

## Article by Alexander Graham Bell, November 1920

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### 3-2-26 Race Betterment — 7 3-2-26 Journal of Heredity, sor. 1920 IS RACE SUICIDE POSSIBLE?

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ONE of the most interesting of the questions of today relates to the powerful influence exerted upon populations by what we might almost call negative selection. A selection that produces the very opposite of that expected.

For example, no inheritable peculiarity associated with lack of offspring can be made to grow and flourish in a community. In spite of all efforts it will languish, and promote the growth of its very opposite. History is full of illustrations.

#### **CELIBACY**

After the fall of the Roman Empire there was a great religious revival among the nations. The Middle Ages saw Europe filled with monasteries and nunneries, where enormous numbers of people took vows of celibacy, and renounced all home and family ties. Even outside of the religious houses the *celibate life* was everywhere held up as the ideal one to be followed by the best and purest elements of the population.

Instead of helping the church this produced the very opposite effect, and actually paved the way for the Reformation! Large masses of the people who were most attached to the Church led celibate lives, and left no descendants, whereas the independently minded who were not so devoted to the Church were not limited in their reproduction.

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As to the more general effects it may be safely said that the worship of celibacy during several hundreds of years in the past has not tended to the improvement of humanity but the very reverse; for, where the best and noblest led celibate lives, they left no descendants behind them to inherit their virtues, whereas the worst elements of the population continued to multiply without restriction.

It is now felt that the interests of the race demand that the best should marry and have large families; and that any restrictions upon reproduction should apply to the worst rather than to the best.

It is of course useless to expect that the worst would take vows of celibacy or keep them; and the realization of this has led to all sorts of impracticable schemes to prevent or restrict their reproduction by compulsory means.

The great trouble about all these schemes, apart from their impracticability, is that they aim simply to prevent degeneration. They aim to prevent the race from moving backwards, but do not help it to move forwards. The only hope of producing higher and better types of men and women lies in the multiplication of the better elements of the population.

There is one very promising feature about the present situation, and that is that the best are readily attracted by high ideals. Give them a new ideal, and many will follow it, especially if they believe that duty points in the same direction. Convince them that the interests of the race demand that the best should increase and multiply; convince them that it is therefore their duty to marry, rather than lead celibate lives. Depose “celibacy” from the high and commanding position she has occupied for so many hundred years, and put “marriage” there instead as the ideal to be held up before the best and noblest of the race. Marriage, with marriage vows as sacred as the former vows of celibacy. Nature demands this in the interests of the race. For the extreme helplessness of the human infant necessitates parental care for very prolonged periods of time—in fact at least from

infancy to the beginning of adult life—and this involves the permanency of the marital tie on the part of the parents, especially where a number of children are produced.

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### **RACE SUICIDE**

At the present time considerable alarm has been expressed at the apparently growing disinclination of American women to bear children, and a cry has been raised against what people call “Race Suicide.” Whatever the cause—it is undoubtedly the fact that in America the children of foreign-born parents are increasing at a much greater rate than the children of native-born parents—and the position is sufficiently grave for serious consideration.

The desire to avoid maternity is a characteristic associated with lack of offspring, and cannot therefore go on increasing indefinitely in a community. Its natural tendency is to die out through lack of offspring to inherit it, leaving the more fertile part of the community alone to propagate the race.

Reflection therefore leads to the somewhat startling conclusion that even wholesale abstention from children, so far from lessening the fertility of the community as a whole will eventually increase it instead. Actual race suicide will not result from such a cause alone, so long as the race is left to itself to work out its own destiny.

Just consider the case of a race of people in which the women show a disinclination for motherhood, surrounded by prolific immigrant races ready to take its place, then of course there would be serious danger of the native race being displaced by the immigrants. The immigrants might absorb the native race instead of the native race absorbing the immigrants; but such a result would be due to the presence of the competing races and not due directly to the operation of natural causes within the race itself.

### **THE DESTINY OF AN ISLAND RACE**

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In order to appreciate this, imagine our native race to be placed upon an island protected by suitable immigration laws from competition with other races. Then it becomes obvious that the sentiment in favor of avoiding the production of offspring must necessarily diminish in process of time, on account of the lack of offspring to inherit it; and that the opposite sentiment of a desire to have children will grow, and ultimately become predominant, because each succeeding generation will be composed exclusively of the descendants of the people who had children. If the desire for offspring is an inheritable characteristics, *and it certainly is*, then of course the next generation will inherit it from their parents to a certain extent; whereas there will be no descendants at all to inherit the characteristics of those who abstained from offspring.

We have placed the people upon an island, and protected them from interference from other races, so as to leave them to themselves to carry on their lives in their own way, as they desire.

Some of these people love little children, and desire to have children of their own. Others look upon children as nuisances, perhaps necessary evils for the continuance of the race—but why should they be bothered with them when they don't want them? Let others have them if they want them, but leave *them* alone. Well—let them have their desires.

Let those who desire children have them, and those who don't, have none, and see how it will all work out.

Now does it not become at once evident that so long as any of the people desire offspring and have them, complete race suicide is impossible? Some offspring will be produced and a second generation will appear.

Suppose for example the boom against maternity reaches such proportions that 99 per cent of the population decide to have no children—and surely this is an extreme case—will the race die out? No—not immediately at all events. There will be another generation

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composed exclusively of the descendants of the one per cent who desire to have children. The whole of the next generation will be composed of their children; and there will be no descendants at all of the other ninety-nine per cent.

This is the critical time for our islanders. Only one per cent of the 341 population have had children, and of course the numbers in the next generation will be so seriously reduced that immigration from outside would speedily swamp them—but we have agreed to protect them from this competition with other races, and leave them alone to work out their destiny to the bitter end.

Well, let us revisit the island after the original population has passed away. We find the population now only a fraction of what it was before; and the question naturally arises: will the population continue to diminish at each successive generation until actual race suicide results?

It is not to be supposed that the sentiment against maternity will disappear in one generation. The second generation will therefore undoubtedly continue to be divided upon the question of maternity; some wishing to have children, others not; but the *proportion* desiring children will necessarily be greater, on account of heredity, than in the original population; for the whole of this second generation are descended from the one per cent who desired offspring, whereas the ninety-nine per cent who did not desire them left no descendants.

There seems to be no escape from the conclusion that in this second generation more than one per cent of the people will desire children, and less than ninety-nine per cent will abstain from their production. Therefore the proportion of the second generation who will have children will be greater than in the first, and the proportion opposed to maternity will be less.

Thus in each succeeding generation the proportion who desire children and have them will increase, and the proportion avoiding maternity diminish, with the net result that each

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succeeding generation will be more fertile than the last. The desire to avoid maternity will die out to a great extent on account of the lack of offspring to inherit it. *The spirit of race suicide will itself commit suicide, and leave a more fertile race than before.*

The only thing that could prevent such a result would be: the admission of immigrants during the period of declining birthrate.

This indeed is the critical period in the history not only of our hypothetical islanders, but of every nation similarly situated. When therefore a nation reaches a stage where it finds its own birthrate declining, and immigrants with a much larger birthrate flocking into the country, the time has come for very serious consideration as to the means to be taken for self-preservation.

The United States is today in this critical position. The birthrate of America is declining; the spirit of avoiding maternity is on the increase; and the immigrant races are increasing at a much greater rate than our own. The only hope for a truly American race lies in the restriction of immigration.

### **EUGENICS AND PATRIOTISM**

“Race has played a far larger part than either language or nationality in moulding the destinies of men; race implies heredity, and heredity implies all the moral, social and intellectual characteristics and traits which are the springs of politics and government. . .

“The moral tendency of the heredity interpretation of history is for our day and generation, and is in strong accord with the true spirit of the modern eugenics movement in relation to patriotism, namely, the conservation and multiplication for our country of the best spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical forces of heredity; thus only will the integrity of our institutions be maintained in the future.”

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— *Henry Fairfield Osborn.*