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Clare Makepeace

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To what extent was the relationship between feminists and the eugenics movement a 'marriage of convenience' in the interwar years?

By Clare Makepeace¹

Abstract

This article extends and questions historians' recent inquiry into feminists' relationship with the eugenics movement. It compares the work of three leading feminists – Eleanor Rathbone, Eva Hubback and Mary Stocks – with that of the Eugenics Society by focusing on the interwar campaigns of family allowances, birth control and voluntary sterilisation. Drawing upon National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship annual reports, personal correspondence and published articles, it challenges historians' assumptions that Rathbone and Stocks courted eugenic support; instead it exposes the pragmatism of an ailing eugenics movement. However, by demonstrating Hubback's ardent eugenic commitment, it also provides new and further evidence for the weakness of feminism during this period.

Keywords: New Feminism; eugenics; interwar period.

Introduction

Far from being simply antithetical, the relationship between feminists and the eugenics movement, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the Second World War, is one of complexity and variety. At one end of the spectrum was Sir Francis Galton, the first President of the Eugenics Education Society, which became the Eugenics Society in 1926, who was a well-known anti-feminist, supporter of the Anti-Suffrage Society and defender of the Contagious Diseases Act (McLaren, 146-7). At the other was Eva Hubback, who in her final presidential address to the National Council for Equal Citizenship (NCEC), set out that after the two great causes of peace and democracy, women's organisations should be working "*for the preservation and welfare of our racial stocks*" (NCEC, 1938). Historians have ignored, excused or embraced this relationship but analysis of it remains far from exhausted. This essay examines the extent of this relationship during the interwar years.

The two parties being studied here are, on one side, three feminists - Eleanor Rathbone, Eva Hubback and Mary Stocks - who were among the leading thinkers of one of the largest and the oldest feminist organisations, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), which reorganised itself into the NCEC in 1932.² Their work and actions will be compared to the eugenics movement. Since eugenic beliefs in Britain during this era were broad and varied (Soloway, 1990: xviii), this essay will focus on the policies and thinking that emerged from the one organised group of eugenicists:

¹ Clare Makepeace wrote this essay while working towards her MA in Historical Research, which she completed in 2008 at Birkbeck, University of London, UK. She is currently working towards her doctorate in History at the same institution.

² Eleanor Rathbone was President of the NUSEC from 1919 until 1929 before becoming an Executive Committee member and from 1932 she was either Honorary President, Executive Committee member or a Vice-President of the NCEC. Eva Hubback was either Parliamentary Secretary or an Executive Committee member of the NUSEC from 1920 to 1932 and then became President of the NCEC until 1938. Mary Stocks was an Executive Committee Member of the NUSEC from 1919 to 1932.

the Eugenics Society, whose founder defined eugenics as “*the study of agencies under social control which may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations*” (cited in Paul: 568). After setting out the historiography surrounding the subject, I will examine this relationship first through the lens of family allowances, then birth control and finally voluntary sterilisation. Both the NUSEC and Eugenics Society supported all three of these issues and through them Eva Hubback provides a concrete link between the two organisations: she joined the Eugenics Society in 1929, became a member of its Council in 1932 and sat on its committees on birth control, family allowances and eugenic sterilisation (Eugenics Society to Hubback, 6 July 1933; Hubback to Blacker, 4 February 1931; Blacker to Hubback, 18 December 1933).

This essay will argue that, contrary to assumptions of some historians, there was no marriage of convenience on the feminists’ side during the interwar years (see Davin: 23; Fleming: 55; Alberti: 140). Rathbone may have dressed up family allowances in eugenically attractive arguments, but the way they were to be implemented would not have met with eugenic approval. Hubback, on the other hand, made no secret of her principled commitment to the legalisation of voluntary sterilisation. Stocks championed birth control as a need of the working classes, just as the eugenicists did, but this is not enough to suggest a marriage of convenience. Instead, it will be shown that such a relationship existed only on the part of the eugenicists. Through this analysis, conclusions will be drawn about the relative strength of feminism and eugenics in the interwar period.

The historiography of feminist developments during this period is a relatively recent one (Caine: 173). The feminists’ objectives at this time - ‘New Feminism’ that looked towards women’s experiences, needs and aspirations (‘Is Birth Control A Feminism Reform?’, 2 October 1925: 283) - had far less in common with the equal rights feminist movement of the 1960s, which largely prompted the ‘discovery’ of women’s history. Also, their ‘quieter’ feminist activity, in wake of the suffragettes, was initially overlooked (Caine: 173). When historians did come to examine feminism in the interwar years, some identified its demise in this era (Rowbotham: 121-7, 142, 162; Kingsley Kent: 6-7, 114-139; Jeffreys: 147-8) whilst others argued that the radical potential of New Feminism was lost as it focused on women’s domestic and maternal roles (Caine: 191; Kingsley Kent: 7; Lewis, 1986: 94). Simultaneously, historians argued that these feminists “*attempted with some success*” to adapt the increased popularity of marriage and motherhood among women (Pugh: 312) but their achievements were neglected because they “*shunned the limelight*” (Harrison: 1, 322). Since Rathbone, Hubback and Stocks aimed, through an organised women’s movement, to change a woman’s place in society (Banks: 3), they are here considered to be feminists, although the extent of their commitment varied considerably.

The historiography surrounding eugenics in Britain is similarly recent (Soloway, 1990: xvi). Previously studied in the context of biology, statistics and social sciences (Farrell, 1979: 112-7), more recently historians have concerned themselves with eugenics’ relationship to society. Daniel Kelves and Richard Soloway (1997) have charted the evolution of eugenics itself, from ‘mainline’ to ‘reform’ eugenics, where the class eugenics of the pre-war years was replaced by a eugenics that recognised the influence of the environment as well as genetics. The contribution that eugenics made to many of the debates of the day concerning population has also been examined (Farrell:

117), whether attacking the pre-war social welfare programme (Searle), promoting birth control in the interwar years (Soloway, 1995) or explaining the social and economic changes that faced Britons when fertility was declining (Soloway, 1990). Michael Freedman and Diane Paul have demonstrated how eugenics, far from being solely identified with conservatives and imperialists, received support from Progressives and the Left, although John Macnicol (1989) warns against overstressing this relationship.

The support that eugenics received from feminists has been overlooked in both biographies and historical literature. Diana Hopkinson's biography of Eva Hubback only once refers to her membership of the Council of the Eugenics Society (160) and Brian Harrison's subsequent biography only offers fleeting acknowledgement of her involvement with eugenics (282, 295) whilst Martin Pugh fails to discuss eugenics in his history of feminism. This disassociation was probably stimulated both by assumptions that eugenics oppressed women through its focus on their reproductive role as well as a desire to dissociate feminism from a movement that many have since connected with Nazism (Taylor Allen: 477). Historians who have examined the relationship between feminists and eugenics before the First World War have tended to concentrate on individual feminists. George Robb (1996: 603; 1997; 1998) has demonstrated how feminists used eugenics to give "*scientific credence*" to their feminist claims, to advocate for greater sociosexual freedom for women and to show that women were morally and evolutionary superior. Angelique Richardson (1999-2000, 2003) showed how eugenics allowed women to expand their contribution to the nation by constructing a "*civic motherhood*" whilst for Caroline Burdett it offered a means of demanding better employment opportunities and economic independence. Lucy Bland (229-30) concludes that feminism overall, before 1914, enjoyed a positive relationship with eugenics because it emphasised a new morality and responsible motherhood. It also gave middle-class feminists the opportunity to continue their philanthropic tradition of exerting power over subordinate classes and races. However, Richard Soloway concludes that whatever eugenicists believed about "*the woman question*", they all supported the same view that "*female emancipation... must not interfere with reproduction of numerous progeny*" of the fit (1982, 141).

Far less has been written on feminists and eugenics in the interwar period and those conclusions differ. Lesley Hall identifies birth control and family allowances, where the discourse of political equality could not be extended, as areas where strategic alliances might take place; she finds overlap between the two movements but concludes their points of view were seldom identical (41-2, 48-9). For Ann Taylor Allen, British feminists were enthusiastic proponents of eugenics. Since feminists were unable to extend human rights language to campaigns for reproductive rights, eugenic theory became a formative part of feminists' positions on motherhood, reproduction and the state (478). This essay uniquely looks at how Rathbone, Hubback and Stocks related to the eugenics movement by examining their personal correspondence and public writing as well as the annual reports of the NUSEC and the NCEC. I will first explore this relationship through the campaign for family allowances, before turning to the issues of voluntary sterilisation and birth control.

Family allowances

The campaign for family allowances was the lifelong crusade of Eleanor Rathbone. Her idea originated in 1910, but there was initial hostility from feminists fearing such payments would discourage responsible reproduction by relieving fathers of financial responsibility for their offspring (Hubback, 1946: 7; Taylor Allen: 484). This was tempered by the good effects of dependency allowances paid to families of the military, and, in 1917, Rathbone, Stocks and Maude Royden founded the Family Endowment Society to make subsidies payable to mothers for child-rearing. This was intended to raise not only children's material standard but also the mother's status in the family by providing a source of income that was independent of the male breadwinner (Taylor Allen: 489, 495).

The Eugenics Education Society was also initially opposed to family allowances. Leonard Darwin (President from 1911 to 1928) was concerned that family allowances would add to the tax burden borne by the upper classes and reduce the selective death rate in large, impoverished families (Soloway, 1990: 295). Under pressure from R. A. Fisher (who became chairman of the Eugenics Society's family allowances subcommittee) Darwin conceded that the Society needed to take a stance on the issue, which it did in 1926, although many continued to see family allowances as a dysgenic scheme (Soloway, 1990: 298; Blacker to Gun, 12 June 1933). This position recognised the positive eugenic potential of family allowances: they would combat the dysgenic fertility rate in Britain by obliterating the social advantage of small families. In this way, Fisher believed that family allowances might "*constitute the most effective social achievement yet devised for benefiting the human race*" (153).

In 1924, Rathbone published The Disinherited Family, which, according to Caine, "*provided the starting-point for making the status of wives and mothers almost the central concern of NUSEC*" (187). In this, and in a speech she subsequently gave to the Eugenics Education Society, Rathbone was quick to point out the negative and positive eugenic potential of her proposal. It would "*cure*" the "*indiscriminate*" breeding among the undesirable classes by allowing families to escape the "*overcrowded and sordid dwellings*", which drove some couples to "*depend more on sexual satisfaction and plan less for the future*"; lessen money available for drink, which was believed to be particularly dysgenic; and, give all women the independence they needed to "*make them better able to regulate their own destinies*". Only if allowances were so high as to act as bribes might they have the opposite effect but, in all probability, the lowest wage earners were already having as many children as nature permits (Rathbone, 1924b: 5; Rathbone, 1924a: 242). On the other hand, as the lower fertility rate in upper-class occupations was, in part, due to the economic penalties of the present system of parenthood, family allowances, if they roughly met the cost of maintenance of the children of "*brain-workers*" and skilled manual labour, "*would result in many (but by no means all) of them having slightly larger families than they at present permit themselves*" (Rathbone, 1924a: 286; Rathbone, 1924b). In this way, family allowances would ensure society had its hand "*on the tiller of maternity*" allowing it to "*do something at least to control the quality and quantity of population*" (Rathbone, 1924a: 247). Historians such as Jane Lewis (1979: 41), Macnicol (1980: 88) and Freedon (665) have taken such arguments as an indication of Rathbone's sympathy for eugenics, whilst Johanna Alberti understands Rathbone to use such arguments when they would appeal to her audience and when Britain was shouldering international responsibilities (140).

However, there are equally examples of Rathbone giving nurture priority over nature. Rathbone finds the origins of the dysgenic birth-rate, which family allowances are supposed to correct, in the environment rather than in the genes: if the standard of life of the poorer wage earner can be raised, then so will their “*dysgenic breeding*” be cured (Rathbone 1942a: 243; Fleming: 32). Fisher questions Rathbone’s “*eugenical interests*” when she accepts as “*true*” that the “*potential value of all children to the nation is the same, or at least is individual*” (152; Rathbone, 1924a: 291-2). A reviewer of The Disinherited Family in *The Woman’s Leader*, the NUSEC’s weekly paper, did not think the eugenic arguments in the book significant enough to even mention (‘The Disinherited Family’, 28 March 1924: 72). In fact, since Rathbone “*evidently*” felt that “*the eugenicist is likely to be a hostile critic*” (Fisher: 153) ‘The Case of the Opposition’ in The Disinherited Family, rather than revealing Rathbone’s eugenic sympathies, reflected one of her rules for reforming success, “*the importance of meeting your opponent’s case as it looks to him, not as it looks to you*” (Harrison: 122). Similarly, Susan Pedersen identifies Rathbone’s “*willingness to welcome allies from all parts of the political spectrum*” as the cause of the policy’s vulnerability: “*only a small number of people felt (as Rathbone did) that a redistribution of income from the childless to those with children was desirable in itself*” (Pedersen: 210).

This illustrates a key obstacle to assessing the relationship between feminists and eugenics: it was difficult to measure the influence of eugenic ideas because concerns about the deterioration of the race were so widespread within political circles during the interwar years (Alberti: 139). Therefore, to limit oneself to “*a dissection of ideology and its attendant interests without examining specific policy outcomes is to present a one-dimensional account*” (Macnicol, 1989: 149). Whilst family allowances only became law in 1945, it is helpful to look at how feminists proposed they should be implemented prior to this. For the Eugenics Society this was crucial: it repeatedly emphasised that family allowances should be established through “*graded equalisation pools and other systems calculated to have a eugenic effect*” and it regarded as “*wholly dysgenic the provision of allowances through flat-rate payment by the State*” (Solway, 1990: 295-6). This it repeated in 1926, 1929 and 1937 (Solway, 1990: 295-7; ‘Eugenics and Family Allowances’; Blacker to Hubback, 5 July 1937).

Such stipulations were not mentioned in the feminists’ proposals: they were primarily concerned with the welfare of children and mothers. In 1918, the Family Endowment Committee (which included Rathbone and Stocks) put forward a universal state scheme paid for through direct taxation, which would result in a better vertical, as well as horizontal, distribution of wealth (Stocks, 1927: 58). The first proposal that Rathbone placed before the NUSEC, in 1920, was “*on the lines of a universal national allowance*” (NUSEC, 1920). In her speech to the Eugenics Education Society in 1924, she did make the case for grading allowances according to income, although for Fisher this was still inadequate. In The Disinherited Family Rathbone left it open whether securing allowances through state action or industrial organisation would be better, although she “*personally obviously*” preferred state action (Rathbone, 1924b: 5; Fisher: 151; Fraser: 89). When the NUSEC came to pass a resolution on Family Allowances in 1925 it failed to specify any one provision for the allowances (NUSEC, 1925-6: 72) and, in 1927, Rathbone urged that the “*question of principle is not confused with that of the particular method*” (Rathbone, 1927: 10). When Stocks came to propose family

allowances in 1931, it was “*on a cash basis*” to raise the standard of living of the mothers and children (NUSEC, 1931:5). The NCEC went on to pass three resolutions on family allowances: in 1933 to prevent the drop in standards of living, caused by the industrial depression, from falling “*so harshly on young children in large families*” (NCEC, 1933); in 1936 “*as a solution to malnutrition and ‘poverty amid plenty’*” (NCEC 1936); and, in 1937, to check the decline in population by making “*the economic position of people with children at least as favourable as that of those without*” (NCEC 1937). All three failed to specify that allowances should be graded and even the latter, which appears to be eugenically sympathetic, could not be supported by Dr C. P. Blacker (General Secretary of the Eugenics Society from 1931 to 1952): he wrote to Hubback, “*in so far as a flat-rate State scheme might be included in...your resolution, so would the whole resolution be opposed by many members of our Council*” (Blacker to Hubback, 5 July 1937). This did not stop the NCEC from proposing in March 1939 a scheme for family allowances that included a state allowance of 5/- per week per child paid for out of taxation (NCEC, 1939).

At times, this support for a state system is interspersed with suggestions that would have received eugenic approval. Rathbone (1927: 103) acknowledged that the immediate and overbearing burden on the Exchequer “*lead some of us who prefer the State scheme as a final objective to believe that one of the others must, and probably will, precede it.*” She offered the “*contributory insurance method*”, which is “*more likely*” to lead to a State financed scheme, after rejecting family allowances confined to the poorest classes, partly on “*eugenic grounds*” (Rathbone, 1926: 297-8). Both Rathbone and Stocks also singled out the eugenically fit employees of the teaching profession, churches and civil and municipal services for family allowances (Rathbone, 1924b: 6; Stocks, 1927: 63-4; Macnicol, 1980: 36), but when Hubback did this, her end goal was the eugenically sympathetic system of graded social insurance (Hubback and Green: 35; Blacker to Fisher, 26 May 1933).

Historians have noted Rathbone’s readiness to alter her arguments to extend their appeal, which makes her allegiances difficult to identify (Davin: 23; Fleming: 55). There is very little doubt she did this but, given that the majority of these proposals failed to adhere to the Eugenic Society’s prescriptions, to characterise her relationship with eugenics as a marriage of convenience would appear too strong. Hubback’s obituary of Rathbone in *The Eugenics Review* is instructive: despite being billed in the preceding issue as “*an appreciation of this great woman and an assessment of her contribution to the cause of positive eugenics*”, it failed to spend a single word discussing this supposed affiliation (‘Obituary of Eleanor Rathbone’, January 1946: 186; Hubback, 1946: 7-8).

In fact, the Eugenics Society took this relationship more seriously. It actively courted Hubback on the issue. She was twice asked to comment on the Eugenics Society’s policy on family allowances and on the second occasion Blacker added that he had “*put in the somewhat rhetorical passages in favour of feminism*” because he thought “*that the appeal made by eugenics could be much wider if it were to a certain extent couched in feminist language*” (Blacker to Hubback, 19 April 1933; Blacker to Hubback, 21 April 1933). Towards the end of the 1930s, the Society came round to the feminist way of thinking. With the backdrop of fascist compulsion and the greater fear of the quantitative rather than the qualitative decline in the birth-rate (in 1933 it was estimated that the net reproduction rate was 0.75), Blacker started to doubt that awarding family

allowances conditional upon any physical, mental, or moral examinations would receive acceptance. He concluded any system would have to be implemented without discriminating tests and on a statutory basis (Macnicol, 1980: 86; Pugh, 89; Soloway, 1990: 305). On 19 April 1939 he sent Hubback a memorandum that he had received from Major Darwin. The last half was the “*most important*”. It contained:

a proposal for a graded scheme, working on an income tax basis, over and above a flat rate State scheme. If I understood you correctly, I think you advocated some such combination of schemes a year ago (Blacker to Hubback, 19 April 1939).

Voluntary sterilisation

Whilst the family allowances campaign was driven by Rathbone, this article now turns towards a campaign initiated by the Eugenics Society, which championed the legalisation of voluntary sterilisation. In the late 1920s it was feared that the number of mentally defective people in England and Wales had reached 300,000 and some claimed that over half of these were heredity conditions (Macnicol, 1980: 82). At this time, the Eugenics Society was leaning towards negative eugenics, believing it to have a more immediate effect on stemming the differential fertility rate than positive eugenics (Soloway, 1995: 640; Thomson: 201). Voluntary sterilisation consequently became a cause on which the Eugenics Society expended a considerable amount of time (Macnicol, 1989: 147).

As with family allowances, the relationship over voluntary sterilisation cannot be characterised as one of convenience but this time there existed a principled commitment from Eva Hubback. She tabled “*off [her] own bat*” a resolution at the NUSEC Annual Council Meeting in March 1931 on sterilisation because she felt “*so strongly*” about the issue (Hubback to Blacker, 11 February 1931). In writing for *The Woman’s Leader*, Hubback set out that sterilisation was the only method of birth control for that “*section of the population too degraded mentally, morally and physically*” to be able to use contraception methods. This group was producing “*a far larger number of children than are the classes where offspring inherit qualities of value to the nation*”. Since “*it is also almost universally admitted that in some way or other mental defect is inherited*” to sterilise this group “*would undoubtedly reduce the incidence not only of feeble-mindedness but also of other social evils*” (Hubback 1931: 31). Cora Hodson (General Secretary of the Eugenics Society from 1921 to 1931), likewise, left the readers of *The Woman’s Leader* in little doubt about the motives of this campaign. She distinguished between voluntary sterilisation that was already being carried out for health reasons, among both the rich and the poor, and this debate about sterilisation on heredity grounds. Her concern was not just that “*a suffering women*” should be “*doomed to bear children who she does not want*” but also that it would only “*prolong into future generations this same toll of unavoidable misery*” (Hodson: 20-1).

The NUSEC went on to pass Hubback’s resolution in 1931, the wording of which was copied from the Eugenics Society (Hubback to Blacker, 11 February 1931):

That the NUSEC holds that voluntary sterilisation if legalised and carefully safeguarded to prevent abuses could be usefully employed to reduce the incidence

of grave hereditary defects seriously impairing physical and mental health and efficiency (NUSEC, 1931: 9; NUSEC, 1931-2: 64).

The momentum did not stop here. The NUSEC asked MPs to support Major A. G. Church MP's Ten Minute Rule bill on Eugenic Sterilisation, which was introduced into the Commons in July 1931, and voted for by Eleanor Rathbone MP (*Hansard*, 21 July 1931: col.1255-6; NUSEC, 1931-2: 9). Sterilisation of the unfit was also included in an NUSEC deputation to the Minister of Health (NUSEC, 1931-2: 11), according to Lewis (1979: 39) this 'unfit' group was the unemployed. In 1934, the NCEC welcomed the Report of the Sterilisation Committee appointed by the Board of Control, which justified sterilisation on social grounds, and urged the Government "*to promote legislation embodying the recommendations of the Committee*" (NCEC, 1934; Thomson: 186). An almost identical resolution was proposed in 1936, this time by the North-Western Federation of the Societies for Equal Citizenship, and in 1937 the Executive Committee again resolved "*that voluntary sterilisation should be legalised in those cases where the husband or wife is suffering from a hereditary physical or mental disease or defect*" (NCEC, 1936; NCEC, 1937). Nor was the NUSEC alone in this support: in total nine women's organisations passed resolutions supporting the legalisation of voluntary sterilisation, including the Women's Cooperative Guild and the National Conference of Labour Women (Blacker, 1962: 19). In doing this, they were representative of the "*groundswell of support among women for legalising sterilisation*" (Hall: 45).

Some historians have refused to acknowledge this support (Caine, 186). Others have given explanations for it on grounds other than eugenic. According to Thomson, women believed sterilisation would act as a potential birth control measure, alleviate the strain of having a mental defective in the family and prevent the irresponsible feeble-minded from having children whilst allowing them to stay in the community (65). Hall (46) and Taylor Allen (484) admit that women might have wished to differentiate themselves from this "*undesirable layer*". However, given that Hubback was so committed in principle to the campaign, it seems possible that there was more eugenic support among these women than historians have credited.

If anyone was making confused arguments between sterilisation and welfare, it was Blacker himself. His activities demonstrate that, again, it was only from the Eugenics Society's side that this relationship could be seen as a marriage of convenience. He appears, quite incredibly, to abandon the fundamental tenets of eugenics by arguing in *The Woman's Leader* that voluntary sterilisation was needed on the grounds that a person who is certifiably defective is unfit to rear children and that an investigation into the aetiology of mental defectiveness was "*irrelevant to the issue here under consideration*" (1931: 39). Such expedient arguments reflect the Eugenics Society's anxiety "*to get as much support as it [could] from Women's Organisations*" on the issue (Blacker to Hubback, 6 February 1931). Blacker not only made it clear to Hubback that he would like the National Union to pass a resolution but also invited her to lobby the National Council of Women on the issue (Blacker to Hubback, 6 February 1931; Blacker to Hubback, 28 June 1934). Women's favourable feeling was so important to the Eugenics Society that it appended evidence of it to their weekly lobbying letter distributed to MPs in advance of the Ten-Minute Rule bill ('Propaganda in Parliament for the Sterilisation Bill', 13 May 1931).

Birth control

This final section looks at birth control, which for Stocks was “*integral*” to the NUSEC’s programme (NUSEC, 1927), whilst the Eugenics Society’s position is harder to discern. From 1926, when the Eugenics Society decided to promote birth control as a negative eugenic agent directed primarily at the poor, it became “*virtually inseparable*” from the birth control campaign (Soloway, 1995: 640). The Eugenics Society’s literature often framed arguments for birth control more as a means of relieving poverty than as a preventative to dysgenic breeding (‘Eugenics Society’s ‘Memorandum for members of the Parliamentary Group on Birth Control’). This makes it difficult to identify systematic eugenic thinking on the issue even within the Eugenics Society, not to mention other eugenically sympathetic organisations and people.

Members of the NUSEC also targeted the working classes in their campaign to make birth control available. The first resolution passed by the NUSEC on the issue suggested that affiliated or sympathetic societies “*accumulate information in their localities concerning the actual extent to which birth control is being practiced and among what classes of persons*” (NUSEC, 1924: 9). ‘A Word with the Minister of Health’ which appeared in *The Woman’s Leader* in 1925 argued for birth control for “*persons who are too poor to obtain expert medical advice*” (59). Mary Stocks emphasised the need for contraceptive methods not for the “*well-to-do women*” who already had access to knowledge but for “*the poor and uninformed married working woman*” (1925a) for whom, in the absence of such information, “*family limitation pursues its disastrous and destructive underground course*” (1926: 395). Only when birth control is made available to everyone will “*wanted children ... be born at the bottom as well as at the top of the economic scale*” (1927: 81).

However, to argue that these women had a marriage of convenience with the Eugenics Society over this issue would be to suggest that they targeted birth control at the working classes to hide the fact that they wanted it for different reasons. For example, Lewis argues that middle-class feminists campaigned for birth control to give them greater sexual autonomy (1986: 93). A hint of this exists in Stocks’ language. She does emphasise that women were taking the initiative for birth control “*and for reasons not purely economic*” (1925b: 117) and that for them, birth control was a question of “*individual ‘self-determination’ and the ‘right to strike’ against intolerable conditions*” (1925a) but, at the same time, she distanced herself from any kind of “*unchecked*” contraception, making the case that birth control should be given to “*mothers who have an arguable need for it*” (1929: 223) and “*those who have a legitimate reason for desiring it*” (1925a). She concludes that the question of family limitation should be viewed “*in its right perspective, as part and parcel of the greater question of maternity and child welfare*” (1925a).

Should singling out working-class women for birth control, therefore, lead us to believe that Stocks was eugenically motivated? This seems untenable given these women themselves were making identical arguments: the 1924 Labour Women’s Conference called for birth control “*in the name of class justice*” (Graves: 87). As one delegate speaking at the 1924 Labour women’s conference argued, just as the “*wealthy woman says how many children she can have because she can afford to pay for the knowledge*” so should the working mother be able to get such information “*although she has no*

money” (cited in Graves: 87-8). Although working-class women had supported the campaign on voluntary sterilisation, their long-term antipathy to eugenicists is apparent in their establishing the Workers’ Birth Control Group to distance themselves from the other birth control organisations in which eugenic ideas survived (Graves: 89-90).

The only evidence of the NUSEC courting the Eugenics Society on this issue is an impersonalised invitation sent in 1928 to attend its informal group on birth control (Horton to Hodson, 29 November 1928), and it is quite possible that this was issued under the auspices of Hubback; her interest was eugenically motivated. In an article in which she asked why so little had been done “*to encourage the production of human beings with the qualities which are everywhere declared as desirable*”, she noted that knowledge of contraceptive methods had “*not yet reached many of the poorest households where the hardships arising from big families is most acute*” (“The Women’s Movement – Has it a Future”: 8). She was a powerful advocate within the Eugenics Society for the research that Dr Zucherman and John Baker were carrying out on the ‘safe period’ and the perfect contraceptive, writing to Blacker that “*the greatest need of the B.C. movement today is a safe, easy, cheap contraceptive method*” (Hubback to Blacker, 21 November 1936). In demanding this she was, as one eugenicist birth control entrepreneur put it, advocating a birth control that could be used “*by the most ignorant of women*” (cited in Soloway, 1995: 638). The fact that she believed money spent on research into the perfect contraceptive would have “*far more effect on negative eugenics than operative methods of sterilisation can ever have*” leaves one in little doubt as to where her allegiances lay (Hubback to Blacker, 21 November 1936).

This indicates that, although coming from different perspectives, the relationship between these feminists and eugenicists over birth control was not one of convenience; if that existed, it was again from the eugenicists’ side. As Soloway argues, eugenicists “*embraced’ birth control out of necessity, not out of conviction that it would by itself improve the genetic quality of the race.*” (Soloway, 1990: 225) Blacker believed that allying with the birth control movement was critical to the future of eugenics (cited in Soloway, 1990: 195) and through it the Eugenics Society could exceed its small membership of between 600 and 750 people during the interwar years (Macnicol, 1989: 153; Soloway, 1997: 70).

Conclusion

This essay, by delineating allegiances, has shown that the three feminists under review did not form a marriage of convenience with eugenicists. Whilst Rathbone readily flirted with eugenics on the issue of family allowances, when the mechanics were spelt out they lacked eugenic substance. On the other hand, Hubback, who led the NUSEC’s support for voluntary sterilisation, demonstrated a principled eugenic commitment, as she did with birth control and family allowances. Stocks campaigned for birth control for the working classes not because that would court eugenic opinion, but from a social justice and welfare angle. This demonstrates a strength of conviction among these three women that historians appear to have underestimated: Rathbone and Stocks did not cover their feminist ambitions in a eugenic cloak nor did Hubback hide her eugenic commitment. It was the Eugenics Society, instead, that altered its arguments and policies to gain maximum support. Through its policies on family allowances, voluntary sterilisation and birth control, we can observe the first symptoms of an ailing

movement. However, this is not enough to suggest that feminism was the dominant partner of the two movements. Rathbone and Stocks were, primarily, motivated by New Feminism, concerned with child and maternal welfare. Hubback, on the other hand, put her eugenic principles uppermost and, given that she remained at the helm of a major women's organisation for two decades, during which time she supported some feminist reforms for eugenic reasons and pushed through an undisguised eugenic measure, indicates a weakness of feminism in the interwar years.

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