New Voices

The Eugenic Underpinnings of Apartheid South Africa, and its Influence on the South African School System

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Abstract: In Apartheid South Africa, eugenic notions formed an underlying justification for the superiority of the white race over Africans, through the works of international eugenicists like Galton and Pearson, and locally through prominent South African eugenicist H. B. Fantham. These ideas are expressed and elaborated upon in Emewvo Biakalo’s essay ‘Categories of Cross-Cultural Cognition and the African Condition’. His work serves particularly to highlight that the mind and cognitive processes of Africans were considered very different from their white counterparts, and thus they would require different approaches to education. I demonstrate here how these views served as part of the underlying justification for Apartheid in South Africa, particularly in Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd’s insistence on creating separate and distinct educational systems for different races. This eugenic legacy is still visible in South Africa’s radically unequal education system to this day.

Keywords: Apartheid, cross-cultural cognition, education, eugenics, scientific racism

In the field of evolutionary science, the now-debunked study of eugenics came to racist and unjustified conclusions on the African condition and aimed to serve as a scientific foundation for the
maltreatment of the African individual and the supremacy of the white race. Eugenics aimed to improve the population on a genetic level through different interventions, and while that alone was not inherently racist, it did pave the way for scientific racism when eugenicists started claiming that they could use the methodology and legitimacy of science to justify ideas of white superiority. In South Africa, eugenic and racist thought went hand in hand, and this type of thinking came to light in the work of H. B. Fantham, a prominent South African eugenicist. Similarly, in ‘Categories of Cross-Cultural Cognition and the African Condition’, Emevwo Biakalo considers the anthropological and sociological thought of Europeans and their view of the African as ‘Other’, which comes to similar conclusions about the perceived superiority of white people. While eugenics was never practiced as explicitly in South Africa as in other countries, these ‘scientific’ ideas of race formed part of the justification for Apartheid in South Africa and had a deep and lasting effect on the South African education system.

In this article, I will firstly consider evolutionary views on society like those of Herbert Spencer, and the related field of eugenics as set out by Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, particularly their thoughts on education. Galton graded black people below white people in terms of evolutionary fitness and was an advocate for colonialism for the progression of the human race. Pearson’s work in particular tried to justify scientific racism, claiming that the white race was inherently superior and therefore both colonisation and slavery were morally justifiable in South Africa. This notion of scientifically founded white superiority found its voice in South Africa through thinkers like Fantham. He promoted and perpetuated these views, particularly when it came to the education of different races and the mental capacities of white compared to black students.

In addition to eugenics, other scientific notions of race also reinforced this view. In Biakolo’s categories of cross-cultural cognition, which draw from fields like anthropology and sociobiology as well, we find international views that further serve to undermine Africans and demonstrate the ‘superiority’ of the white race: the ‘savage African’ compared to the ‘civilised European’, and religious as opposed to scientific. African thinking, according to these categories, is pre-logical as opposed to logical, and perceptual as opposed conceptual, and the way it was expressed was oral rather
than written. Each of these categories, to greater or lesser degrees, tie in and are supported by eugenics ideas, and are particularly relevant to education since they focus on cognitive capacities.

Eugenic ideas and similar ones from anthropology, that Biakolo highlights, informed the creation of distinct and separate systems of education for different races, including different curriculums, funding, and mandatory levels of education. These were enforced by the Bantu, Coloured and Indian education acts in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa. We see this particularly in the thought and influence of Verwoerd. And although eugenics is largely debunked as pseudoscientific, we still see the legacy of this thinking in the radically unequal South African education system. While the distinguishing factors now are based on class, rather than race, with less than one percent of white South Africans below the poverty line, these distinctions still generally fall along racial lines.

Social Darwinism and Eugenics

When Charles Darwin first published the theory of evolution and how it worked through natural selection in 1859, it changed the way people thought about the world, its age, and also much of what was known in biology. Not only did the theory of evolution change scientific views, but it also ‘raised a number of fundamental moral questions, so fundamental, in fact, that it has served as the basis for several systems of ethics’ (Zirkle 1959: 149). Evolution cast doubt on the authenticity of any absolute ethical code and suggested that all standards of conduct possibly had only relative validity and were useful only provisionally. Simply put, from the perspective of evolution, what is considered good and bad (biologically, though for some ethically), is determined only by what is better or worse for survival in a particular environment. Social Darwinism became popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and was discredited soon after, on three main counts: philosophically, because it violates the logical distinction between facts and values, scientifically, particularly because the genetic differences between the races are insignificant, and ethically, considering all the cruelties committed in its name (Kaye 1997). It was based on the premises that humans are also animals and thus under the same
constraints as the natural world. Similarly, society as a whole was also considered an organism that was subject to the same rules (Andrews 2003). For many Social Darwinists, if biology was the cause of discordances in a given human society, then it was also the tool to remove them.

Herbert Spencer, the biologist and philosopher who coined the term ‘survival of the fittest’, proposed a biological understanding of society as a whole. However, he thought that it was exactly intervention in the natural state that led to the degeneration of society. He explains that evolution always progresses from a simple homogeneity to a complex heterogeneity, and society progresses in the same way. This process, however, can also start to decay or to reverse. For Spencer it is a natural necessity to pass through these various evolutionary stages, and trying to intervene in this process is not only futile but also harmful. He says, ‘we see that, ethically considered, this law (survival of the fittest) implies that each individual ought to receive the benefits and the evils of his own nature and consequent conduct’ (Spencer 1900: 17).

Spencer meant that any one person should never be prevented from gaining the good that their actions would normally bring them, by being forced to give it up for someone who did not earn it. Nor should anyone be allowed to burden other persons with the negative consequences that follow from their own actions or rob them of what they fairly gained by their own actions (Spencer 1900). In other words, legislated charity and help offered to those that needed it was seen as an unfair process that robbed those who did well for themselves and rewarded those who did less well. But for Spencer, this was meant to be applied only to enforcing legislation – he did not mean that the poor should suffer and that it is morally right. He considered that, given the complexity of situations and the unknowability of the outcomes of interventions, that the state could neither be capable of, nor trusted to create and enforce legislation that could lead to the betterment of society. Combined with the ‘moral hazard’ of interventions, state action ‘to improve the condition of the poor will be ineffective’ (Zwolinski 2015: 74).

While Spencer never described himself as a Social Darwinist (ibid.), and the term Social Darwinism is not necessarily a unified school of thought, he did hold that evolution would lead to the betterment of society. But interventions were unnecessary. As
Zwolinski notes: ‘appeals to the “survival of the fittest” were purely descriptive in nature. To label an organism as “fit” is to make a largely formal statement about its adaptation to the conditions of survival in a particular environment. It does not imply any sort of normative judgement about the value of the organism, or the goodness of its survival’ (ibid.: 62). It did, however, view society as a whole as the type of thing that was subject to and shaped by natural biological processes.

We see similar tendencies in anthropological arguments such as those of Otto Ammon, a German anthropologist who claimed that the social processes of selection were already naturally in place in society. Unlike Spencer however, he thought that interventions were necessary and could be implemented successfully. For him, these social processes were the food system, the education system and the legal system. With the first, the food system, there are always many to feed, but at the same time, food is limited. In respect of education, schools (most relevant to our study) were there to identify delinquents from an early age, and the law was put in place to remove the genetically criminal from society (Stark 1961). He was also anti-egalitarian, believing that any move towards equality is unnatural. Following his reasoning, children should be educated in the manner best suited to them, depending on how intelligent they were. In this way no money needs to be wasted trying to educate those that are genetically not suited to benefit from it. Food should also be dealt out differently for different classes. The upper class needs prime cuts of meat and good food, necessary to sustain the brain power needed for upper class work, whereas the lower classes do not need the best food and can eat cheaper meats to sustain them in what Ammon considered their ‘menial’ jobs (ibid.: 51).

For Spencer then, society would naturally progress, and for Ammon the processes were already more or less in place. Others however, such as Galton and Pearson, were adamant that intervention was necessary to create a better society, and that we have a moral imperative to create this society. This led to the ‘science’ of eugenics, which was practiced in varying countries for different lengths of time. The word ‘eugenics’ is derived from two words, the Greek ‘eu’- meaning good, and ‘gen’- genesis, or creation. It can be seen as the ‘science of improving the inherited stock, not only by judicious matings, but by all other influences’ (Galton 1998: 263).
Galton coined the term eugenics and described it as ‘the science of being well born’ (Zirkle 1959:141) or more elaborately, ‘the study of agencies under social control (my italics) that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, physically or mentally’ (Galton in Pearson 1925: 3).

Galton was an advocate of human breeding restrictions, not only for the good of the individual but also for the good of society. After some trips to various countries in Africa, he placed Africans two grades lower than their European counterparts, and he based this grading mostly upon perceived intellect. These tests for cognitive abilities were based on very questionable metrics, and mostly served only to reveal the inherent prejudice already put in place by men of power (Rutherford 2022). In the 1900s, Galton, along with Winston Churchill and John Cecil Rhodes, considered it their moral duty as British imperialists to fill the world (including South Africa) with the dominant race – white people (ibid.).

Galton’s student and mentee, Karl Pearson, elaborated and expanded on Galton’s work. Pearson was committed wholly to the ‘scientific treatment of racial problems in man’ (1925: 1), believing both that there is no equality between the different races (ibid.: 3), and that if black and white men were to be brought into contact with each other, they would naturally fall into the position of master and servant, ‘if not admittedly or covertly into that of slave-owner and slave’ (Pearson 1901: 20).

Pearson’s work had a large role in justifying colonialism. He argued that ‘painful and even terrible as it was in its details, (colonisation) has given us a good far outbalancing its immediate evil’ (ibid.: 23). Particularly about South Africa, he wrote, ‘we shall never have a healthy social state in South Africa until the white man replaces the dark’ (ibid.: 48). Rather the only ‘healthy’ thing to do was drive out inferior races completely, since even existing together was considered dangerous (an idea Fantham would also bring to the fore in his fears of miscegenation).

Of course, in reality, eugenics as a science is debunked. The genetic differences between different races are negligible, in fact the genetic differences between different populations are much too small to even speak in any meaningful terms about different ‘races’ (Bardien-Kruger and Müller-Nedebock 2020: 33), and in modern science the use of racial terminology leads mostly to
unfounded bases for racism or misunderstanding of genetic studies (ibid.). Because of this insignificant difference between the mental and physical characteristics, there is no scientific basis for eugenics. Eugenic policies such as gene editing in humans are riddled with dangers because manipulating processes of inheritance can have far-reaching negative results (ibid.), and predictions of which genes to remove from the gene pool and what their consequences will be are impossibly complex. Yet during the time of Apartheid, these international views on South Africa, and those from other scientific fields such as anthropology, served as justification for colonisation of the African continent, and shaped the European view of the African individual and their cognitive capacities.

**Eugenic Thought in Apartheid South Africa**

Before embarking on eugenic thought and its role in Apartheid legislation, it is important to note that Apartheid was a complex phenomenon, and there were many justifications and forms of reasoning underlying its implementation. While this article focuses on the scientific ones, there were also ideological and economic rationales. Not all white South Africans were in favour of scientific or evolutionary views of race, as it did not sit comfortably with much of Afrikaner nationalism, nor with literal readings of scripture. And if poverty was a biological problem, it would lead to the problematic conclusion that Afrikaner poverty itself might have eugenic origins (Dubow 2014).

Many Afrikaners’ thinking was racist to the extent that miscegenation was considered an evil that would lead to the degeneration of their race. But what was not necessarily present was the idea that superior races would naturally supplant inferior ones (Gilio-mee 2003). The Afrikaner Volk rather had an ‘ingrained aversion towards racial mixture or impurity’ (Dubow 2014: 22), not necessarily because of any eugenic fear but from the desire to preserve their identity as white Africans. It was God’s will ‘that their distinctive identity be protected’ and that that ‘which God wished to remain separate in nature or society would never be conjoined’ (ibid.: 22).
There were also underlying economic benefits to keeping a segregated state, and an interplay of ideological and material forces were considered in creating legislation. Many thought that economic segregation was the only reliable way to preserve white supremacy (see Posel 1988 and 2003). Harold Wolpe makes a similar argument that Apartheid had massive economic benefits, with his cheap labour thesis (2003). These two factors, ideological and economic, combined to form a strong rationale for Apartheid. For example, Giliomee recognises that the rise of modern Afrikaner nationalism was shaped by a vulnerable group motivated both ‘by the desire to secure collective economic advantage, in particular to “uplift” Afrikaans-speaking “poor whites”’ and because it ‘had a vital psychological and cultural dimension, affording a sense of collective security and solidarity’ (2003:200).

Apartheid could then be understood as Afrikaners trying to protect their own identity and interests, with or without scientific backing. At the same time, however, scientific accounts of race had an influence on creating and justifying Apartheid. As Dubow tells us: ‘there has been a distinct tendency to avoid taking serious account of the content and internal logic of scientific racism. Liberals have pursued this comforting line because of the impulse to place the sole responsibility for segregation onto Afrikaner nationalism’ (1995:4). To address this problem, the scientific racism in South Africa needs to be addressed in detail.

In the first half of the twentieth century, racist ideology was already present in South Africa, and most of these ideas came from earlier anthropological studies done about Southern Africa in Europe and North America (Dubow 1989). Eugenicists and those studying race sourced their studies mostly from information gathered by travellers and missionaries from Southern Africa. By 1933 the Oxford dictionary already contained the word ‘Hottentot’, which is described as ‘a person of inferior intellect or culture; one degraded in the scale of civilisation, or ignorant of the usages of civilised society’ (ibid.: 8).

The sequence of occupation of South Africa also helped to reinforce the idea of white supremacy. The occupation of South Africa mirrored the supposed racial hierarchy, which was composed respectively of Bushmen, Hottentots, Bantu and whites (ibid.: 6). This is of course a wild oversimplification of South Africa’s history,
but eugenicists held this as fact. In terms of survival of the fittest then, the fact that each race was overthrown by the next seemed to prove that each consequent race was somehow better, stronger, more intelligent or fitter than the previous ones. This reinforced the idea that white supremacy was the natural outcome of the evolutionary process, since they had occupied the land successively after the previous races and so proved themselves superior. These ideas also gained approval from many South African intellectuals like Prime Minister Verwoerd, and academics like Fantham.

Fantham was a professor of zoology at the University of Witwatersrand in the early 1900s. While not the only one, his work focussed strongly on the mental capacities of different races, and thus serves its purpose when looking at effects of eugenic ideas on the schooling system. Fantham believed that both the mental and ethical differences between the different races occupying South Africa were almost entirely due to heredity’s influence. He further spoke of the need for a ‘eugenic conscience’ in South Africa (ibid.: 13). He was also a member of the Pretoria Eugenic Study Circle, which proposed that even school children be taught a basic eugenic understanding (ibid.).

Fantham believed that democracy was fundamentally flawed because it does not recognise natural variations within humankind – a similar anti-egalitarian sentiment that Pearson had, that different races are not equal. Following Fantham’s reasoning, whites were superior to the other races occupying Africa, and of course deserved superior treatment. Democracy would aim to give everyone equal rights even given the fact, according to him, that the African races were not equal at all, but rather less ‘developed’ than whites. ‘Energy, perhaps the most valuable of human attributes, is inherited, and, in the germinal make-up of the negroid peoples, this factor appears to be either very feebly developed or lacking’ (Fantham 1925: 408) compared to the white. Further he believed that the sexual impulses in black people were much stronger than their inhibitions, and coupled this with a lack of foresight, persistence and initiative.

Fantham also claimed that racial intermarriage would lead to degeneration of the population as a whole. In his view, considered racially, the white man loses and the negro gains in such miscegenation. But in neither case can the union of white and black be
considered really advantageous to the community at large. The coloured race has not the energy nor the persistence of the white, neither is it controlled by the tribal conventions of the native. Educationally, the coloured peoples lag behind the white, and the general tendency is towards mediocrity. As a body, the coloured are often despised by black and white alike (ibid.: 409).

This idea of miscegenation led to fears of contamination, of the loss of racial pride and purity, and of the ‘black peril’ (Dubow 1989:15). For Fantham this fear of contamination was also quite literal: ‘Observance of hygienic; principles is but little developed among primitive people, with the result that they suffer from a multiplicity of parasite diseases, and by their unhygienic habits serve to spread the said maladies among the whites with whom they dwell’ (Fantham 1925: 409). All of this pointed not only to the inferiority of the African, but particularly to the need for separation of the races on so-called scientific and ethical grounds, since, just like Pearson, he considered the mixing of races dangerous.

**Biakolo’s Categories of Cross-Cultural Cognition**

These eugenic notions of race were not the only ‘scientific’ views on race, anthropological thought also considered the African lesser, particularly when it came to the cognitive capacities of the African. In Emevwo Biakolo’s 2002 article, ‘Categories of Cross-Cultural Cognition and the African Condition’, he concerns himself with the cognitive capacities of the African, and how they are considered different, or in some cases, inferior to those of the white individual. These differences, if believed to be true, would mean that different teaching strategies, subject matter and the like would not be as accessible to some groups as to others, and is thus particularly relevant to the question of education in South Africa in the following section, and more generally serves again as demonstration of the scientific racism applied to Africans.

Biakolo considers five categorical differences between Westerners and Africans, constructed by Europeans with political motivation to create a cultural paradigm of the ‘Other’, who could be exploited and mistreated because of their different nature. These categories are savage versus civilised, pre-logical versus logical,
perceptual versus conceptual, oral versus written, and religious versus scientific (Europeans themselves were also religious though, so this category might be better classified as superstitious thinking rather than purely religious thinking). It is important to note here that Biakolo combines ideas from many fields of study, not only eugenic ones. He includes anthropological thought, although some, like Pearson, considered eugenics a type of anthropology, though highly developed and applied (Pearson 1925). Anthropology similarly gives an account of the social and cultural development of humankind, but eugenics required mathematical and genetic knowledge to be put in practice (ibid.).

Biakolo’s categories also highlight racist ideology, and while eugenic thought was largely racist, this is not the case, not in every instance. Racist ideology and scientific racism is again not the same as racial essentialism, where physical and internal features of an individual are their essence, and that these factors determine ‘your humanity, your dignity, your worth, your value, your esteem and the respect and regard owed to you’ (Jansen 2020: xi), but we see instances of racial essentialism demonstrated in Biakolo’s work as well. Generally considered, each of Biakolo’s categories are informed by some kind of underlying application of ‘scientific’ principles towards race and highlights the ideologies of colonialism and how the African was viewed by the European.

Biakolo’s first category of cross-cultural recognition is that of savage versus civilised, with the African being considered ‘brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious’ (Biakolo 2002: 9). Biakolo refers to the work of Lewis Hendry Morgan (1870), who had seven classes of civilisation, Lower Savagery, Middle Savagery, Upper Savagery, Lower Barbarism, Middle Barbarism, Upper Barbarism and Civilisation. These classes were determined by a society’s kinship relations, subsistence system and technology, with white people of European descent being the only ones to achieve true civilisation, and everyone else falling short to differing degrees (Biakolo 2002). Most of the following categories tie into and support this category, with the lack of writing, technology and other Western standards of civilisation apparently lacking in African society.

Next, Biakolo considers the view of the European as logical, compared to the pre-logical African. He uses the work of Lévy-Bruhl,
who went beyond evolutionary science and considered the psychological foundations of ‘primitive’ cultures. He argues that the African prefers memory over abstract reasoning, and collective thought over individual genius. Rather, ‘primitive culture is participated in collectively, it is a shared reality; the idea of an individual, and by implication, dissident, grasp or assessment of reality, individual creativity and so on, runs counter to the ethos of primitive culture’ (ibid.: 11). While pre-logical thinking is not necessarily considered illogical or un-logical, it leaves us with the implication that the very way that the African understands and interacts with the world is different from the Western one, and as soon as one of those ways is considered better, it opens up the foundations for scientific racism, racial essentialism, and different treatment of individuals as a result.

The next category he considers is perceptual versus conceptual, referring to the work of Lévi-Strauss. He argues that the African has only heterogenous and limited knowledge. While the African can work with and rearrange knowledge that they already have, they are not able to conceptualise new possibilities and in so doing create new knowledge (ibid.: 12). This would tie into the lack of technological advancement that happens only in civilised societies, because knowledge created in this way is always conservative instead of innovative. And if scientific knowledge is considered conceptual, and of a higher epistemological order, the African is not privy to this type of thinking (ibid.: 12). This category in particular, combined with the one above, will be relevant to education and would impact what would be considered the best teaching methods for different races, as will be argued later in this article.

Biakolo then considers the category of oral versus written, noting that many believe that civilisation owes its origin to writing, since it makes the storage and retrieval of knowledge easier, and gives rise to the possibility that communication can happen over space instead of only in time, and links strongly to the creation of technology (ibid.: 13). Similarly, in his final category, that of religious (or rather superstitious) versus scientific thinking, he notes that the European considers all African thought as religious or magical or mythical, rather than scientific (ibid.: 17). Together with the lack of written texts, this again comes down to rejection of rationality in the African subject, weakly justified by the lack of technological
advancement (ibid.: 18). Overall, each category serves to place the African epistemically, intellectually or morally lower than their European counterparts. These views were held about the black race as a whole and can be seen in eugenic thought in Apartheid South Africa as well.

**Influence on Education**

When it came to education of the different races in South Africa, for white supremacists, the need for separation was clear. Separating the races would make the process of educating different races in different ways much easier, if they had different cognitive capacities, and protect against fears of miscegenation. Combined with that, the theory of ‘arrested development’ was already well established in SA by the twentieth century. This was the idea that intellectual development of black and coloured people somehow lagged behind that of white people. This was not visible initially, but only came into view after pubescence (Dubow 1989), when they started to fall behind and stop progressing at the same pace of the whites or stopped developing completely. Teaching children that had arrested development next to those that progressed normally would be impractical, again emphasising the need for separation.

It was further argued that ‘feeble-mindedness’, which was also supposedly inherited, included a weak will that led men to crime and made women prone to seduction (Morice 1920: 1). Fantham picks up on and perpetuates this notion that the black individual is simply not as intelligent as the white. In *Some Factors in Eugenics, Together with Notes on Some South African Cases*, he considers a single historical study on students of various races, where white people consistently scored higher, and claims that ‘this confirms the belief of many observers that the ability of a coloured man is proportionate to the amount of white blood he has’ (1925: 409). Whiteness was directly associated with intelligence, and blackness with a lack of it, again influencing what children could be taught and how they could be taught it.

In practice, these ideas, along with other ‘scientific’ approaches from anthropology and other fields, formed one rationale for the separation of the races on various grounds. In terms of education,
this reinforced the drive for separate schools, led by the Bantu education act in 1953, followed by the Coloured education act and the Indian education act in the 1960s (Mkeever 2017). These acts held that white, Indian, coloured and African students were to be educated separately and differently (Crisholm 2012). The quality of education for non-white pupils was incredibly low, consider for instance in 1965, for every one hundred thousand students, 866 white, 322 Indian, seventy-four coloured and thirteen African students reached their final year of schooling. The average school life for Africans was a mere four years (ibid.). Even before the acts were put into place, the logic was as follows: ‘the education of the white child prepares him for a life in dominant society and the education of a black child for a subordinate society’ – taken from a report from the Interdepartmental Comity in 1939 (Molteno 1984: 64).

In reality, these education acts were political rather than scientific in nature, and it is now argued that the new curriculum had two main political goals: to ensure that black South Africans have the minimum education needed for labour, and that they would be separated from the white state (Legassick 1980), which tied in with the economic justifications of Apartheid: to maintain a large, cheap labour force. Yet these acts were justified by eugenic, anthropological and psychological sciences, which comes to the fore especially in the work of Verwoerd.

Verwoerd, often credited as the father of Apartheid, started his career as a lecturer in psychology and sociology at the University of Stellenbosch. This seemed to give him the credentials necessary to speak about the mental capacities of different races. He also studied in Leipzig for a year, where he came into contact with thinkers like Fisher, Binding and Hoche, who all believed in eugenic ideas and racial hygiene, and this seemed to have an influence on his own ideas of race (Burke 2006). Fisher in particular was concerned with racial mixing and studied the Rehoboth Basters of Namibia, children of Khoikhoi mothers and white fathers, and his study provided the template for thinking about the cultural and biological consequences of miscegenation (Robin 2020). We see these ideas echoed in Verwoerd’s thinking. He became South Africa’s Minister of Native Affairs, and then Prime Minister in 1958, and with him came new laws aimed at separating the races, such as the law
against the marriage of black and white individuals to one another (Burke 2006). With regards to education Verwoerd stated: ‘There is no place for him (the black individual) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour . . . until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze’ (Verwoerd in Maree 1984: 149). And his words again to parliament during debates about the education act: ‘racial relations cannot improve if the result of native education is the creation of a frustrated people who, as a result of the education they received, have expectations in life which circumstances in South Africa do not allow to be fulfilled immediately, when it creates people trained for professions not open to them’ (Verwoerd in Burke 2006: 90).

What stands out here most clearly is Verwoerd’s view that black people lack the intelligence of a white individual. They are only able to do ‘certain types of labour’, which we can safely assume refers to mining and other blue-collar professions, and anything more he considered to be beyond their abilities, leading to a ‘frustrated people’ who are aware of other possibilities out there, but that are not available to them. Fantham considered intelligence a characteristic of the white population only, and Verwoerd seems to have come to the same conclusion. His mention of black people’s ‘own community’ is also telling, and he believed that there are fundamental differences between the races. This is reminiscent of Pearson’s work, that there is a natural hierarchy with white people at the top and black people at the bottom, and that any attempt at integrating these two communities would cause more harm than good. It also ties in with Biakolo’s observances that different races’ communities are set up in different and incompatible ways.

Biakolo’s categories also come into play here: if the African was communal rather than individual, Western teaching strategies would not be as successful. If African reasoning is perceptual rather than conceptual, teaching conceptual subjects, more academic subjects or the sciences in general would be of no use since they can only consider things perceptually and rework a limited amount of knowledge in limited ways.

The same conclusion would be reached if we consider Biakolo’s differentiation between the logical European compared to the
pre-logical African; if these two groups had such differing ways of understanding the world, it would make no sense educating them in the same way. Combining this with the fact that thinkers like Fantham considered any non-white individual less intelligent led to radically unequal education systems. Spending funding on people that they believed could not benefit from it or giving them resources that they did not need or care for, such as proper sanitation and safe environments to learn in, had no point in a system that believed that Africans were inherently inferior.

We see echoes of Ammon’s work here as well, that money or funds need not be spent on those who will not benefit from them. Similarly, for Spencer, charity or helping those that are worse off is as good as stealing from those who earned it rightfully and cannot be enforced through legislation since doing so would either fail or have unintended consequences. Funding was allocated in a similar way in 1970s South Africa: only ten percent of government spending on education went to black schools (Amnesty International 2020). And since black children were considered unlikely to excel, there was no reason to teach them any more than they would need: doing so, and allocating funding to these children, was ‘robbing’ children who could benefit from it.

Based on this underlying logic, the implementation of the Bantu, Coloured and Indian education acts led to very different measures regarding which regulations would govern the different schools, the curriculums they would be taught, and also how much funding would be allocated to each. There were also different mandatory levels of education, with non-whites having much lower requirements, combined with less academic and more practical subjects, considering the ‘blue-collar work futures’ that they had in store for them (Mkeever 2017: 119). On 16 June 1976, the Soweto Riots against Afrikaans as a teaching medium marked the start of the end for the education acts (Ross 2005), and by 1978, the acts were repealed.

Yet even so, and even though eugenics has long since been debunked, and the racism in the South African education system is completely unfounded, in today’s South Africa ‘a child’s experience of education still very much depends on where they are born, how wealthy they are, and the colour of their skin’ (Amnesty International 2020: 7). While the acts have been repealed and a common
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The curriculum is in place, the legacy of this unfair system has yet to be repaired, and other factors now continue to perpetuate racial educational inequality. In South Africa, less than a quarter of nine-year olds can read for meaning, with eighty-five percent of children in the Eastern Cape not being able to do so, and ninety-one percent in Limpopo. The majority of schools still have no library, laboratories or internet access, and in 2018, nineteen percent of schools still had only illegal pit latrines, with another thirty-seven schools having no sanitation facilities at all, and some 239 schools without any electricity (ibid.).

While there are many political and social factors intertwining to create this situation, the largest factors leading to these problems arguably stem from notions and practices seen in Apartheid South Africa. While we might no longer see the justifications, the consequences of racism, including its eugenic version, and its effects on education are still very much at play, and the South African education system has not yet reversed the effects. We see them in a few of the most major contributors to the dismal state of the South African education system; poverty combined with a lack of, or mismanagement of funding, mostly affecting the black population. Research has shown the direct link between the economic resources of a home, and the educational success of an individual (Mkeeever 2017). This seems like a factor that would be independent of race, but considering that in South Africa nearly half of the black population is living below the poverty line, compared to less than one percent of the white community (Amnesty International 2020), these discrepancies fall broadly along racial lines.

This problem can and should be alleviated by funding for education, and while there are measures put in place to allocate more to basic education in places that need it most, the effects are rarely seen. Consider the two poorest provinces, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. In 2016 and 2017, they were allocated more funding than any other province, yet when it came to how this money was allocated, they had the lowest allocations per individual learner across all the provinces (ibid.). This can be compared to the Western Cape and Gauteng (home to nineteen and forty percent of the white population, respectively). These provinces were allocated less funding overall, but because they have the lowest proportion of their population in school, the allocation per individual learner was higher (ibid.).
We see it also in the neglect of proper sanitation and facilities students need to be educated successfully, and finally in the ignorance of the language problem facing many learners, where instructions in home languages is difficult or only available in foundational phases, where English is neglected yet expected to be the language of instruction at higher levels. Considering these factors, which are but a few of those that currently plague the education system, it seems that the education of those in poverty, which are statistically African, are still receiving radically different and inferior educational experiences.

Conclusion

The South African colonial legacy was, in part, influenced and spurred on by the work of international eugenicists, especially those like Galton and Pearson who thought not only that society was the type of thing that could develop through evolutionary processes but also that certain races were genetically inferior to others. This led to a scientific ‘justification’ for colonisation of African countries and the suppression of their people. In South Africa, these views were perpetuated by local eugenicist Fantham, who argued that black people are culturally, intellectually and morally inferior.

This eugenic thought, combined with the anthropocentric research of early colonists regarding South Africa, reinforced the cultural and economic ideas of white superiority on every front, particularly the intellectual one. As Biakolo points out (2002): black people were considered savage rather than civilised, superstitious rather than scientific, and their thinking pre-logical and perceptual rather than logical and conceptual, and expressed orally rather than in writing.

These international views, from the fields of eugenics, anthropology, religion and others influenced local policy making and informed the creation of separate and different systems of education for different races, enforced by the Bantu, Coloured and Indian education acts. This influence was especially clear in the influence of Verwoerd. And although eugenics is largely debunked as pseudoscientific, and the educational acts have been repealed, the racist
legacy of this thinking and the radically unequal South African education system it helped create still remains.

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