon Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender in Britain, 1860–1940* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 266 n. 111; Angus McLaren, *Reproduction by design: sex, robots, trees, and test-tube babies in interwar Britain* (Chicago, IL, 2012); David Redvaldsen, ‘Eugenics, socialism, and artificial insemination: the public career or Herbert Brewer’, *Historical Research*, 88 (2015), pp. 138–60.

the Second World War.⁸ Beginning with the eugenics movement's problems in the 1920s and 1930s, and moving on to the development of what was called 'population research' at sites including the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Population Investigation Committee, the article explores how a group of researchers with backgrounds in both biological and social science joined together to create a project that would answer a swirling constellation of attacks on eugenics. Simultaneously a criticism and descendant of eugenics, that project found a home in post-1945 British sociology, where its roots were gradually obscured, meaning we now know little about the origins of an idea that has become central to modern political discourse.

These sections will be knitted together by two arguments. The first concerns the relationship between eugenics and quantitative social mobility research, which will be shown to have clear links through not only individuals and institutions but also an equally important set of ideas that matter for our understanding of both fields, as well as biology and social science more generally. Simply put, key components of this important area of British sociology were originally forged within the context of the British eugenics movement. The second argument concerns the mediatory role population research played in that process. The relationship between population research and sociology is often framed by demography and the 'political arithmetic tradition' of social research.⁹ However, by drawing on the work of scholars including MacKenzie and utilizing social science sources including Mass Observation records, Mike Savage has drawn attention to what he calls the 'technical identity' at the heart of mid-twentieth-century British social science. In so doing, Savage has interpreted post-war British social science as a challenge to old forms of cultural authority, often located in literary circles, with new methods such as the sample survey being used to legitimate a managerial and technical identity focused on social change.¹⁰ As we will see, Savage's technical identity concept not only helps explain why the interwar British eugenics movement provided the platform for social scientists who viewed themselves as political progressives but also informs our understanding of the legacy they left for scientific practices and ideas in British sociology.

⁸ Soloway, *Demography and degeneration*; Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*; Edmund Ramsden, 'Eugenics from the New Deal to the great society: genetics, demography and population quality', *Studies in History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 39 (2008), pp. 391–406.

⁹ A. H. Halsey, *A history of sociology in Britain: science, literature, and society* (Oxford, 2004), ch. 2; E. Grebnik, 'Demographic research in Britain, 1936–1986', *Population Studies*, 45, supplement (1991), pp. 3–30.

¹⁰ Mike Savage, *Identities and social change in Britain since 1940: the politics of method* (Oxford, 2010); MacKenzie, *Statistics in Britain*.

I

As Pauline Mazumdar has documented, the Eugenics Society experienced a difficult interwar period.¹¹ After the burst of enthusiasm that accompanied its founding as the ‘Eugenics Education Society’ in 1907, the society struggled to find an identity that was acceptable to the different factions, including elite scientific and lay groups, who contributed to its meetings and activities. Although those internal wrangles, which led the society to drop the word ‘Education’ from its name in 1926, were partly the kind of teething problems common to many new organizations, they were also a product of bigger questions about eugenics in early twentieth-century Britain. Despite the distinguished natural and social scientists, literary intellectuals, and social activists it counted among its members and fellows during its first two decades, including the economist John Maynard Keynes, the writer and sexologist Havelock Ellis, the social reformer Eleanor Rathbone, and the birth control campaigner Marie Stopes, the Society had failed to make an impact as wide or deep as its founders had hoped for. To be sure, eugenics was widely discussed in Britain during the two decades after the society was founded. The problem, however, was that by the late 1920s the society could claim only the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act as evidence of progress when it came to its goal of influencing political decision-making. This single success was hugely disappointing compared to the advances eugenics seemed to be making in other countries, especially the USA where well-funded campaigns had encouraged several states to introduce significant eugenics legislation.¹² Leading British eugenicists wondered what they needed to do to achieve similar success.

Central to the Eugenics Society’s problems were the criticisms of eugenics that were widespread in early twentieth-century Britain. Attacks came from across the political spectrum. Whilst liberals and conservatives objected to the violations of individual rights and the expansion of state powers that were required to implement policies such as sterilization for ‘feble-mindedness’, people on the left, including the Labour party, were concerned social and economic elites were using the language of eugenics to naturalize their dominance of the working classes.¹³ Much of the criticism, however, came from within the ranks of the eugenics movement itself. Francis Galton, for instance, worried that

¹¹ Mazumdar, *Eugenics, human genetics, and human failings*, chs. 3–4.

¹² Greta Jones, ‘Eugenics and social policy between the wars’, *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), pp. 717–28; Edward J. Larson, ‘The rhetoric of eugenics: expert authority and the Mental Deficiency Bill’, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 24 (1991), pp. 45–60; Thomson, *The problem of mental deficiency*, ch. 1.

¹³ Bradley W. Hart, ‘Watching the “eugenic experiment” unfold: the mixed views of British eugenicists toward Nazi Germany in the early 1930s’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 45 (2012), pp. 33–63; Thomson, *The problem of mental deficiency*; David Stack, *The first Darwinian left: socialism and Darwinism, 1859–1914* (Cheltenham, 2003), chs. 5, 8, and 9; Michael Freedon, *The new liberalism: an ideology of social reform* (Oxford, 1978), chs. 3 and 5. See Diane B. Paul, *The politics of heredity*, especially chs. 2 and 6, for these issues in international perspective.

members of the Eugenics Education Society were rushing to popularize scientific ideas he considered promising but incomplete and, in the process, were risking his project's reputation.¹⁴ By the early 1930s, the splits within the movement had grown wider as a new generation of biologists turned their attention to the relationship between heredity and society. Utilizing new methods and ideas, these researchers cast serious doubts on the scientific credentials of the models many eugenicists used to explain their ideas about the origins of social problems, particularly the family pedigrees they claimed showed everything from diseases to criminality were passed down the generations.¹⁵

Among the most prominent of these biologists was Lancelot Hogben (1895–1975), a renowned socialist who had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector during the First World War.¹⁶ Hogben's reputation as a biologist was based on his leading role in the effort to promote experimental methods in biology and his attempts to construct a better understanding of how genes and environments connect, combine, and otherwise affect each other.¹⁷ An adversarial and often difficult figure, his most famous and important dispute was with the biologist and leading member of the Eugenics Society, R. A. Fisher (1890–1962), author of *The genetical theory of natural selection* – a landmark exposition of the mathematical relationship between the previously opposed schools of Darwinian natural selection and Mendelian genetics.¹⁸ Whilst Fisher maintained it was possible to identify the precise contributions of genes and environments to development, Hogben argued the two were interdependent in ways that made Fisher's judgements at best unreliable and at worst impossible.¹⁹

Hogben's arguments were hugely significant for the way biologists came to think about concepts such as organism-environment interaction during the

¹⁴ This criticism was shared by the branch of Galton's followers led by the socialist biostatistician Karl Pearson, the first Galton Professor of Eugenics at University College London, who emphasized the importance of expert knowledge and technocratic approaches to social problems. Mazumdar, *Eugenics, human genetics, and human failings*, p. 43; Theodore M. Porter, *Karl Pearson: the scientific life in a statistical age* (Princeton, NJ, 2004), ch. 9; MaKenzie, *Statistics in Britain*, ch. 4.

¹⁵ Kevles, *In the name of eugenics*, chs. 8–12; Mazumdar, *Eugenics, human genetics, and human failings*, chs. 3–4.

¹⁶ Werskey, *The visible college*, pp. 60–6, 101–14, 199–211; Lancelot Hogben, *Scientific humanist: an unauthorized autobiography*, ed. Adrian Hogben and Anne Hogben (Woodbridge, 1998).

¹⁷ James Tabery, *Beyond versus: the struggle to understand the interaction of nature and nurture* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), ch. 2; Steindór Jóhann Erlingsson, 'The rise of experimental zoology in Britain in the 1920s: Hogben, Huxley, Crew, and the Society for Experimental Biology' (Ph.D. thesis, Manchester, 2005).

¹⁸ William Provine, *The origins of theoretical population genetics* (2nd edn, Chicago, IL, 2001); Peter J. Bowler, *The eclipse of Darwinism: anti-Darwinian theories in the decades around 1900* (London, 1992); David J. Depew and Bruce H. Weber, *Darwinism evolving: systems dynamics and the genealogy of natural selection* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), chs. 8–9.

¹⁹ James Tabery, 'R. A. Fisher, Lancelot Hogben, and the origin(s) of genotype-environment interaction', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 41 (2008), pp. 717–61, and Tabery, *Beyond versus*, ch. 2.

late twentieth century. Yet he was also an effective communicator of scientific ideas to wider audiences and became well known from the early 1930s onwards as the author of hugely popular books including *Mathematics for the million* and *Science for the citizen*.²⁰ These skills posed a problem for the eugenics movement. To be sure, lay audiences did not always fully grasp the exact details of Hogben's arguments, set out in books such as *Genetic principles in medicine and social science*, but they took away a message that worried eugenicists. As the sociologist and former student of Karl Pearson, Alexander Carr-Saunders, put it in a letter to C. P. Blacker, the president of the Eugenics Society, in 1932,

Do you realise (a) what kind of influence Hogben's book is having and (b) how widespread that influence is? Does he realise it?

I have told you how much I genuinely admire the book. But (a) he has emphasised every point that tells against the importance of genetic differences and (b) has expressed some strong criticisms of eugenicists [sic].

The consequence is that the book is interpreted as undermining the eugenic position – i.e. as proving that we need not bother about the genetic constitution of our population. As evidence of this see the reviews in the lay press. Also listen to those who read or look at the book. A man of some eminence in his own line, for instance, who follows things generally, told me that he understood that Hogben had knocked the bottom out of eugenics.

I have been very much impressed by the extent to which the book is exerting its influence. I am giving public lectures here on Eugenics, and several members of the audience, have at least heard of the book. Though not all have seen it, and few have read it, they are somehow of opinion that it has shown up eugenics.

This is happening just at a time when there is more public interest in eugenics than there has ever been before in my experience. Four years ago I gave a lecture, and got a small audience; each day this time people are turned away. But just as the public is waking up, the one man who holds an academic position in this field seems to have given the whole thing a coup de grace.²¹

In fact, rather than turning people away from eugenics, these issues inspired significant amounts of research into the relationship between biology and society. Hogben's own position during the 1930s underlined this point. After spending the decade after the First World War moving from job to job, including posts at universities in London, Edinburgh, Montreal, and Cape Town, he was recruited by the economist and social reformer William Beveridge (1879–1963) in 1930 to head a new department of social biology at the LSE, of which Beveridge was then director. Established with the aid of significant

²⁰ Lancelot Hogben, *Mathematics for the million: a popular self-educator* (London, 1936); Lancelot Hogben, *Science for the citizen: a self-educator based on the social background of scientific discovery* (London, 1938); Peter Bowler, *Science for all: the popularization of science in early twentieth-century Britain* (Chicago, IL, 2009), ch. 6.

²¹ Alexander Carr-Saunders to C. P. Blacker, 17 Feb. 1932, Eugenics Society Collection, Wellcome Library, London, SA/EUG/C/56, © The Galton Institute; Lancelot Hogben, *Genetic principles and medicine and social science* (London, 1931).

grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the department of social biology was intended to explore the meaning of biological knowledge for social policy and investigate what the biological and social sciences could learn from each other methodologically.²² In addition to Hogben and his research students, whom Beveridge provided with a fully equipped laboratory housing over 1,500 animals, the department of social biology employed social scientists, including the radical feminist demographer Enid Charles (1894–1972), who was married to Hogben, and the German Jewish refugee R. R. Kuczynski (1876–1947).

Studies conducted by members of the department of social biology, whose centre of intellectual gravity lay in the idea that society – the human environment – was preventing many people from realizing their innate potential, illustrate what Hogben and his allies considered a robust response to mainline eugenics. J. L. Gray and Pearl Moshinsky, for example, worked extensively on the relationship between the distribution of ability across social classes and the opportunities offered by the British education system. In one study, which took place in 1933 and 1934, they and four research assistants visited schools across London where they used Otis group advanced tests (form A) on school children aged between 9 years and 12.6 years old. These tests, from which the US army had derived examinations for recruits during the First World War, were Binet and Spearman style intelligence tests containing ten parts, including sections on verbal memory, numerical problems, and ‘following directions’, which researchers believed enabled them to obtain an index of intelligence that was independent of age.²³ Gray and Moshinsky’s aim was to use the results to answer a specific question: ‘to what extent does the existing machinery of social selection adjust educational opportunity to individual ability?’²⁴ Was it the case, they wanted to know, that every child of high intelligence was able to continue at school beyond the age of fourteen, when compulsory education ended in England? Moreover, was there hard evidence to justify

²² Robert Bud, *The uses of life: a history of biotechnology* (Cambridge, 1991), ch. 3; Chris Renwick, ‘Completing the circle of the social sciences? William Beveridge and social biology at London School of Economics during the 1930s’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44 (2014), pp. 478–96; Jose Harris, *William Beveridge: a biography* (revised edn, Oxford, 1997), chs. 11–12; Ralf Dahrendorf, *A history of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895–1995* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 249–66.

²³ J. L. Gray and Pearl Moshinsky (1938), ‘Ability and opportunity in English education’, in Lancelot Hogben, ed., *Political arithmetic: a symposium of population studies* (London, 1938), pp. 337–8. For more on Arthur S. Otis and his tests, see Franz Samelson, ‘Lewis M. Terman and mental testing: in search of the democratic ideal’, in Michael Sokal, ed., *Psychological testing and American society, 1890–1930* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1987), pp. 95–112. For more on testing in an English context, see Gillian Sutherland in collaboration with Steven Sharp, *Ability, merit, and measurement: mental testing and English education, 1880–1940* (Oxford, 1984); Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the mind: education and psychology in England, c. 1860–c. 1990* (Cambridge, 2006).

²⁴ Gray and Moshinsky, ‘Ability and opportunity in English education’, p. 335.

the dominance that privately educated children had over university places and, ultimately, the employment opportunities that were dependent on them?

By combining their results from 1933 and 1934 with the data acquired in earlier department of social biology investigations, Gray and Moshinsky were able to study data relating to over 10,000 children from five different types of school, including a third of secondary schools, in London. Utilizing IB ('index of brightness'), rather than IQ ('intelligence quotient'), measures to interpret their test results, Gray and Moshinsky found that there were, indeed, higher mean test scores among children whose parents paid for their education than those who received their education for free.²⁵ Whilst 50 per cent of fee-paying children in their sample scored an IB of 120 or above, only 25 per cent of children in their sample of those educated for free achieved the same scores. However, as Gray and Moshinsky pointed out, such mean scores were misleading because they concealed statistically important information. In their case, the different means obscured the fact their sample of fee-paying children was 3,000 whilst the sample of children educated for free was 7,000. When those figures were further adjusted, using official statistics, to represent the school population as a whole, which was even more unequally distributed between fee-paying and freely educated children, this meant that around 80 per cent of the total number of children possessing high ability did not attend private school – a hugely significant finding at a time when only 6.6 per cent of children in elementary schools were offered a free secondary school education.²⁶

In their follow-up study of the relationship between educational opportunity and parental occupation, Gray and Moshinsky argued that social and economic groups were self-recruiting, despite the lack of evidence to support the idea that intelligence was concentrated in the offspring of those groups.²⁷ Indeed, as Gray showed in a study co-authored with his colleague David Glass, the relationship between ability and opportunity became weaker the further down the social ladder one looked. Despite 80 per cent of high-ability children being found among the population who received their education for free, seven fee-payers were admitted to university for every non-fee-paying student.²⁸ These facts disclosed 'a defect in our social organization more extensive than is commonly realised', Gray and Moshinsky argued.²⁹ Indeed, as Hogben put

²⁵ IB essentially judged an individual in terms of their distance from what was deemed the normal score (always expressed as 100) for someone of their age. Gray and Moshinsky argued that a different measure was required because the selective status of some of the schools they studied made interpreting their results using IQ difficult.

²⁶ Gray and Moshinsky, 'Ability and opportunity in English education', pp. 349–66, 366–73.

²⁷ J. L. Gray and Pearl Moshinsky, 'Ability and opportunity in relation to parental occupation', in Hogben, ed., *Political arithmetic*, pp. 377–417.

²⁸ David V. Glass and J. L. Gray, 'Opportunity and the older universities', in Hogben, ed., *Political arithmetic*, pp. 418–70.

²⁹ Gray and Moshinsky, 'Ability and opportunity in English education', p. 336.

it in his introduction to Gray, Moshinsky, and Glass's work, these facts illuminated British society's basic inefficiencies. To have so many children of high ability exit education for financial reasons at the age of fourteen was clear evidence of 'biological' and 'social wastage': biological because it was raw ability that was being lost, social because institutions were responsible.³⁰

As the alliance of the liberal technocrat Beveridge and socialist Hogben demonstrated, these ideas resonated with thinkers of different political convictions but they had particularly strong connections with the cross-party planning movement. Focused on the economic problems of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s, members of the planning movement believed the UK's social and economic problems could be solved by political reorganization that handed more responsibility for development to state agencies.³¹ An important part of this vision for a planned society was its emphasis on social and economic research, particularly quantitative work, which seemed to its advocates less open to political manipulation than armchair theorizing. Quantitative research promised to reveal laws of development that the state might accelerate or redirect, helping it to modernize Britain's social, political, and economic structures.³²

Of the many groups associated with the planning movement, the most important was Political and Economic Planning (PEP), which was formed in 1931 in response to an article published in the *Week-End Review* by the ornithologist and proto-environmentalist Max Nicholson, who later served as Herbert Morrison's most senior civil servant in the post-war Labour administration.³³ Among PEP's founding members was Julian Huxley, who was invited to bring a biologist's perspective to the problems of social and economic planning. This move made clear that biology was seen as relevant to planning, not to

³⁰ Hogben, 'Introduction to part II', in Hogben, ed., *Political arithmetic*, pp. 332–3. The idea of 'social wastage' became increasingly visible in social science research from the mid-1920s onwards. Two of the most prominent examples include Kenneth Lindsay's *Social progress and educational waste: being a study of the 'free-place' and scholarship system* (London, 1926), which included a preface attributed to Viscount Haldane but actually written by R. H. Tawney, and Richard Titmuss's *Poverty and population; a factual study of contemporary social waste* (London, 1938), though Titmuss was referring to the higher mortality rates among the lower classes.

³¹ Richard Toye, *The Labour party and the planned economy, 1931–1951* (Woodbridge, 2003), chs. 1–3; Daniel Ritschel, *The politics of planning: the debate on economic planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997). See also Richard Cockett, *Thinking the unthinkable: think-tanks and the economic counter-revolution, 1931–1983* (London, 1994), chs. 1–2.

³² Indeed, as Andrew Hull has argued, economists were much more successful than their counterparts in the natural sciences when it came to selling themselves as experts to government during this period. Hull, 'Passwords to power: a public rationale for expert influence on central government policy making: British scientists and economists, c. 1920–c. 1925' (Ph.D. thesis, Glasgow, 1994), chs. 5–7.

³³ Anonymous [Max Nicholson], 'A national plan for Great Britain', *Week-End Review* supplement (14 Feb. 1931); John Pinder, ed., *Fifty years of Political and Economic Planning: looking forward, 1931–1981* (London, 1981); Richard Overy, *The morbid age: Britain and the crisis of civilization* (London, 2010), pp. 81–6; Ritschel, *The politics of planning*, ch. 4.

mention progressive politics more generally. Yet members of PEP, like the members of the department of social biology, were adamant that much more work needed to be done on the relationship between biological and social science ideas before the political classes would be able to harvest useful knowledge from it. This cautionary approach did not extinguish everyone's hopes, though. On the contrary, for some influential figures it promised not only political progress but also to regenerate the eugenics movement.

II

Mainline eugenicists were concerned with what they called 'quality' – the type of people who were reproducing. Reform eugenicists concentrated on quantity. This interest in population size and dynamics, which had a history dating back to T. R. Malthus's work of the late 1790s and early 1800s, was focused on different problems at different points in time. There were deep concerns about overpopulation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when government statistics, including historical census data, showed the British population had grown significantly over the previous 100 years. By the 1930s, though, social researchers including Charles and Kuczynski were arguing those figures were misleading. Growth had been driven by increased life expectancy but this would soon be countered by declining fertility rates among the young, which meant population decline, perhaps to as little as four million people within a century.³⁴ This was a serious problem that could threaten the stability of Britain's political and social structures.

A central figure in these discussions was Alexander Carr-Saunders (1886–1966). Although he is now seldom studied, Carr-Saunders was one of his generation's leading biosocial thinkers. After reading zoology at Oxford during the first decade of the twentieth century, he had studied under the biometrician and eugenicist Karl Pearson at University College London, then returned to Oxford as a demonstrator in zoology after the First World War before being appointed the first Charles Booth Professor of Social Science at the University of Liverpool in 1923.³⁵ The early result of his work at the intersection of

³⁴ Enid Charles, 'The effect of present trends in fertility and mortality upon the future population of England and Wales and upon its age composition', *London and Cambridge Economic Service Special Memoranda*, 40 (1935), p. 6. See also Enid Charles, *The menace of under-population: a biological study of the decline of population growth*, originally issued under the title *The twilight of parenthood* (London, 1936), and C. P. Blacker and David V. Glass, *The future of our population?* (London, 1937). On the issue of declining fertility in government statistics, see Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*; Soloway, *Demography and degeneration*. See Alison Bashford, *Global population: history, geopolitics, and life on earth* (New York, NY, 2014), for an account of these issues in national and international perspectives during the twentieth century.

³⁵ Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, 'Populating sociology: Carr-Saunders and the problem of population', *Sociological Review*, 56 (2008), pp. 552–78; Erik Angner, 'The history of Hayek's theory of cultural evolution', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 33 (2002), pp. 695–718.

biology, social science, and statistics, and the publication that secured his appointment at Liverpool, was *The population problem*, in which he argued that numbers were central to the study of populations but very far from the only consideration. Declining and differential fertility, to name just two of his era's concerns, were not simply biological phenomenon, he argued, but complex historical changes involving the interaction of biology, economics, and anthropology in social contexts. Declining fertility may or may not be a bad thing, Carr-Saunders told his readers, but it could be reversed only if they paid attention to the social environment as well as the biological constitution of the people living in it.³⁶ To emphasize this point, he followed up *The population problem* with pioneering collaborative work on the structure of British society and the role institutions played within it.³⁷

Unsurprisingly, Carr-Saunders was also a prominent eugenicist – the author of the Home University Library volume on the subject – who shared his contemporaries' worries about the movement's credibility.³⁸ As he told the Eugenics Society audience who gathered to hear his Galton Lecture, 'Eugenics in the light of population trends', in February 1935,

One day someone will write a history of the eugenic movement. The historian will have some puzzles to solve. How did it come about that the subject was ventilated as early as the 'sixties of the last century though no real knowledge of the mechanism of inheritance was available until the early years of the present century? That we may attribute mainly to the genius of one man. Sir Francis Galton saw the importance of applying our knowledge of heredity to social problems; at the same time he did not fail to realize that the knowledge available in his day was very limited. Indeed he devoted much of his time and energy to the building up of a science of inheritance. But it is not the case that his followers have always been equally impressed with the necessity of postponing the formulation of policy until the relevant facts are certainly known, and of this opportunity for criticism the opponents of the movement have not been slow to take advantage.³⁹

Joining up the Eugenics Society's worries about its public reputation and the discussion about population trends, Carr-Saunders argued the main problem was negative eugenics. British popular opinion was clearly uneasy when it came to policies such as forced sterilization, whilst his own work suggested that preventing people from reproducing was a moot point in the context of overall population decline. The priority was a better body of empirical evidence that enabled researchers to dig deeper into population trends. Indeed, Carr-

³⁶ Alexander Carr-Saunders, *The population problem: a study in human evolution* (Oxford, 1922).

³⁷ Alexander Carr-Saunders and David Caradog Jones, *A survey of the social structure of England and Wales* (Oxford, 1927); Alexander Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson, *The professions* (Oxford, 1933).

³⁸ Alexander Carr-Saunders, *Eugenics* (London, 1926).

³⁹ Alexander Carr-Saunders, 'Eugenics in the light of population trends', *Eugenics Review*, 27 (1935), p. 11.

Saunders went on, 'What is required is that some organization, which has the whole population situation under review and desires to construct an adequate programme, should examine all the proposals made to deal with these difficulties, and to weave them into a coherent population policy.'⁴⁰

This message was important because Carr-Saunders not only eloquently articulated many reform eugenicists' thoughts but also inspired the founding of the 'Population Investigation Committee' (PIC) in 1936. The PIC, which counted Hogben and Blacker as members and elected Carr-Saunders as chairman, came into being at an important moment. The six-year-old department of social biology was experiencing serious problems at the LSE stemming from Beveridge's growing unpopularity as director, Hogben's poor relations with colleagues outside the department, and the Rockefeller Foundation's scepticism that it would deliver research findings that could be translated into concrete policy any time soon.⁴¹ The PIC was therefore able to recruit personnel from the department, including the LSE sociology graduate David Glass (1911–78) – the son of a Jewish immigrant tailor – who began his career as Beveridge's assistant and was appointed the PIC's research secretary.⁴² Like the department of social biology, the PIC resolved to keep an official distance from the Eugenics Society, developing a research programme that was strictly focused on population trends and their meaning for social structure. As Blacker and Glass explained in *The future of our population?*, a pamphlet setting out the organization's founding aims and motivations, which was later published in the *Eugenics Review*, the PIC

does not at present take part in propaganda designed to modify existing population trends. It wishes, however, to draw the fullest possible attention to the nature of these trends. Only in this way can it obtain the public co-operation and support which are necessary in carrying out a satisfactory investigation on a sufficiently large scale.⁴³

These aspirations stemmed from a commitment to empirical and positivistic scientific methodology, which Hogben, in particular, contrasted with the deductive foundations of other systems, including the free-market economics doctrines espoused by Lionel Robbins and Friedrich Hayek, his colleagues at the LSE.⁴⁴ Indeed, Hogben emphasized this point when he chose not only the William Petty-inspired title, *Political arithmetic*, for the edited collection of the department of social biology's work, which was published in 1938, but also a

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴¹ Bud, *The uses of life*, ch. 3; Renwick, 'Completing the circle of the social sciences?'; Harris, *William Beveridge*, chs. 11 and 12.

⁴² Glass had worked on the project that led to William Beveridge et al., *Changes in family life* (London, 1932), before working on projects based in the department of social biology.

⁴³ Blacker and Glass, *The future of our population?*, p. 30; C. P. Blacker, 'The future of our population', *Eugenics Review*, 28 (1936), pp. 205–12.

⁴⁴ Lancelot Hogben, 'Introduction – prolegomena to political arithmetic', in Hogben, ed., *Political arithmetic*, pp. 13–46, especially pp. 24–30; Renwick, 'Completing the circle of the social sciences?'

statement from Beveridge, inspired by the seventeenth-century English anatomist William Harvey, as the book's epigraph: 'I profess to learn and to teach economics, politics, sociology, not from books but from observations, not from the positions of philosophers but from the conduct of mankind.'⁴⁵

Yet for all its aspirations to neutrality, population research was a deeply political project and eugenics was never far away. On the one hand, the free movement of people between the Eugenics Society, the department of social biology, and the PIC meant there were shared interests and concerns that were adapted to different forums, audiences, and purposes. On the other hand, large-scale statistics were studied and positivistic methodologies deployed within the framework of what Simon Szreter has called the 'professional model of social classes': the hierarchical, five-class view of British society, which was used for the first time in the General Record Office of England and Wales's *Fertility of marriage report*, and went on to dominate demographic work during the twentieth century. Originally used to interpret census data, the professional model was a significant departure from earlier approaches to social structure because it identified status with work – that is, occupation – rather than worth. This indicated the significant debts the model owed to the middle-class social reformers drawn to both the statistical and eugenics movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁶

These points were illustrated by the work undertaken by population researchers during the late 1930s. Glass, for example, carried out a comparative study of national family allowance programmes, which was funded by the positive eugenics committee of the Eugenics Society. As is well documented, the merits of family allowances were widely debated in early twentieth-century Britain. Some commentators viewed the payments as a positive means of addressing child poverty and improving nutrition, others as a tool to encourage fertility either overall or in particular socio-economic groups, whilst some labour organizations argued unscrupulous employers might use the allowances to reduce wages. In some quarters, including the Eugenics Society, which only threw its support behind family allowances under Blacker's reforming leadership during the 1930s, there were concerns about their potential dysgenic effects.⁴⁷ However, as population researchers were quick to point out, there was little empirical evidence to support any of these claims.

⁴⁵ Hogben, ed., *Political arithmetic*, epigraph. Beveridge's statement was taken from his hugely controversial farewell lecture as director of the LSE, in which he attacked the kind of social science practised by the likes of John Maynard Keynes and Hayek. Beveridge believed his support for empirical and positivist social research was at the root of opposition to his directorship. William Beveridge, 'The place of the social sciences in human knowledge', *Politica*, 2 (1937), pp. 467 and 470. See Renwick, 'Completing the circle of the social sciences?'

⁴⁶ Census of 1911, vol. XIII, *Fertility of marriage report*, Pt 1, Cd. 8678, PP 1917–18; Census of 1911, vol. XIII, *Fertility of Marriage Report*, Pt 2 (London, 1923); Szreter, *Fertility, class and gender*, chs. 2–5.

⁴⁷ Susan Pederson, *Family, dependence, and the origins of the welfare state: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge, 1993); John Macnicol, *The movement for family allowances, 1918–*

Glass intended to address this deficiency by travelling to mainland Europe to gather statistical information on family allowance schemes implemented by industrial employers in France and governments in Italy and Germany. Although each of those schemes, along with others pursued in Scandinavia, had different motivations, with some aimed at workers' welfare and others focused on reproduction among particular ethnic groups, they all provided opportunities to observe the relationship between the payments and subsequent family sizes. Glass's main finding, published in his book, *The struggle for population*, as well as articles in the *Eugenics Review*, which formed the basis of his landmark monograph of 1940, *Population policies and movements in Europe*, was that family allowances had a negligible effect on fertility rates.⁴⁸ Only Germany experienced a short increase in fertility after the policy was implemented. Even that rise could be attributed to other factors, though, such as an increase in the marriage rate shortly before family allowances were introduced.⁴⁹ Whatever they might be, family allowances were neither dysgenic nor the answer to the population problem.

The desire of some population researchers to transform findings such as these into policy proposals was strong, but most agreed with Carr-Saunders that impartiality and objectivity were central to the project he had described to the Eugenics Society in 1935. It was for this reason the Population Policies Committee (PPC) was formed by PEP and PIC as a joint enterprise in 1938. The PPC counted Blacker, Glass, and PEP's Max Nicholson among its members and was administrated by its secretary, François Lafitte, who would make his name by exposing the British government's internment of political refugees during the early stages of the Second World War and would later be appointed to a chair of social policy at the University of Birmingham and serve as chairman of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service.⁵⁰ The committee's aims were '(1) to survey the social and economic conditions which discourage the adequate replacement of eugenically sound stocks; and (2) to examine and report on proposals for raising the fertility of healthy stocks in different occupational groups'.⁵¹ Whilst this framework revealed the ostensibly neutral

1945: a study in social policy development (London, 1980); Mazumdar, *Eugenics, human genetics, and human failings*, pp. 48–50. For his part, Beveridge introduced a family allowance scheme for LSE's academic staff in 1926.

⁴⁸ David V. Glass, *The struggle for population* (Oxford, 1936); David V. Glass, 'The Berlin Population Congress and recent population movements in Germany', *Eugenics Review*, 27 (1935), pp. 207–12; David V. Glass 'Population policies in Scandinavia', *Eugenics Review*, 30 (1938), pp. 89–100; David V. Glass, 'Gross reproduction rates for the départements of France, 1891 to 1931', *Eugenics Review*, 30 (1939), pp. 199–201.

⁴⁹ Glass, *The struggle for population*, pp. 87–9.

⁵⁰ François Lafitte, *The internment of aliens* (Harmondsworth, 1949); Nicholas Deakin, 'Besieging Jericho: episodes from the early career of François Lafitte', *Cercles*, Occasional Papers Series, 11 (2004), www.cercles.com/n11/deakin.pdf.

⁵¹ 'First draft of memorandum, February 23rd 1938', Political and Economic Planning Collection, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics, PEP/PWS/1/folder 1.

population research project's underlying motivations and concerns, it also provided an outlet for discussions that could not be hosted by the PIC, particularly the more radical arguments in favour of greater state involvement in education and health that some commentators drew from Carr-Saunders's and Huxley's focus on the social environment.

The wind was taken out of the PPC's sails almost immediately when scientists, particularly those with statistical and administrative skills, including Glass and Nicholson, were called up to work on problems within the war economy. Population research did not disappear, either as a scientific or political concern, though. On the contrary, the appointment of a Royal Commission on Population in 1944 'to examine the facts relating to the present population trends in Great Britain; to investigate the causes of these trends and to consider their probable consequences; [and] to consider what measures, if any, should be taken in the national interest to influence the future trend of population', confirmed population research's agenda was part of the conversation when thoughts turned to post-war reconstruction.⁵² Moreover, with Carr-Saunders invited to serve as a commissioner and bodies including the Eugenics Society, PEP, and PIC contributing to the commission's work, including a new fertility survey carried out by Glass and Eugene Grebnik, the Royal Commission helped population researchers find a foothold in the uncertain post-war landscape.⁵³ Yet in the context of new government commitments to the social sciences after the Second World War, population researchers did not find themselves restricted to the field that bore that name.

III

The LSE's department of social biology and the PIC were established when there were limited opportunities within British universities for social researchers who identified, and whom we might now identify, as sociologists. Contrary to received views, British scientists, social commentators, and politicians had been immensely enthusiastic about sociology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the first British chairs, journal, and society for sociology were established at around the same time as those in France, Germany, and the USA.⁵⁴ There was little further institutional expansion in the UK before the Second World War, however, with just one dedicated sociology department, at the LSE, and three departments in total – at the LSE, Liverpool,

⁵² *Royal Commission on Population report*, Cd. 7695, PP 1949, p. iii.

⁵³ David V. Glass and Eugene Grebnik, *Trend and pattern of fertility in Great Britain: a report on the family census of 1946*, Part I, Papers of the Royal Commission on Population, vol. 6 (London, 1949). For more on the Royal Commission, see Soloway, *Demography and degeneration*, pp. 346–43. After the wartime lull in its activities and a period stationed in the Eugenics Society's premises, the PIC received a substantial grant from the Nuffield Foundation, which was founded in 1943, and was re-housed at the LSE.

⁵⁴ Renwick, *British sociology's lost biological roots*.

and Bedford College, London – hosting sociology in broader social science contexts before 1939. All this was to change in subsequent decades. By the late 1960s, there were chairs of sociology at twenty-eight universities and the Social Science Research Council, the forerunner of today's Economic and Social Research Council, had been established. There are numerous well-known narratives attached to that period of expansion, which sociologists consider the discipline's golden age. Yet few acknowledge its connections with the biosocial research of the interwar years.⁵⁵

Given that the field expanded so rapidly during post-war reconstruction and within the expanded university system created after the Robbins Report in 1963, it is perhaps unsurprising that British sociology is usually understood in terms of the political priorities of the 1950s and 1960s. One often-quoted statement to this effect is the French sociologist and public intellectual Raymond Aron's reputed assertion that British sociology was 'essentially an attempt to make intellectual sense of the political problems of the Labour Party'.⁵⁶ This idea makes much sense in light of the proliferation of studies relating to poverty, class, and equality after 1945, not to mention the presence of sociologists in politics and government: from Michael Young, the wartime director of PEP, who took the lead in the writing of Labour's 1945 manifesto, *Let us face the future*, to A. H. Halsey, who served as advisor to the Labour education secretary Anthony Crosland during the 1960s. Yet the close identification of sociology with the welfare state established in the wake of Beveridge's *Social security and allied services report* in 1942 and the 'White Paper chase' of 1944 often produces a particularly narrow perception of the field.

As Mike Savage has argued, broadening our understanding of British sociology's development requires paying closer attention to the ways in which it was entwined with particular social and class identities.⁵⁷ Located between C. P. Snow's two cultures of natural science and literature, sociology appealed to, and was largely pursued by, the lower middle classes who were drawn to scientific rather than gentlemanly high literary culture. Post-war British sociology was not simply quantitative and empirical, it was managerial, technocratic, and frequently positivistic, with sociologists seeing their emerging field as a distinctly modern enterprise embodying progressive values, both methodologically and substantially. As George Steinmetz has suggested, British sociology's association with a particular vision of modernity meant it thrived in the post-war context of decolonization, where, along with economics and political science, it found favour with Colonial Office officials as they turned towards policies of

⁵⁵ One important exception is Richard Szeterer's study of the sociology of education – 'Some forerunners of sociology of education in Britain: an account of the literature and influences c. 1900–1950', *Westminster Studies in Education*, 7 (1984), pp. 13–43 – though Szeterer's account of eugenics is fairly light.

⁵⁶ Halsey, *A history of sociology in Britain*, p. 70.

⁵⁷ Savage, *Identities and social change*.

developmentalism and local government.⁵⁸ For these reasons, British sociology was as much part of the warfare state David Edgerton has described as it was the welfare state.⁵⁹

The trajectory of interwar biosocial science and population research was deeply entangled with these post-war developments. Whilst Kuczynski produced a demographic survey of the colonies, funded by the Colonial Office, Glass served on the Colonial Social Science Research Council's (CSSRC) 'Standing committee on anthropology'. Carr-Saunders was the chairman of the CSSRC, the first social science funding body of its kind, when it was founded in 1944; a member of the Asquith Commission on higher education in the British colonies, which was convened in 1943; and chair of the Senate committee that organized the relationship between the University of London and colonial universities and colleges.⁶⁰ Moreover, there were strong intellectual continuities between the work carried out during the interwar years and research produced in sociology's years of expansion. Particularly instructive in this respect is *Social mobility in Britain*: a landmark study, published in 1954 and led by Glass, who was appointed to a chair of sociology at LSE in 1948 and succeeded Ginsberg as Martin White Professor of Sociology in 1961. As Glass explained in his preface, *Social mobility in Britain* had numerous

obligations to Professor Lancelot Hogben. Professor Hogben was not associated with our research and is in no way responsible for our faults. But our approach to the study of social selection and differentiation has clearly been influenced by the investigations which he promoted before World War II in the Department of Social Biology, the London School of Economics. It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge that fact, especially as I myself had the privilege of working in Professor Hogben's department.⁶¹

Like *Political arithmetic*, *Social mobility in Britain* was a large collaborative project, involving twelve contributors, who used empirical and statistical research methods to produce a series of studies of Britain linked by a common theme. Glass's project, which, like the department of social biology, benefited from Rockefeller Foundation funding, was carried out with an eye on how its findings might aid government, particularly when it came to formulating education policy after the 1944 Education Act. Yet Glass's project owed bigger but less obvious debts to Hogben, the department of social biology, and the broader culture of population research. The very concept of social mobility—a

⁵⁸ George Steinmetz, 'A child of the empire: British sociology and colonialism, 1940s–1960s', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 49 (2013), pp. 353–78.

⁵⁹ Savage, *Identities and social change*, ch. 3; David Edgerton, *Warfare state: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁶⁰ R. R. Kuczynski, *Demographic survey of the British colonial empire*, III (London, 1948); Alexander Carr-Saunders, *New universities overseas* (London, 1961); Sir Charles Jeffries, ed., *A review of colonial research, 1940–1960* (London, 1963), part II, ch. 1; Steinmetz, 'A child of the empire'.

⁶¹ Glass, 'Preface', in David V. Glass, ed., *Social mobility in Britain* (London, 1954), p. vi.

prominent issue in late twentieth-century British sociology – was also a product of the context that had created population research.

As Glass noted in *Social mobility in Britain*, whilst his own project was the first comprehensive study of social mobility in the UK, there was only one other and in many ways very different substantial work on the subject: the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin's *Social mobility*, published in 1927.⁶² Although the mid-Victorian era had seen a small boom in self-help philosophy and literature, most famously the writings of Samuel Smiles, the ideas about self-reliance and thrift put forwards in those works were far removed from the fine-grained understanding of social structure and sifting characteristic of modern social mobility studies. The absence of a coherent understanding, explanation, or justification of the processes through which individuals either climbed up or fell down the social ladder was partly due to the dearth of easily computable data, reflected in the static rather than dynamic accounts that typified nineteenth-century social surveys. It was also a consequence of social scientists operating with different understandings of social mobility. Many pre-war social investigators understood social mobility in terms of geographic or spatial mobility – the ability of workers to relocate for employment.⁶³ This was linked to the strong British tradition of political economy, in which thinkers such as Alfred Marshall emphasized the importance of mobility, both spatial and occupational, for economic efficiency, and was perhaps an unsurprising assumption given the importance of urban migration to economic growth during the nineteenth century.⁶⁴

The absence of questions about social mobility from sociological investigation in the UK before the second half of the twentieth century has seldom been

⁶² Glass, 'Introduction', in Glass, ed., *Social mobility in Britain*, p. 5; Pitirim Sorokin, *Social mobility* (London, 1927). Indeed, Sorokin acknowledged Glass's assessment in the foreword to the post-war reprints of his 1927 book. Sorokin, *Social and cultural mobility* (New York, NY, 1964), foreword [no page reference].

⁶³ See, for example, Howard Becker, 'The process of secularisation: an ideal typical analysis with special reference to personality change as affected by population movement', *Sociological Review*, 24 (1932), pp. 138–54. Almost all articles published in the *Sociological Review* during the interwar period pursued these economic definitions of social mobility.

⁶⁴ Alfred Marshall, *Principles of economics*, 1 (2nd edn, London, 1891), book 4, chs. 4–12. See also Lionel Robbins, 'Notes on some probable consequences of the advent of a stationary population in Great Britain', *Economica*, 25 (1929), pp. 71–82; Andrew Miles, *Social mobility in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), chs. 1–2. As criticism of Glass's post-war social mobility project indicated, the focus on economic issues, particularly occupation, was problematic, not least because it excluded huge numbers of women. In many ways, these problems were an inevitable constraint of the methods that Glass and others pursued, which only permitted analysis of issues and categories on which sufficient data was collected – a trend that was reinforced by John Goldthorpe's exclusion of qualitative evidence in his hugely influential Nuffield study, which began during the early 1970s. As Geoff Payne has argued, these constraints had implications for political debates about social mobility, in which politicians equate social mobility with increased wages. Geoff Payne, 'The new social mobility? The political redefinition of a sociological problem', *Contemporary Social Science*, 7 (2012), pp. 55–71.

considered. One plausible argument is that the concept was at best overlooked and at worst incompatible with the Spencerian evolutionism that dominated early British sociology through L. T. Hobhouse and Patrick Geddes, two of the era's dominant thinkers. In those largely organicist and frequently functionalist interpretations of society, the focus was on groups and types in the context of social differentiation brought about by evolution, with Geddes, in particular, arguing humans existed in a symbiotic relationship with their environments.⁶⁵ Given that Morris Ginsberg, Hobhouse's disciple and successor at LSE, published one of the first empirical studies of social mobility, that explanation is far from perfect.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the interpretation does convey important elements of truth. This much is clear from British sociology's strong connections with social policies such as the national minimum, which aimed to raise up entire deserving classes, rather than specific individuals, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁷

In these respects, it was the questions and styles of thought associated with 1930s population research that facilitated new understandings of social mobility. Having accepted and built on the professional model of social class, population researchers helped create a hierarchical view of British society that served as the framework for post-war sociologists who investigated and defined concepts to suit their wider social reform aspirations. When it came to social mobility, those goals owed much to population researchers' engagement with eugenics; in particular, the effort to challenge hard-hereditary and 'mainline' eugenics and develop an alternative account in which existing social structures were maladjusted to the distribution of ability throughout the British population. Underpinning this idea was a belief common to progressives of the interwar period, such as the LSE-based economic historian and socialist R. H. Tawney, that what was important was not complete equality between individuals but structures that made for an open and fair society.⁶⁸ More than anything else, this belief in the importance of openness facilitated the growth of social science research into social mobility, which did not challenge hierarchical societies so much as it emphasized the importance of people genuinely deserving to be in the place they found themselves in society. This idea had its roots in

⁶⁵ Volker Welter, *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the city of life* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); John Scott and Ray Bromley, *Envisioning sociology: Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes, and quest for social reconstruction* (Albany, NY, 2013); Chris Renwick, 'Evolutionism and British sociology', in John Holmwood and John Scott, eds., *The Palgrave handbook of sociology in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 71–96.

⁶⁶ Morris Ginsberg, 'Interchange between social classes', *Economic Journal*, 39 (1929), pp. 554–65.

⁶⁷ Lucinda Platt, 'Poverty studies and social research', in Holmwood and Scott, eds., *The Palgrave handbook of sociology in Britain*, pp. 30–53; G. R. Searle, *The quest for national efficiency: a study in British politics and political thought, 1899–1914* (Oxford, 1971); Ben Jackson, *Equality and the left: a study in progressive political thought, 1900–1964* (Manchester, 2007).

⁶⁸ R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (London, 1931), especially chs. 3, 5, and 6; Miles, *Social mobility*, chs. 1–2.

population research, which provided a space for researchers who believed positivistic social research should be the basis of policy-making and who aimed to create a social structure that helped individuals rise and fall according to ability and, through this, better served the interests of the country as a whole.

As Andrew Miles has observed, these ideas and values were clear for everyone to see in Glass's *Social mobility in Britain*.⁶⁹ Setting out the rationale underpinning the various studies in the collection, Glass explained that

There are two primary reasons for wishing to see the possibility of high social mobility in a community. First, in order to increase economic and social efficiency, since with a fluid social structure there is more likelihood that positions requiring high ability will in fact be held by individuals who possess high ability. A fluid social structure is also, on that account, more capable of adapting itself to internal and external change. Secondly, from the point of view of the individual, social mobility should ensure that there are fewer square pegs in round holes, and the existence of opportunity to rise in status will in any case provide an incentive for the fuller utilization of a person's capacities. There may, as a consequence, be less feeling of personal frustration and a greater possibility of social harmony. Indeed, even if there is little actual opportunity to rise social status, the belief in a myth of opportunity may produce similar results; and perhaps part of the pride which Americans feel in their 'open' society derives more from the image of nineteenth-century U.S.A. than from any exceptional present reality. Certainly it is one of the postulates of a democratic and egalitarian society that ability, whatever its social background, shall not be denied the chance to fulfil itself... We need to encourage mobility for the advantages it offers to individuals and to society; but we also need to avoid, as far as possible, such disadvantages as may follow from having a social structure in which the status relationship between individuals in successive generations will be far less stable than at present or during the past half-century.⁷⁰

IV

Social mobility is one of British sociology's most enduring concepts, emerging as an object of widespread interest after 1945 alongside a new set of terms, such as 'meritocracy', which expressed the normative values it was associated with. Not only was social mobility the subject of some of the field's most famous post-1945 investigations, including the Nuffield Study, begun at Oxford by John Goldthorpe, a former student of Glass's, in the early 1970s, it was also a phenomenon that many sociologists working in the UK during that period experienced.⁷¹ Yet, as an expression of a particular set of technical values focused on the importance of adjusting social structures to suit those judged to be in possession of high ability, social mobility was also the subject

⁶⁹ Miles, *Social mobility*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Glass, 'Introduction', in Glass, ed., *Social mobility in Britain*, pp. 24–5.

⁷¹ John Goldthorpe in collaboration with Catriona Llewellyn and Clive Payne, *Social mobility and class structure in modern Britain* (Oxford, 1980); Savage, *Identities and social change*.

of criticism. Indeed, Michael Young originally popularized the word ‘meritocracy’ as part of a satirical critique of the increasingly influential vision of modern Britain associated with Glass and others, which reflected a growing diversity in sociology in the UK from the 1950s onwards.⁷² Notwithstanding such criticisms, which have had the strongest influence in the sociology of education, social mobility has continued to command attention in British sociology and been a central concern in British politics into the early twenty-first century, even if the definitions of social mobility that politicians use are somewhat narrower than the ones social scientists have developed.⁷³

Post-Second World War social mobility research’s roots in interwar population research, and in particular the relationship between population research and eugenics, is therefore highly significant. In many ways, those roots should not surprise us. Whilst social mobility researchers were concerned that society wasted much of the talent at its disposal, the reform eugenics movement that began in the 1920s highlighted the risks of drawing incorrect conclusions about a person’s innate ability from their position in the social structure. Such points of intersection not only throw light on the complex origins of our understandings of social mobility, they also illuminate the deep connections between eugenics and modernity. Although we frequently think of eugenics as reactionary or conservative in its aims and associations, the researchers who endeavoured to forge a new project under the name population research saw themselves as progressives and were clearly possessed by the technical identity that underpinned the work during sociology’s post-war expansion. Indeed, as Glass put it in response to questions about education, ‘we must not “take the world as we find it” and ground our educational system in the existing social structure. In the schools, as in the wider society of which they are a part, we must deliberately make that closer community; it will not create itself.’⁷⁴

In a broader sense, work in these areas should also throw light on the potential and growing collaboration between history and sociology. Mike Savage’s efforts to reuse the raw materials of mid-twentieth-century social science studies have been central to recent moves towards reconnecting the two fields, not just in the sense of making sociology relevant to historians but also demonstrating how historical skills and practices might address aspects of what has been called the ‘coming crisis of empirical sociology’.⁷⁵ Building on

⁷² Michael Young, *The rise of the meritocracy, 1870–2033: an essay on education and equality* (London, 1958); Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: social entrepreneur* (Basingstoke, 2011), ch. 5; Edmund Ramsden, ‘Surveying the meritocracy: the problems of intelligence and mobility in the studies of the Population Investigation Committee’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Science*, 47 (2014), pp. 130–41. The term ‘meritocracy’ was coined two years earlier by Allan Fox, ‘Class and equality’, *Socialist Commentary*, May 1956, p. 13.

⁷³ Payne, ‘The new social mobility?’; Janet Finch, *Research and policy: the uses of qualitative methods in social and educational research* (London, 1986).

⁷⁴ Glass, ‘Introduction’, in Glass, ed., *Social mobility in Britain*, p. 28.

⁷⁵ Mike Savage and Roger Burrows, ‘The coming crisis of empirical sociology’, *Sociology*, 41 (2007), pp. 885–99.

Savage's investigative models, one way of furthering the links between history and sociology might be for historians to return to the raw data and results of mid- and late twentieth-century social mobility studies in order to understand more about how individuals actually experienced social mobility during that period.⁷⁶ As this article has shown, an important contribution to such a project should be a reflection on the historical dimensions of the concepts that sociologists, historians, and politicians use. Whilst it is easy to take the stability of a modern concept such as social mobility for granted, its meaning has changed in subtle but important ways that are important for our understanding of what social scientists, reformers, and politicians have understood and continue to understand themselves as trying to achieve.

⁷⁶ For more on this idea, see Sam Friedman, 'The price of the ticket: rethinking the experience of social mobility', *Sociology*, 48 (2014), pp. 352–68. See also Selina Todd, *The people: the rise and fall of the working class, 1910–2010* (London, 2014).