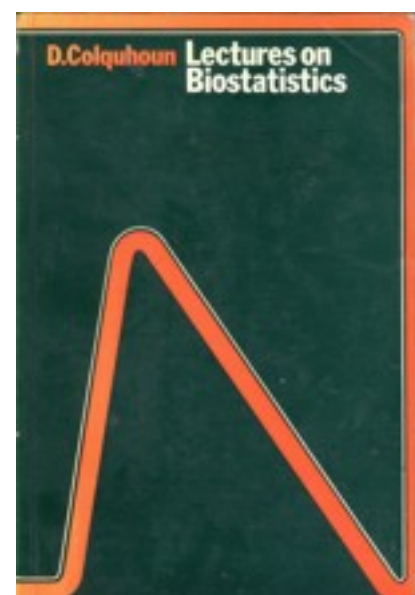


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[Eugenics, UCL and freedom of speech](#)

Published January 14, 2018

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On Monday evening (8th January 2018), I got an email from Ben van der Merwe, a UCL student who works as a reporter for the student newspaper, *London Student*. He said

“Our investigation has found a ring of academic psychologists associated with Richard Lynn’s journal *Mankind Quarterly* to be holding annual conferences at UCL. This includes the UCL psychologist professor James Thompson”.

He asked me for comment about the “London Conference on Intelligence”. [His piece came out](#) on Wednesday 10th January. It was a superb piece of investigative journalism. On the same day, Private Eye [published a report](#) on the same topic.

I had never heard about this conference, but it quickly became apparent that it was a forum for old-fashioned eugenicists of the worst kind. Perhaps it isn’t surprising that neither I, nor anyone else at UCL that I’ve spoken to had heard of these conferences because they were surrounded by secrecy. According to the Private Eye report:

“Attendees were only told the venue at the last minute and asked not to share the information”

The conference appears to have been held at least twice before. The programmes for the 2015 conference [[download pdf](#)] and the 2016 conference [[download pdf](#)] are now available, but weren’t public at the time. They have the official UCL logo across the top despite the fact that Thompson has been only an honorary lecturer since 2007.



London Conference on Intelligence 2015

A room was booked for the conference through UCL’s external room booking service. The abstracts are written in the style of a regular conference. It’s possible that someone with no knowledge of genetics (as is likely to be the case for room-booking staff) might have not spotted the problem.

The huge problems are illustrated by the [London Student piece](#), which identifies many close connections between conference speakers and far-right, and neo-nazi hate groups.

"[James Thompson’s] political leanings are betrayed by his [public Twitter account](#), where he follows prominent white supremacists including Richard Spencer (who follows him back), Virginia Dare, American Renaissance, Brett Stevens, the Traditional Britain Group, Charles Murray and Jared Taylor.”

“Thompson is a [frequent contributor](#) to the Unz Review, which has been described as [“a mix of far-right and far-left anti-Semitic crackpottery,”](#) and features articles such as ‘America’s Jews are Driving America’s Wars’ and [‘What to do with Latinos?’](#).”

His own articles include frequent defences of the idea that women are innately less intelligent than men ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#)), and an [analysis of the racial wage gap](#) which concludes that “some ethnicities contribute relatively little,” namely “blacks.”

“By far the most disturbing of part of Kirkegaard’s internet presence, however, is a [blog-post in which he justifies child rape](#). He states that a ‘compromise’ with paedophiles could be:

“having sex with a sleeping child without them knowing it (so, using sleeping medicine. If they don’t notice it is difficult to see how they could be harmed, even if it is rape. One must distinguish between rape because the other was disconsenting (wanting to not have sex), and rape because the other is not consenting, but not disconsenting either.”

The UCL Students’ Union paper, [Cheesegrater](#), lists some of James Thompson’s tweets, including some about brain size in women

It’s interesting that these came to light on the same day that I learned that the first person to show that there was NO correlation between brain size and intelligence was Dr Alice Lee, in 1901 [[download pdf](#)]. Alice Lee was the first woman to get a PhD in mathematics from UCL and she was working in the Galton laboratory, under Karl Pearson. Pearson was a great statistician but also a eugenicist. It was good to learn that [he supported women in science](#) at a time when that was almost unknown.

What’s been done so far?

After I’d warned UCL of the impending scandal, they had time to do some preliminary investigation. An [official UCL announcement appeared on the same day](#) (10 Jan, 2018) as the articles were published.

“Our records indicate the university was not informed in advance about the speakers and content of the conference series, as it should have been for the event to be allowed to go ahead”

“We are an institution that is committed to free speech but also to combatting racism and sexism in all forms.”

"We have suspended approval for any further conferences of this nature by the honorary lecturer and speakers pending our investigation into the case."

That is about as good as can be expected. It remains to be seen why the true nature of the conferences was not spotted, and it remains to be seen why someone like James Thompson was an honorary senior lecturer at UCL. Watch this space.

How did it happen

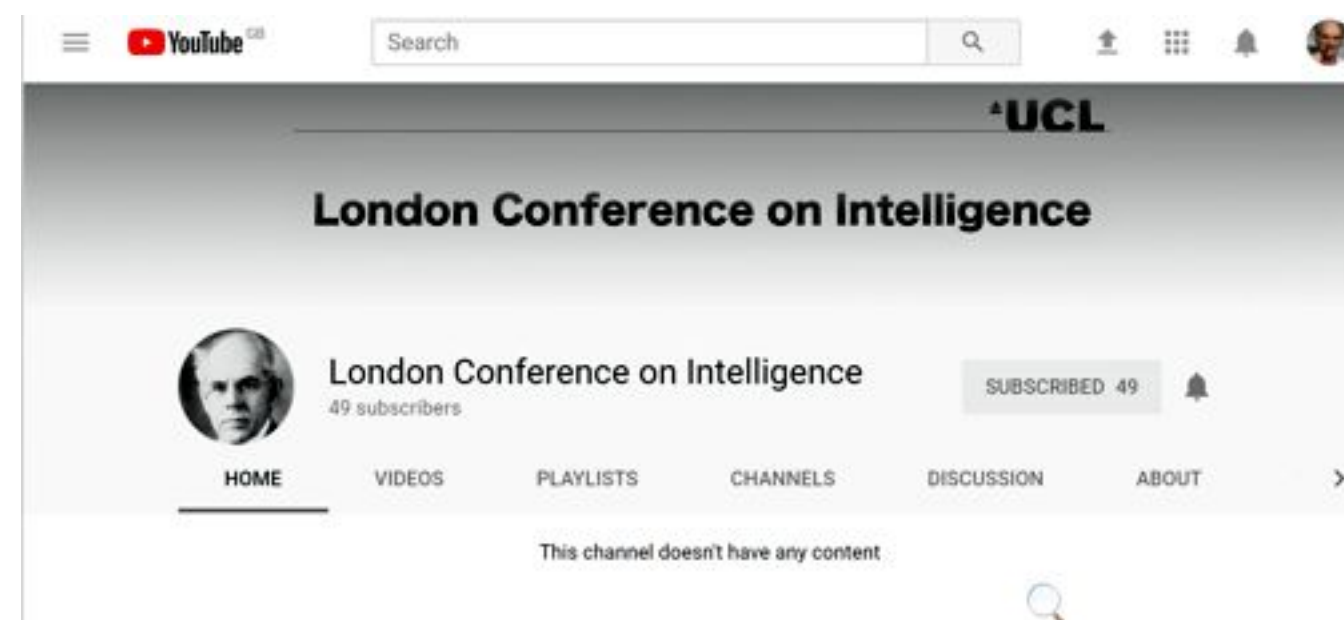
Two videos that feature Thompson are easily found. [One, from 2010](#), is on the UCLTV channel. And in March 2011, a [BBC World News video](#) featured Thompson.

But both of these videos are about his views on disaster psychology (Chilean miners, and Japanese earthquake, respectively). Neither gives any hint of his extremist political views. To discover them you’d have to delve into his twitter account (@JamesPsychol) or his writings on the unz site. It’s not surprising that they were missed.

I hope we’ll know more soon about how these meetings slipped under the radar. Until recently, they were very secret. But then six videos of talks at the 2017 meeting were posted on the web, by the organisers themselves. Perhaps they were emboldened by the presence of an apologist for neo-nazis in the White House, and by the government’s support for Toby Young, who wrote in support of eugenics. The swing towards far-right views in the UK, in the USA and in Poland, Hungary and Turkey, has seen a return to public discussions of views that have been thought unspeakable since the 1930s. See, for example, this discussion of eugenics by *Spectator* editor Fraser Nelson with Toby Young, under the alarming heading "[Eugenics is back](#)".

The London Conference on Intelligence channel used the UCL logo, and it was still public on 10th January. It had only 49 subscribers. By 13th January it had been taken down (apparently by its authors). But it still

has [a private playlist](#) with four videos which have been viewed only 36 times (some of which were me). Before it vanished, I made a copy of [Emil Kirkegard](#)'s talk, for the record.



Freedom of speech

Incidents like this pose difficult problems, especially given UCL's past history. Galton and Pearson supported the idea of eugenics at the beginning of the 20th century, as did George Bernard Shaw. But modern geneticists at the Galton lab have been at the forefront in showing that these early ideas were simply wrong.

UCL has, in the past, rented rooms for conferences of homeopaths. Their ideas are deluded and sometimes dangerous, but not illegal. I don't think they should be arrested, but I'd much prefer that their conferences were not at UCL.

A more serious case occurred on 26 February 2008. The [student Islamic Society invited](#) representatives of the radical Islamic creationist, Adnan Oktar, to speak at UCL. They were crowing that the talk would be held in the Darwin lecture theatre (built in the place formerly occupied by Charles Darwin's house on Gower Street). In the end, the talk was allowed to go ahead, but it was moved by the then provost to the Gustave Tuck lecture theatre, which is much smaller, and which was built from a donation by the former president of the Jewish Historical Society. See more accounts [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). It isn't known what was said, so there is no way to tell whether it was illegal, or just batty.

It is very hard to draw the line between hate talk and freedom of speech. There was probably nothing illegal about what was said at the Intelligence Conferences. It was just bad science, used to promote deeply distasteful ideas..

Although, in principle, renting a room doesn't imply any endorsement, in practice all crackpot organisations love to use the name of UCL to promote their cause. That alone is sufficient reason to tell these people to find somewhere else to promote their ideas.

Follow up in the media

For a day or two the media were full of the story. It was reported, for example, in [the Guardian](#) and in the



[Click to play the interview.](#)

The real story

Recently some people have demanded that [the names of Galton and Pearson should be expunged from](#)

[UCL](#).

There would be a case for that if their 19th century ideas were still celebrated, just as there is a case for removing statues that celebrate confederate generals in the southern USA. Their ideas about measurement and statistics are justly celebrated. But their ideas about eugenics are not celebrated.

On the contrary, it is modern genetics, done in part by people in the Galton lab, that has shown the wrongness of 19th century views on race. If you want to know the current views of the Galton lab, try these. They could not be further from Thompson's secretive pseudoscience.

Steve Jones' 2015 lecture "[Nature, nurture or neither: the view from the genes](#)",

or "[A matter of life and death: To condemn the study of complex genetic issues as eugenics is to wriggle out of an essential debate](#)".

Or check the writing of UCL alumnus, Adam Rutherford: "[Why race is not a thing, according to genetics](#)",

or, from [Rutherford's 2017 article](#)

"We've known for many years that genetics has profoundly undermined the concept of race"

"more and more these days, racists and neo-Nazis are turning to consumer genetics to attempt to prove their racial purity and superiority. They fail, and will always fail, because no one is pure anything."

"the science that Galton founded in order to demonstrate racial hierarchies had done precisely the opposite"

Or read this terrific account of current views by Jacob A Tennessen "[Consider the armadillos](#)".

These are accounts of what geneticists now think. Science has shown that views expressed at the London Intelligence Conference are those of a very small lunatic fringe of pseudo-scientists. But they are already being exploited by far-right politicians.

It would not be safe to ignore them.

Follow-up

15 January 2018. The involvement of Toby Young

The day after this was posted, my attention was drawn to a 2018 [article by the notorious Toby Young](#). In it he confirms the secretiveness of the conference organisers.

"I discovered just how cautious scholars in this field can be when I was invited to attend a two-day conference on intelligence at University College London by the academic and journalist James Thompson earlier this year. Attendees were only told the venue at the last minute – an anonymous antechamber at the end of a long corridor called 'Lecture Room 22' – and asked not to share the information with anyone else."

More importantly, it shows that Toby Young has failed utterly to grasp the science.

"You really have to be pretty stubborn to dispute that general cognitive ability is at least partly genetically based."

There is *nobody* who denies this.

The point is that the interaction of nature and nurture is far more subtle than Young believes, and that

makes attempts to separate them quantitatively futile. He really should educate himself by looking at the accounts listed above ([The real story](#))

16 January 2018. How UCL has faced its history

Before the current row about the “London Intelligence Conference”, UCL has faced up frankly to its role in the development of eugenics. It started at the height of Empire, in the 19th century and continued into the early part of the 20th century. The word “eugenics” has not been used at UCL since it fell into the gravest disrepute in the 1930s, and has never been used since WW2. Not, that is, until Robert Thompson and Toby Young brought it back. The history has been related by curator and science historian, Subhadra Das. You can read about it, and listen to episodes of her podcast, at “[Bricks + Mortals, A history of eugenics told through buildings](#)“. Or you can [listen to her whole podcast](#).

Although Subhadra Das describes Galton as the Victorian scientist that you’ve never heard of. I was certainly well aware of his ideas before I first came to UCL (in 1964). But at that time. I thought of Karl Pearson only as a statistician, and I doubt if I’d even heard of Flinders Petrie. Learning about their roles was a revelation.

17 January 2018.

Prof Semir Zeki has been pointed out to me that it’s not strictly to say “the word “eugenics” has not been used at UCL since it fell into the gravest disrepute in the 1930s”. It’s true to say that nobody advocated it but the chair of Eugenics was not renamed the [chair of Human Genetics until 1963](#). This certainly didn’t imply approval. Zeki tells me that it’s holder “Lionel Penrose, when he mentioned his distaste for the title, saying that it was a hangover from the past, and should be changed”.

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