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SOCIAL DECADENCE

BY SCOTT NEARING

It may be supposed, with what measure of reasonableness each reader shall judge, that no social group has ever existed which did not believe in its own integrity. On the other hand, history teaches, pretty conclusively, that there never was a social group,—China excepted,—which did not fall a victim of social decadence. Assyria, Carthage, Greece, Rome, the Italian City-States, and Spain, rose one by one to positions of wealth and power, became corrupt and decadent, and then fell easy victims to some virile, conquering people. Social decadence is a commonplace of history.

Can any such doctrine apply to the United States?

How absurd that question! There are the Declaration and the Constitution, guaranteeing freedom. There is the impregnable American home; the public school rears its bulwark of education; a network of industrial processes, heretofore undreamed of, supplies the wealth which we consume. Social decadence in the United States? Impossible!

How strangely history reiterates! So they all said. Yet, we laughed at Spain in 1898—Spain, the dreaded mistress of the sixteenth-century world. We commiserated with England over her wretched showing in the Boer War—England, the proud conqueror of Imperial Spain. Since 1905, when England received the report of her Parliamentary Committee on Physical Deterioration, we no longer wonder at her performance in the Transvaal. The investigations leading up to that report reveal low physical standards and a host of adverse social conditions threatening to send them still lower.

Our own youthful society, dating back scarcely two centuries, is still virile, is it not? Yet as mortality is always highest during infancy, an examination of our social structure will not be amiss, and even though the facts be inadequate to prove beyond cavil the negative or affirmative of decadence, they may well be stated and considered.

Social standards are aggregations of individual qualities. Therefore, if the individual members of a society are of low type, the social standard must be low. On the other hand, the presence of a group of high-type individuals necessarily implies the existence of a high-standard society. Speaking by analogy, a society can raise its standard above that of its individual members as easily as a river can raise its level above the water-drops of which it is composed. Thus individual qualities constitute, in the aggregate, social standards.

Social decadence involves a lowering of the qualities of the members of a group; while social progress involves the reverse process. Since the object of the American people is progress,—the production of increasing proportion of individuals possessing that combination of physical and mental capacity, efficiency, sympathy, and vision which may be described as social worth,—it becomes necessary for them to inquire what factors may be relied upon to produce an increasing proportion of social worth, and what factors may, on the other hand, lead to social decadence.

If the qualities composing social worth are transmissible from parent to child,—even though it be by chance,—the social worth of any individual must be the product of heredity, of environment, or of a combination of these two forces. If heredity alone is responsible for these qualities, each generation may, by the character of its marriages, determine the extent of such special qualities in the succeeding generation. But even supposing that heredity is a negligible factor, and that environment is wholly responsible for their presence or absence,—the parent is still largely answerable because parental influences are everywhere dominant to the age of six, and in the upper income classes, for several additional years. A limited study of the transmission of human qualities and a wide experience with the transmission of special qualities in animals (for example, speed in horses) leads to the inference that ability among men may be consciously handed on from generation to gen-

eration. Are these qualities the result of a careful training during babyhood and early youth? Are they the product of wise marriages? The answer is really unimportant to this discussion, for whether the associations of youth or the combinations of germ cells are to be held accountable for exceptional capacity, in either case the source of civic worth is parenthood.

The importance of this statement to the present question warrants some elaboration. The pioneer work in establishing the transmission of special capacity was done by Francis Galton, who estimated that the men who "have distinguished themselves pretty frequently either by purely original work or as leaders of opinion,"—*i. e.*, the geniuses,—constitute 250 (.025 per cent.) in every million men. The transmission of special capacity was illustrated by an intensive study of the judges of England from 1660 to 1865. On this study, Galton bases his estimate that the most gifted members of distinguished judges' families had 26 per cent. of genius among their fathers and 36 per cent. of genius among their sons. Thus, in the population at large 250 men in each million are geniuses, while of the fathers of the most distinguished judges 260,000 in a million, and of the sons, 360,000 in a million were eminent. So that the son of a distinguished judge is fifteen hundred times as liable to be eminent as is the son of an average man.[1]

Numerous other illustrations of the transmission of ability are available. An investigation of the genealogies of sixty-five eminent men of science shows that 26 per cent. of their fathers and 60 per cent. of their sons were eminent. That is a proportion among the sons of six in ten as contrasted with six in twenty-five thousand for England at large.[2] In one family,—the Darwins, beginning with Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802),—there have been in five generations sixteen men of scientific attainments.[3] The Bach family of musicians furnishes another remarkable instance of the transmission of ability. In eight generations (1650–1800) there were "far more than twenty eminent musicians," and the Biographical Collections of Musicians gives the lives of fifty-

[1] *Hereditary Genius.* By Francis Galton. London: Macmillan Company, 1892. (First edition 1869), pp. 6–9 and 74.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 188.

[3] *The Family and the Nation.* By W. C. D. and C. D. Whetham. London: Longmans, 1909, pp. 89–90.

seven. Tradition holds that the men married within the Musical Guild, hence both parents may have been musical. "It was a custom of the family to meet in yearly reunions at which the entertainments were purely musical."[1]

F. A. Wood's studies of heredity in royalty confirm Galton's work, leaving little question of the transmission of special ability from parent to child.

The same law holds with equal, if not greater, force in the transmission of defect. While it cannot be shown that ability is due to heredity alone, it has been definitely proven that certain defects are transmitted through the germ cell, and are, therefore, wholly hereditary. Feeble-mindedness, for example, is generally accepted as an hereditary defect. A recent New York study of families in which both parents were feeble-minded showed only two normal children in a total of seventy-five. In one Pennsylvania family with feeble-minded parents there are eleven children, all feeble-minded. All of the more recent studies of institutional records show that feeble-mindedness may usually be traced through several generations.[2]

While mental defect is clearly hereditary, other parental blemishes may, through heredity or environment, affect the offspring disastrously. Hæmophilia (bleeding disease) and Daltonism (color-blindness) are both distinctly hereditary. The same is probably true of deaf-mutism. The venereal diseases while not hereditary are most disastrous to the offspring. Pauperism, crime, and vice, surrounding childhood, likewise leave their impress on the physique and mentality of adult life.

Among the few studies of the transmission of anti-social qualities none is more striking than that of a notorious Indiana family *(The Tribe of Ishmael)*. In one branch of the family

"there were originally four children of whom two have been traced. William and Brook. William had three children who raised pauper families. One son of the third generation died in the penitentiary; his two sons in the fourth generation have been in the penitentiary; a daughter in the fourth generation was a prostitute with two illegitimate children. Another son of the third generation has a penitentiary record, and died

[1] *Hereditary Genius.* By Francis Galton. Pp. 232–4.

[2] *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics.* By C. B. Davenport. New York: Henry Holt & Company, Chap. III.

of delirium tremens. There have been several murders; a continuous pauper and criminal record. . . ."[1]

A similar and a far more complete study of defect was made in Europe by Dr. Jorger.[2] The Zero family, the subject of the inquiry, originated in a small Swiss valley, from which they spread their curse of criminality and pauperism over the adjoining territory.

"Parental irresponsibility, idiocy, and poverty have made this family for one hundred years a burden to the almshouse. The most persistent efforts have failed to raise the standard of the family, even in cases where the children were taken from their parents. This human product 'is a matter of selective breeding' from among the worst."

What social contrast could be more full of meaning than this between the Jukes family and the Jonathan Edwards family? On one side defect and social cost, on the other ability and civic worth have been handed down for generations.[3]

MAX "JUKE" (BORN 1720)	JONATHAN EDWARDS (BORN 1703)
1,200 descendants identified.	1,394 descendants identified.
300 in the poorhouse.	295 college graduates.
2,300 years in all.	13 college presidents.
300 died in childhood.	65 college professors.
440 viciously diseased.	60 physicians.
400 physical wrecks.	100 clergymen and musicians.
50 notorious prostitutes.	75 army and navy officers.
7 murderers.	60 prominent authors.
60 habitual thieves. (Averaged twelve years in jail.)	100 lawyers.
130 convicted of crime. ("None of them ever contributed to social welfare." Their actual and potential cost to society was $1,250,000.)	30 judges.
	80 held public office.
	1 Vice-President.
	3 United States Senators. ("It is not known that any of them was ever convicted of crime.")

Thus one family has produced twelve hundred social burdens or social scourges, while the other has given to the race nearly fourteen hundred social servants. One family represents social decadence; the other social progress. One field of tares, another of wheat lying side by side in the

[1] *The Tribe of Ishmael.* By Oscar C. McCulloch. National Conf. of Charities and Corrections, 1888, p. 156.

[2] *Hereditary Crime.* By G. C. Davenport, Am. Journal Sociology, Vol. 13, pp. 402–09 (1907–8).

[3] *The Jukes-Edwards.* By A. E. Winship. Harrisburg: R. L. Myers & Co., 1900, Chap. VIII.

same social area. Unlike the incident in the Scripture, the two do not grow in the same field, hence it is not necessary to wait until the harvest before attacking the tares.

Ability and defect may be the result of heredity through the germ cell or of environment through training, or they may be caused by both. In any case, they are not the product of chance, but are passed on through parentage from one generation to the next. The increase in ability or in defect is therefore determined by the qualities of the parents and the character of the training which children receive. Since parenthood plays so large a part in determining the qualities of the new generation, the birth-rates of different parental groups will be an invaluable indication of the source of the coming generation. Is it to the parents of high or of low social worth that the citizens of the future are being born? If those parents of the lowest social worth have the largest families the social decadence is inevitable. On the other hand, if the greatest number of children is born to those parents best fitted by heredity, training, and income, to care for them, social progress is assured.

The situation presents three possibilities. Either the proportion of high and of low social worth remains the same, in which case no progress is being made, or the increase in population is greatest among families of high social worth, which insures progress; or the families of low social worth furnish the greatest increase, which signifies decadence.

Any increase in social worth can therefore be assured only by maintaining the highest relative birth-rate in that portion of the population which represents high social worth standards. The facts at hand suggest that, in violation of this law, the population of the United States is increasing most rapidly from that group which is least fitted to transmit social worth to the coming generation. Whether through actual physical defect (feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, etc.) or through ignorance, poverty, or vice, a large group of American parents is unable to provide for children an heredity or an environment conducive to the production of high social worth. If, therefore, the birth-rate in this group of the population is relatively higher than in the group of greater civic worth, the population at large shows a tendency toward decadence.

The statistics which may be employed to demonstrate the

proposition contained in the last paragraph are, to say the least, unsatisfactory. Practically the only valid contrasts which can be drawn relate to hereditary defect, parentage, income, and scholastic attainments. No one of these tests is satisfactory, nor is their combination by any means conclusive. Yet native-born persons, with advanced education and comfortable incomes, are, on the whole, more competent to transmit social worth to their offspring than are foreign parents with less education and smaller incomes. The foreign-born have been classed as of lower social worth than the native-born group, because their lack of acquaintance with American customs renders them less desirable as child-trainers than the native-born; and because, employed largely at unskilled tasks, their incomes are wholly inadequate to rear a family of even medium size. Persons living below the poverty line may not represent low social worth in themselves, but they are certainly incapable of affording to their children adequate opportunities for normal development.[1]

The table on next page lends itself to certain generalizations. First. The data from Philadelphia, where excellent birth statistics are collected, show as clearly as may be the relation between social status and birth-rate. In the expensive residence wards, the rate is 18.0 per 1,000—barely enough to replace the population; in the great area devoted to small three-story and two-story houses, the homes of the "well-to-do," the rate is 21.4 per 1,000; among the American-born factory-workers the rate is 24.5 per 1,000, while in the lowest districts of the city, among the worst-paid immigrants, the rate rises to 41.9 per 1,000. (The variation in the death-rate is much less than that in the birth-rate; the death-rate ranges from 14.5 per 1,000 for the expensive residence wards to 20.5 per 1,000 for the slum wards.)

Second. In the population at large, the birth-rate is more than twice as high among foreign-born as it is among native-born. As present-day immigrants and low standards of life

[1] The reader should bear in mind that such statistics are in themselves nothing but generalizations. For example, the Philadelphia wards are not exclusively high-income or low-income districts. In fact, there is hardly a ward in Philadelphia which does not contain every type of domicile from a mansion to a shanty. So, too, the birth-rates are crude. No allowance is made for the sex or age of the inhabitants. Such figures merely confirm in a broad way the fact of common experience—large income, small family, and *vice versa.*

A CLASSIFICATION OF BIRTH-RATES ACCORDING TO SOCIAL WORTH

HIGH SOCIAL WORTH	MEDIUM SOCIAL WORTH	LOW SOCIAL WORTH
LOW BIRTH-RATE		HIGH BIRTH-RATE
Philadelphia[1] expensive-residence wards, per 1,000 population.... 18.0	Philadelphia two-story-house wards, per 1,000 population.... 21.4	Philadelphia (native-born) factory wards, per 1,000 population 24.5
		Philadelphia (foreign-born) slum wards, per 1,000 population..... 41.99
COLLEGE GRADUATES[2]		
Births Per Family	*"Laboring Classes"[3] (Native-born)*	
Harvard (1872-77).... 2.21	St. Louis..... 2.1	
Middlebury (1875-79).. 1.8	Boston 1.9	
New York University 1870-74) 2.5		
Yale (1867-86)..... 2.02		
"Higher Classes" Per Family	*Native-born*	*Foreign-born*
St. Louis..... 1.8	United States,[4] per 1,000 women fifteen to forty-four years 462.00	United States, per 1,000 women fifteen to forty-four years.. 710.00
Boston 1.8	Massachusetts,[5] per 1,000 population..... 16.58	Massachusetts, per 1,000 population.... 50.40
	Michigan,[6] per 1,000 women fifteen to forty-five years..... 111.00	Michigan, per 1,000 women fifteen to forty-five years..... 232.00
	New York City,[7] per 1,000 females..... 28.26	New York City, per 1,000 females..... 109.46
Defectives[8] Per Family		
Deaf mutes 6.1		
Insane 6.0		
Criminals 6.6		
Feeble-minded[9] 6.0		

[1] Annual Report, Philadelphia Bureau of Health, 1908; Philadelphia, 1909, pp. 60-61.
[2] *Popular Science Monthly,* Vol. 63, p. 179.
[3] *Ibid,* p. 179.
[4] Census Bulletin No. 22, Washington, 1905, p. 23.
[5] *Modern Social Conditions,* W. B. Bailey, p. 104.
[6] Supra, p. 105.
[7] Annual Report, New York Department of Health, 1909, Vol. 2, p. 813.
[8] *World's Work,* Vol. 15, pp. 9821-2, 1907-8.
[9] A letter from Dr. H. H. Goddard (February 8, 1911). Records of 680 children based on 120 cases of feeble-mindedness in the institution at Vineland, New Jersey. Though there were six births per family, there were but four living children at the time of the study.

are synonymous, it is apparent that the greatest population increase occurs in a social group which is incapable of affording to children adequate opportunities. Among the native-born in New England there are indications of an actual decrease from generation to generation.[1]

Third. The birth-rate among college graduates is not sufficient to maintain the population static. The race of college graduates is dying out from generation to generation.

Fourth. Among the "higher classes," meaning "higher income classes," the birth-rate is lower than the rate among college graduates.

Fifth. The little available data indicates that the birth-rate among defectives is greater,—perhaps two or three times greater,—than that among college graduates.

The population of the United States is apparently increasing most rapidly among that group which has the lowest social worth. The largest families are found among the immigrants, the low-paid workers, and the defectives. Unfortunately, partly because of a lack of interest in the subject, partly because of the inadequacy of American birth statistics, no exact studies of the relative birth-rates of high, average, and low social worth have been made in the United States.

Perhaps the only reliable data is that contained in family records kept by institutions and the Eugenics Laboratory, Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island. In reply to a question on the subject, the director, Dr. Davenport, writes:

> "I have gained the general impression from looking up the pedigree of the offspring of parents, one or both of whom are mentally defective, that if their propagation is not interfered with, their families are larger than the families of Harvard graduates."

This fragmentary material is all that the United States affords on the subject.

In the course of the English studies, considerable data have been collected, among which are the following unsatisfactory figures of family size in defective families:[2]

	NUMBER OF CHILDREN PER FAMILY
Edinburgh degenerates	6.1
London mentally defective	7.0
Manchester mentally defective	6.3

[1] *The Declining Birth-rate.* By F. A. Bushel. *Popular Science Monthly,* Vol. 63, pp. 355–357 (1903).

[2] *Breeding Better Men.* By Raymond Pearl. *World's Work,* Vol. 15, pp. 9821–2 (1908).

W. C. D. Whetham, an English social student, writes:

"From the study of 150 degenerate families Dr. Tredgold found that the average number of children in a family was 7.3, while the normal average for the country at large is 4. With the birth-rate falling in other classes, especially the most provident classes, the influence of a high rate of increase in feeble-minded families must mean the rapid and progressive deterioration of the race."

The most satisfactory and complete statement of the problem as it relates to England was made by David Heron in a study *On the Relation of Fertility in Man to Social Status*. After an intensive study of London Vital Statistics, the author concludes:

"As far as the present investigation goes, it demonstrates I think conclusively that for the London districts there is a very close relationship between undesirable social status and a high birth-rate. In districts where there is overcrowding, where there is a superabundance of the lowest type of labor, where it is needful to employ many young children in order to earn daily bread for the family, where infantile mortality is greatest, then the wives of reproductive ages have most children. Where there is more culture and education as shown by a higher proportion of professional men, where there is more leisure and comfort as shown by a higher percentage of domestic servants, where the traders, who appeal to the thriftless and improvident are fewer in number, there the birth-rate is least. Again, where there is more general pauperism, where signs of bad environment like phthisis are prevalent, where pauper lunatics are most plentiful, there the birth-rate is highest. . . .

"Nor is the birth-rate of the undesirable elements compensated by the higher death-rate. The net fertility of the lower status remains higher than that of the superior status."

These conclusions derived from English studies are not, of course, applicable to the United States, yet it is interesting to note that in a kindred racial stock, living primarily in towns and cities and engaged, like the Americans, in industrial pursuits, the group of lower social worth are largely responsible for replacing the population. Would a similar study in American cities yield like results? Certainly the American data already presented create a strong presumption in favor of the statement that the American population is being most rapidly increased from among those of low social status.

The available data clearly show that in the United States the well-educated and well-to-do portions of the population have a birth-rate (about two children per family) below that necessary to maintain the population. While it cannot be definitely shown that the defectives are propagating at a

higher rate than the other classes of society, the data thus far would so indicate. On the other hand, it has been proven beyond cavil that the rate of increase among the immigrants is at least twice as great as that among native-born families, while among the lowest income groups the rate of propagation is several times as great as it is among college graduates and the well-to-do elements in the population. Here is evidence of a stationary population among those of high social worth, and a rapidly increasing population among those of low social worth.

The American population may, therefore, be increasing most rapidly from that group least fitted by heredity or by income to develop social worth in their offspring. The continuance of such a condition must inevitably mean the replacement of the more able by a less able stock. Such a process of "reversed selection" must mean, for the nation, a constant decrease in the social worth of each succeeding generation.

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