

A Summary History of Eugenic Theories and Practices in the United States

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The term ‘eugenics’ was conceived by Sir Francis Galton (Charles Darwin’s cousin and the inventor of composite photography) in the 19th century. Eugenic practice includes the systematic elimination of so-called ‘undesirable’ biological traits and the use of selective breeding to ‘improve’ the characteristics of an organism or species.¹ One branch of eugenics held that the rich and powerful were genetically superior to the poor, and that whites were in general superior to other races. Such a philosophy has provided convenient justification for a system of structuring inequities.

1904 Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie establishes a center for the study of “hybridized peoples,” whose researchers seek to understand the “idleness, the inconstancy...and...inadequate intelligence” of “racial mixtures.”²

1906 The American Breeders Association (ABA) forms a Committee on Eugenics. Their purpose is to investigate and report on heredity, emphasizing the value of “superior blood” and the menace of “inferior blood.”

1907–WWI Sixteen States adopt sterilization laws for “socially inadequate biological varieties”—i.e., criminals and the mentally ill.³

1910s The wealthy Harriman family establishes the first Eugenics Record Office in Cold Springs Harbor, NY, in 1910, and the Kellogg family, the Race Betterment Foundation in 1913. Subsequent societies spring up throughout the U.S. during the teens.

1914 A report made to the ABA states that “Society must look upon germ plasm as belonging to society and not solely to the individual who carries it.”⁴

1919 Margaret Sanger, a leader of the birth control movement, moves to the political right, declaring “More children from the fit and less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control.” Her *Birth Control Review* begins to publish eugenicist arguments. By 1932 she is calling for the sterilization or segregation by sex of “the whole dysgenic population.”⁵

1924 House of Representatives passes a law effectively restricting all immigration by Southern Europeans (who were considered non-white, or ‘degenerate’) to the United States.

1925 German officials write to state governments in the United States for information on sterilization laws. A leading advocate of eugenics in Germany at the time remarks, “What we racial hygienists promote is not at all new or unheard of. In a cultural nation of the first order, the United States of America, that which we strive toward was introduced long ago. It is all so clear and simple.”⁶

1928 Seventy five percent of all colleges and universities offer courses on eugenics. A professor at Harvard University teaches that “the solution to crime is the extirpation of the physically, mentally, and morally unfit or (if that seems too harsh) their complete segregation in a socially aseptic environment.”

1930s Eugenicist Frederick Osborn, director of the Carnegie Institute, argues that the public will never accept eugenics as top-down militarized directive; rather, eugenic consciousness would develop as an emergent property within the population as capitalist economy increased in complexity. Once a specific set of social structures (consumer economy and the nuclear family) developed to a point of dominance, eugenic activity would cease to be seen as a monstrous activity, and instead become a taken-for-granted part of everyday life.⁷ Beginning in the Great Depression, the Genetics Society of America maintains an unresolved debate whether or not to formally condemn the Third Reich’s policies.

1931 Thirty states adopt sterilization laws, and tens of thousands of American citizens undergo non-consensual sterilization.

Post WWII While the Nazi atrocities do much to discredit this brand of eugenics in the United States, it has never completely disappeared. Some of its arguments will resurface in the 1950s in the population control movement.

Racism continues to infect the birth control movement. In 1939, the American Birth Control Federation designs a “Negro Project,” whose aim is to control the “breeding” of Blacks in the South.

1942 Sanger’s Birth Control Federation changes its name to Planned Parenthood. While “these organizations did perform the very valuable role of making contraception more available and accessible...at the same time...they shifted the focus away from women’s rights, embraced eugenicist and elitist views of the poor, and adopted a limited, top-down approach to services.”⁸

1960 Beginning of second wave eugenics in the United States. Unlike the first wave of eugenics, which had a conspiratorial aura about it, the new eugenics are (as Owen predicted) emerging as voluntary, driven by the dominance of consumer economy and the nuclear family in late capitalist culture.

1970s–90s The number of articles in the popular print media that attribute genetic causes to complex social and economic phenomena increases dramatically. In the six-year period from 1976 to 1982, *The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* displays a 231 percent increase in the number of articles attempting to demonstrate a genetic basis for crime, mental illness, intelligence, and alcoholism. Between 1983 and 1988, the number of articles attributing a genetic basis for crime quadruples in frequency over the previous decade. As Troy Duster points out, the explosion in such claims in both the popular and scientific literature came not from those working at the vanguard of molecular genetics or biochemistry, as one might expect. Instead, the major data source for the resurgent eugenicist claims was “a heavy reliance on Scandinavian institutional registries dating back to the early part of the century.”⁹

1980s Sperm banks that select donors according to intelligence, looks and success are founded. One of these sperm banks prohibits artists from being donors. [One scientist] founds a sperm bank exclusively for Nobel Prize win-

ners . In this explicitly eugenicist project, only women who were members of MENSA could receive the sperm.

1990s At least one college coed with “desirable traits” has sold her eggs for \$50,000.

A spate of books such as *The Bell Curve* reintroduces earlier eugenicists’ arguments about the genetic basis of social inequality . This argument is only the most extreme variation, symptomatic of the ideological geneticism being accelerated by the new bio-technologies.

1999 A Web site devoted to the sale of the eggs of supermodels promising “beauty to the highest bidder” asks \$10,000 to \$150,000 per egg. Its owner declares, “This is Darwin’s ‘Natural Selection’ at its very best...this ‘Celebrity Culture’ that we have created does better economically than any other civilization in history...”

Rather than being forcefully imposed, these new eugenic mechanisms reflect the ideological values of the social formation in which the rationalized reproductive process occurs, where ‘quality of life = economic performance’ and human value is determined by a person’s economic success. As Owen predicted, eugenic ideology, if not practice, is rapidly being naturalized.

Under the guise of optimizing reproduction—and “improving” human beings—today’s reproductive technologies are being implemented without a critical discussion of their latent eugenic content. ★

1 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Biotech Century: Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1998), p. 116.

2 Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), p. 98.

3 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Biotech Century: Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1998), p. 126.

4, 5, 6 Ibid.

7 Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies and New Eugenic Consciousness* (New York: Autonomedia, 1998), Chapter 6.

8 Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), p. 98.

9 Troy Duster, “The Prism of Heritability and the Sociology of Knowledge,” Laura Nader, ed., *Naked Science* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 119–120.