

THE ROOTS OF TRUMPISM

A CAUTIONARY TALE

MICHAEL NEVINS

As the possibility of a second Trump presidency looms, critics worry whether if he is successful, our country might veer toward autocracy, or kleptocracy, or take some unheard-of new form. “Make America Great Again” is one of Trump’s familiar linguistic contortions, but his core message seems to be that we should no longer bother with being great; rather, we should retreat from global commitments and make ourselves small and mean.

After Trump’s 100th day in office, David Remnick observed that the new president was “wary of expertise... has the attention span of a hummingbird...is an unprincipled, cocky, value-free con who will insult, stiff, or betray anyone to achieve his gaudiest purposes. Thomas Friedman cited Trump’s “core ignorance, instability and indecency” while Gail Collins described “a guy who wanders around in an ego-filled cloud, saying whatever the heck pops into his head. It’s a combination of id, ineptitude and bad intent.” Maureen Dowd deplored Trump’s “grandiosity, insularity and scamming — belligerent, dystopian, Darwinian.” That was then, but would things be any better if he were to win a second term? Will we learn from history or are we doomed to repeat it?

Psychopathic tendencies notwithstanding, there were historical precedents to the former president’s behavior. In his *New Yorker* article “The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming” (on-line edition, Dec. 5, 2016), Alex Ross described an intellectual enclave that existed in Frankfurt Germany during the 1950s which constructed a psychological and sociological profile of the authoritarian personality. These scholars believed that the mass media posed particular danger to democracy by blurring the line between truth and fiction, making the public susceptible to psychological manipulation and promoting fascist methods of “mass hypnosis.” With subsequent expansion of the internet and social media sites, this phenomenon has accelerated.

Alex Ross cited German social theorist Theodor Adorno whose book *“The Authoritarian Personality”* (1950) described the accumulation of racist, antidemocratic, paranoid, and irrational sentiments in political life. Recalling a “Father Coughlin type of rabble-rouser,” Adorno contemplated the possibility that a similar evolution might arise again in which large numbers of people would be susceptible to manipulation. Indeed, since the historical roots of surrender of intellectual and political freedom to authoritarianism ran deep, let’s consider what happened in Leipzig Germany during the late-19th century.

WILHELM WUNDT

In his book *The Leipzig Connection. The Systematic Destruction of American Education* (1980), Paolo Lionni described how Professor Wilhelm Wundt’s ideas were responsible for profound transformation in American education that ultimately effected our national psyche. Wundt had received a medical degree in Heidelberg in 1856 and stayed on there as a professor of psychology for seventeen years before accepting a position at the University of Leipzig where he remained for the remainder of his long academic career.

Professor Wundt set up the world’s first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in a conscious attempt to “mark out a new domain of science.” His approach was to gather data to support his assertion that man is devoid of self determination but is the summation of his experiences. If there is nothing to begin with except a brain and a nervous system, this raw physiological material can be conditioned (educated) by experiences to make the “correct” response — this preceded Pavlov who studied physiology in Leipzig five years after Wundt established his laboratory there. The idea was that man is but a stimulus-response animal.

Leipzig became the Mecca of students who wished to study the “new” psychology — “a novel, daring, exciting way of studying mental processes by experimental and quantitative methods as with other sciences.” Wilhelm Wundt’s students carried forward his idea that man must adapt to his environment instead of adapting the environment to suit his needs.

The product of such education would be “well-adjusted” (conditioned) children and these ideas were imported to America. Wilhelm Wundt’s concept of Volk (Folk) Psychology was employed by latter-day eugenists to justify public policy based on the public good rather than on individual rights.

Professor Wundt’s first American student G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924) became the first president of Clark University, the first president of the American Psychological Association and a leading authority on child psychology. Professor Hall envisioned a totalitarian state led by a class of super-leaders and argued that America had to tighten-up and discipline itself. Every institution needed to be restructured in order to serve the collective good and in order to achieve this same end, he advocated “genetic psychology” and reform of the educational system. Physically or intellectually inferior youth should not be educated at all, girls belonged in the home not the work place and male adolescents in their formative years should be taught to follow commands. “The nation that breeds best will rule the world...a pound of heredity is worth a hundred-fold weight of education.”

Another scholar who was indirectly influenced by Wilhelm Wundt was John Dewey, sometimes considered to be the “Father of American Education.” In 1884 he spent a year studying for his doctorate with G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins. To Dewey, as to Wundt and Hall, man is an animal entirely dependent on his experiences. The purpose of education is to teach students to adapt to behavior required in order to conform in his group.

EUGENICS

Early in the 20th century most Americans accepted the fact that mental illness, crime and poverty were inherited and could be cured by manipulating reproduction. These ideas were taught in universities and some social scientists and religious leaders spoke in apocalyptic terms as if the fate of civilization was at stake — it was necessary to preserve “the racial stock.” So said Charles Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton who in 1883 coined the term eugenics — meaning well born.

Galton argued that the human race could be strengthened by selective breeding as with thoroughbred race horses and show dogs. “It is a duty that we owe to humanity...to exercise that power [breeding] in a way that shall be most advantageous to future inhabitants of the earth.” Biologist Charles Davenport agreed (1904): “Heredity stands as the one great hope of the human race....The general program of the eugenicist is clear....it is to improve the race by inducing young people to make a more reasonable selection of marriage mates; to fall in love intelligently.” Sterilization should be used “to dry up the springs that feed the torrent of defective and degenerate protoplasm....Death is nature’s great blessing to the Race. Why keep defectives alive?”

Winston Churchill (1910) supported compulsory sterilization for the “feeble minded” so that their curse dies with them and is not transmitted to future generations.” Charles Darwin’s son Leonard (1912) hoped that the 20th century would be known as the time “when the eugenics ideal is accepted as the creed of civilization.” Theodore Roosevelt (1913) said, “We have no business to permit perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type.” J.H. Kellogg (1915) wrote, “Our race is going to seed....The world needs a new aristocracy....a real democracy made up of Apollos and Venuses and their fortunate progeny.”

In his book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), environmentalist Madison Grant argued that only through state-mandated sterilization could future generations be spared from “the curse of an ever increasing load of victims of misguided sentimentalism.” He wrote that the idea of the United States as a “melting pot is an absolute failure and he dehumanized the “unfit” by calling them “human weeds or insects.”

Harry Laughlin of the Eugenics Record Office on Long Island estimated that perhaps eleven million Americans — “the lowest 10%” — were “clearly unfit due to inherent defect and weakness. They are an economic and moral burden on the 90% and a constant danger to the national and racial life.” And after they were dealt with by sterilization, then on to the next lowest 10%. Laughlin drafted a model sterilization law intended to serve as a template for all states to follow and before long many did. In 1936, the University of Heidelberg awarded Harry Laughlin an honorary doctorate for his work in the science of “race hygiene.

While in jail and writing *Mein Kampf* (1923-24), Adolf Hitler read translations of books by Madison Grant, Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin. In fact, he wrote a fan letter to Grant calling his book “my personal Bible.” Hitler concluded that “sentimental” ideals about individual liberty must give way for the good of the people and in order to preserve “the master race.” When German sterilization laws followed Harry Laughlin’s model, an American eugenicist complained, “The Germans are beating us at our own game.”

Other enthusiastic eugenicists included Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell, Luther Burbank, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Mary Harriman, Margaret Sanger and Charles Lindbergh. Obviously, all weren’t evil-minded, xenophobic racists but most were elitists who wished to preserve the status quo that favored people like themselves — the affluent “fit.”

The Immigration Act of 1924, or Johnson–Reed Act, was a federal law that prevented immigration from Asia and set quotas on the number of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Eugenicists argued that “American blood” was incompatible with foreign blood and that any mixing between the two would destroy the quality of the country’s native stock. Passage of this law was the greatest triumph of the American eugenics movement and effectively closed the Golden Door until 1965.

In 1927 the United States Supreme Court in the landmark case of *Buck v. Bell*, upheld the right of states to mandate sterilization of “defectives” against their wishes — Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. famously declared, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” By 1937 a Gallup poll found that 84% of Americans approved of sterilization of the mentally ill and by 1963 23 states still had sterilization laws on the books — all told, more than 65,000 Americans had been sterilized against their will.

According to Stephen Jay Gould (*The Mismeasure of Man*, 1981), “The eugenicists battled and won one of the greatest victories of scientific racism in American history. The paths to destruction are often indirect, but ideas can be agents as sure as guns and bombs.”

ALEXIS CARREL

Perhaps the most outspoken and influential spokesman for aggressive eugenics policy during the 1920s and 1930s was the Nobel Prize winning French surgeon Alexis Carrel who declared, "There is no escaping the fact that men are *not* created equal." On April 14, 1939 the *New York Times* reported that on the previous day New York's Rotary Club gave its Gold Service Award to Dr. Carrel "in recognition of a life devoted to the amelioration of human suffering."

Alexis Carrel's acceptance speech was merely a sampler of his beliefs described in the second edition of his international bestseller *Man the Unknown*. When the book's first edition appeared in October 1935, it was second in sales only to *Gone With The Wind* and the author's face appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*. Dr. Carrel was well aware of world events and in the preface of the second edition his words were apocalyptic. In order to appreciate the spirit of the time, I'll excerpt several shocking statements from Carrel's book, albeit out of order and slightly edited.

A new civilization will develop when full use is made through a brain pool of scientific knowledge to replace the present civilization [which] is based on ideologies of the 18th century....In our civilization we have misfits and feebleminded persons that the people of the 18th century did not take into consideration there are hereditary and physiological traits that make individuals different...

If we used scientific insights we might discover a new way of life which would be based on reality. If life is based on reality we cannot fail. If it is based on philosophical or sociological ideologies we will fail as we already have failed. Our present knowledge is too great to be in one mind. It should be coordinated into a brain pool or a sort of composite Aristotle... It is too soon now but it will come because it is absolutely necessary.

The human race is degenerating morally and mentally, indifferent to everything but money. The only possible remedy is a much more profound knowledge of ourselves but there's reason for hope because, after all, the ancestral potentialities still exist in the germ plasm of their weak offspring. A great race must propagate its best elements to form a better human stock. Many inferior individuals have been conserved through the efforts of hygiene and medicine and the only way to obviate the disastrous predominance of the weak is to develop the strong.

The feeble-minded and the man of genius should not be equal before the law. The stupid, the unintelligent...those incapable of attention, of effort, have no right to a higher education. Eugenics is indispensable for the perpetuation of the strong. It asks for the sacrifice of many individuals...

Philosophical and sentimental prejudices must give way before necessity. The free practice of eugenics could lead not only to the development of stronger individuals but also strains endowed with more endurance, intelligence and courage. These strains should constitute an aristocracy from which great men probably would appear.

What's needed is a high council living in seclusion like monks...audacious men of science, unafraid of resorting to extreme, even ruthless measures. They should be free from research or teaching responsibilities and dedicate their lives to contemplation of our habits and thoughts...Our destiny is in our hands. Humanity's attention must turn from the machines of the world of inanimate matter to the body and the soul of man...On the new road, we must now go forward.

Alexis Carrel noted that upon this “new road” the defenders of the body and soul of a great race should be descendants of bold men – the likes of crusaders, revolutionaries, great criminals, financial and industrial magnates. Those deemed worthy should have their lives extended while the dregs of society “humanely and economically disposed of in small euthanistic institutions supplied with the proper gasses...Why preserve useless and harmful beings?” The term “useless” was a code word frequently employed in those days, first by eugenicists and later by Nazis, to characterize the unwanted other: the mentally ill, epileptics, homosexuals, gypsies, Jews. To be sure, Carrel was referring to individual executions by using “proper gasses” and in this country during the 1920s and 2010, hundreds of criminals were executed in gas chambers.

Dr. Carrel wasn't thinking exclusively about eliminating criminals. As a social Darwinist he advocated weeding out the unfit while encouraging the elite to multiply: “a great race must propagate its best elements”:

Civilization is already encumbered with those who should be dead: the weak, the diseased and the fools.

Natural selection no longer plays its part because the weak are saved as well as the strong.

Perhaps it would be effective to kill off the worst and keep the best, as we do in breeding dogs.

The old order must die so that the new order lives.

The fight of man against death will perhaps succeed too well. For the artificial postponement of death of a large number of individuals would be a far greater calamity than death itself.

Alexis Carrel had no doubt that there would be many worthy candidates for this new ruling caste that would build a new civilization: "The herd always profits by the ideas and inventions of the elite...we should construct greater men. Although he advocated "positive" eugenics and, in individual cases even "negative" eugenics, but he never sanctioned mass involuntary sterilization or euthanasia of sick or defective children or adults as was being done in Nazi Germany during the 1930s. Carrel praised Nazi Germany for its "energetic measures to prevent contamination of the human race" and his was not a lone voice, His views were shared by many Americans, thousands flocked to his lectures and millions read his book. Was Alexis Carrel a moral monster? a fascist? a Nazi? an antisemite? a mad scientist or merely a misguided elitist? Nearly a century later later, it's still difficult to say with clarity.

Writing in her daily syndicated newspaper column *My Day*, although Eleanor Roosevelt sounded almost fatalistic, her words from seven decades ago still ring true. By 1954, the column had become Mrs. Roosevelt's political platform and her personal diary. It was the major avenue by which she challenged complacent Democrats and apathetic citizens to accept the responsibilities of living in a democracy:

Here in America, so many miles away, the clouds which hang over other countries are felt and, more and more, the thought seems to come home to us that we are fortunate to live in America. I suppose, however, that no matter where you live or under what conditions, you carry on your daily tasks and adjust yourself to whatever circumstances you may have to meet. Probably this is why human beings survive all kinds of situations. Impossible as it seems today that one could ever survive and adjust to certain things, one will find oneself doing so tomorrow and almost forgetting that other conditions ever prevailed.

DJT REDUX

What would Donald Trump have thought about the ideas of American eugenicists, no less those of Adolf Hitler? — after all, he once said that “Hitler did some good things.” The former President once told a mostly white crowd at a campaign rally in Minnesota, “You have good genes. A lot of it is about the genes, isn't it? Don't you believe the racehorse theory?” (*L.A. Times*, Oct. 5, 2020). Trump has often spoken about his beliefs in the superiority of his genes, dating back to his days as a Manhattan developer. In 2007 he told Larry King on CNN, “You can absolutely be taught things. Absolutely. You can get a lot better. But there is something, you know, the racehorse theory, there is something to the genes... and when I say ‘something’, I mean a lot.”

Three years later, Trump said that because his father was successful, it naturally followed that he would be too: “I have a certain gene. I'm a gene believer. Hey, when you connect two racehorses, you usually end up with a fast horse. And you know, I had a good gene pool from the standpoint of that.” In 2016 he bragged to a crowd in Mississippi, “I have an Ivy League education, smart guy, good genes. I have great genes and all that stuff, which I'm a believer in.” In 2020 during a presidential debate with Joe Biden he sneered: “You could never have done the job we did. You don't have it in your blood.”

Trump has described his current political opponents as “vermin” and often exploits race as a political issue. Recall how he speculated about President Obama's birthplace or recent references to immigrants from Mexico as “killers and rapists.” Or this, “Every family in Minnesota needs to know about sleepy Joe Biden's extreme plan to flood your state with an influx of refugees from Somalia and from other places all over the planet.” Recently HE has adopted an old eugenics trope that immigrants are “poisoning the blood of our country.”

With the benefit of hindsight, it's tempting to ask what were our ancestors thinking? Indeed what is Donald Trump thinking right now? In 1998 an international survey of 2,901 geneticists in 36 nations concluded that despite crucial changes, “eugenics is alive and well.” It seems that a dose of history-based humility is appropriate for if history teaches nothing else, it's that the more things change, the more they are the same.

Michael Nevins

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- An authoritarian regime has "a concentration of power in a leader or an elite not constitutionally responsible to the people".^[70] Unlike totalitarian states, they will allow social and economic institutions not under governmental control,^[71] and tend to rely on passive mass acceptance rather than active popular support.^[72]

- An **Autocracy** is a state/government in which one person possesses "unlimited power".
- A **Totalitarian** state is "based on subordination of the individual to the state and strict control of all aspects of the life and productive capacity of the nation especially by coercive measures (such as censorship and terrorism)".^[73] and are ruled by a single ruling party made up of loyal supporters.^[74] Unlike autocracies, which "seek only to gain absolute political power and to outlaw opposition",^[75] totalitarian states are characterized by an official ideology, which "seek only to gain absolute political power and to outlaw opposition",^[75] and "seek to dominate every aspect of everyone's life as a prelude to world domination".^[75]
- A **Fascist** state is autocratic and based on a political philosophy/movement, (such as that of the Fascisti of pre-WWII Italy) "that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition".^[76]