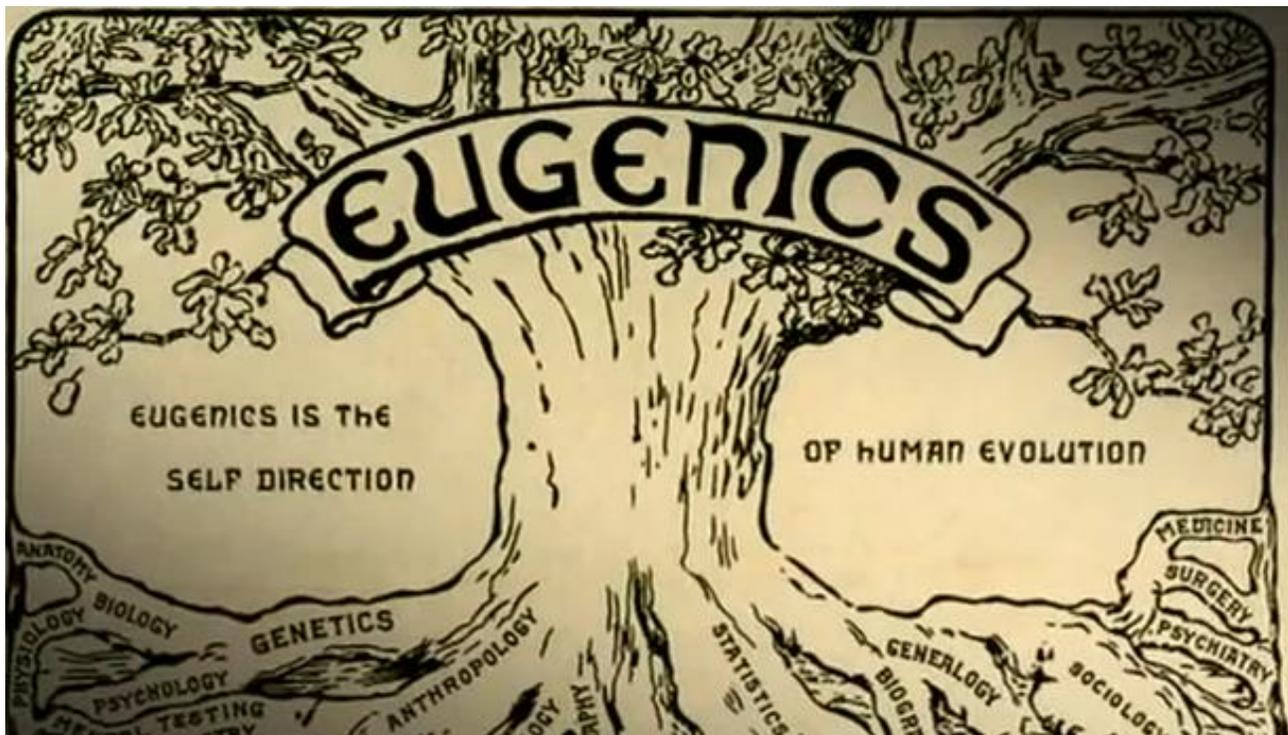


RIDDING AMERICA OF “VERMIN” AND THE “UNFIT”

Michael Nevins

*Speaking to a raucous crowd in New Hampshire recently, former President Donald Trump promised to root out “vermin” who live within our country — including immigrants, communists, fascists and “radical left thugs.” At another rally he likened illegal migrants to Hannibal Lecter, a fictional serial killer who eats his victims in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. Trump’s critics noted that he often echoes Adolf Hitler, but some of these ideas were long-standing tropes substantially based on the pseudoscience known as eugenics. Of course the former president wouldn’t have understood any of this.*



As originally conceived by Francis Galton in 1883, eugenics evolved from evolutionary biology with the goal of scientific cultivation of superior beings. However, this idealistic agenda became perverted as emphasis shifted from encouraging the well-bred to multiply to preventing society’s less fortunate from propagating at all. Early in the 20th century most Americans accepted as fact that mental illness, crime and poverty were inherited and could be cured by manipulating reproduction. Eugenics was taught in elite universities and many scientists and religious leaders spoke in apocalyptic terms as if the fate of civilization was at stake — it was crucial to preserve the “racial stock.”

During the late 19th century, the mentally challenged (including epileptics) were segregated on large tracts of land and housed in isolated “colonies” or “villages” whose leaders collaborated with the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Springs Harbor, Long Island to study the “pedigrees” of their charges and disseminated information about the importance of eugenics in order to “save the American way of life.” What follows next is a compendium of significant events and statements that were made by influential people who should have known better.

Chronology

1869: Francis Galton asserts that the same principles of breeding show dogs and race horses can be applied “to produce a highly gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations.” He states that intelligence, talent and character all are inherited, that “it is a duty we owe to humanity to investigate the range of that power and to exercise it in a way that, without being unwise toward ourselves, shall be most advantageous to future inhabitants of the earth....What nature does blindly, slowly and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly and kindly.”

1871: Charles Darwin (Galton’s half cousin) laments the wide spread use of small pox vaccination because it ensures the survival of the weak which is “highly injurious to the race of man....Except for man himself, hardly anyone is so ignorant as to allow the worst animals to breed.” Darwin adapts philosopher Herbert Spencer’s term “survival of the fittest” — if human society is to become fit, the logical and humane thing is to get rid of the unfit.

1877: Richard Dugdale’s book *The Jukes, A Study of Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* is based on his study of a rural New York State family and supports a popular view that "crime, pauperism, fornication, prostitution, bastardy, exhaustion, intemperance, disease and extinction" are common features of their lives.

1883: Galton coins the term “eugenics” (good genes) for the science of “improving the stock.” He suggests that it will be “the religion of the future...a secular faith” and declares that medical care and misguided social policies have “interrupted the natural struggle for existence by artificially preserving the weak and defective.” Europeans are superior to “the lower races” – Jews are described as “parasites,” negroes as “childish simpletons.” However, the term eugenics isn’t generally recognized in the United States until 1904.

1900: Gregor Mendel's work with heredity is rediscovered some forty years after it was first performed. By cross-pollinating pea plants Mendel had established the Law of Dominance from which the word "genetics" was coined.

1903: Theodore Roosevelt suggests that Anglo-Saxons are committing "race suicide" by not replenishing their stock in adequate numbers: "The Jew, the Russian, the Hungarian [and] the Italian are darkly 'outshading' the Americanized descendants of the English, the Germans and the Swede....We have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type." A dozen years later when Roosevelt spoke to the National Americanization Committee, he supported a proposed law that would demand that new immigrants learn English and "live up to our ideals or be sent back home."

1904: The Station for Experimental Evolution of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C. opens in Cold Spring Harbor. Directed by Charles Davenport and funded by Mary Harriman, it opens a Eugenics Records Office that becomes the epicenter of research on human inheritance that will provide scientific data to support the movement. ERO leaders propose that "better" classes should be fruitful and multiply (positive eugenics) while "lower" classes should have their bad seeds literally cut off (negative eugenics.)

1905: Harvard zoologist Charles Davenport: "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 can dry up the springs that feed the torrent of defective and degenerate protoplasm....The lowest stratum of society has neither intelligence nor self-control enough to justify the State to leave its mating in their own hands...Death is nature's great blessing to the Race, Why keep defectives alive?"

1906: Henry Goddard modifies Alfred Binet's IQ test and uses it to classify "morons" (a term he coined) who function at an 8 to 12 year old level, "idiots" who function at a 2 year old level and "imbeciles," midway between the others. He reports that two thirds of the feeble-minded have inherited their defect and after testing immigrants at Ellis Island, writes "We are getting the poorest of each race." Dr. J.H.Kellogg, Michigan's breakfast cereal mogul, founds The Race Betterment Foundation in order to help stop the propagation of defectives. "Our race is going to seed...The world needs a new aristocracy...a real aristocracy made up of Apollos and Venuses and their fortunate progeny...the White Races of Europe [need] to establish a race of human thoroughbreds."

1907: Indiana is the first state to pass a law providing for government mandated sterilization. “Idiots, imbeciles and degenerate criminals are prolific and their defects are transmissible...we owe it not only to ourselves but to the future of our race and nation to see that the defective and diseased do not multiply.” According to Luther Burbank, “Only by selection of the best can any race be improved...Environment and education alone can not make appreciable progress...When both parents are shiftless in some degree, only about 15% of their children would be ‘industrious.’”

1910: Winston Churchill supports segregation and compulsory sterilization for England’s 120,000 feeble minded “so that their curse dies with them.” In his view, white protestant Christians are at the top, above white Catholics, while Indians are “higher” than Africans

1911: Eugenicists in New Jersey propose “An act to authorize and provide for the sterilization of idiots, imbeciles morons, epileptics, rapists and certain criminals and other defectives.” The state legislature approves and Governor Woodrow Wilson, who wishes to suppress “citizens of the wrong type”, signs the bill into law.

1912: Harvard is considered to be “the brain-trust of eugenics.” Its former president Charles W. Eliot is not opposed to admitting new Americans, but calls the mixture of racial groups to be a grave danger: “Each nation should keep its stock-pure..There should be no blending of races.”

Presiding at the First International Eugenics Congress in London, Charles Darwin’s son Leonard extolls eugenics as being the practical application of the principle of evolution: “The 20th century will be known as the time when the eugenics ideal is accepted as the creed of civilization...We shall conquer in time.” He admits that implementation of better breeding procedures will require “moral courage.”

At that same Congress, Bleecker Van Wagenen, chairman of the Committee on Sterilization for the American Breeders Association, declares that his organization’s goal is to “purge the blood of the American people.” He argues that people of “defective inheritance should be eliminated from the human stock.” He declares that three million Americans of “inferior blood” are not yet in institutions and seven million more – 10% of the total population – carry hereditary maladies and are “totally unfitted to become parents of useful citizens.” Although Van Wagenen supports killing undesirables, he concedes that state sterilization laws will face constitutional challenges because some research has been premature or flawed and that more work needs to be done.

1916: Madison Grant, a wealthy conservationist and white supremacist, is more concerned with preserving redwood trees and big game than human stock. He is called “the great patriarch of scientific racism” and in his book *The Passing of the Great Race* he proposes that enlightened government policy will produce “a strong, virile and self-contained race which would inevitably overwhelm nations whose weaker elements had not been purged....The individual himself can be nourished, educated and protected by the community during his lifetime, but the state through sterilization must see to it that his line stops with him, or else future generations will be cursed with an ever increasing load of victims of misguided sentimentalism.” Grant calls the feeble-minded “human weeds or insects....The only really good group of humans are northern Europeans Nordics, except for the Irish. In 1923, while languishing in prison, Adolf Hitler reads Madison Grant’s book, calls it his personal Bible, and paraphrases “Sentimental” ideals about individual liberty must give way for the good of the people and in order to preserve the master race.”

1917: During World War I, social scientists Robert Yerkes, Louis Terman and Carl Brigham test the mental fitness of 1.7 million U.S. Army recruits and report that more than half meet Goddard’s definition of morons — including 60% of Jews and 86% of negroes. These “alpha” tests were biased in favor of scholastic skills and cultural background. Some questions were basic math and language problems but others would be unfamiliar to foreigners — an example: “Christy Mathewson is famous as a writer, artist, baseball player, comedian?” The results were widely accepted and helped fuel the drive to sterilize “unfit” Americans and keep out “unworthy” immigrants. The responsibility for screening immigrants is assigned to a cadre of doctors who, as “American officials” will pick the parents of future generations “in the interests of their race.” Many physicians take on this work and by 1915, there were 94 working at Ellis Island alone.

1920: Charles Davenport warns against “hordes of Jews” coming to America. Unless immigration is halted, Americans will have darker skin, grow smaller in stature and become “more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape and sex-immorality....Can we build a wall high enough around this country, so as to keep out these cheaper races? If not, the Nordics will have to abandon the country to the blacks, browns and yellows and seek an asylum in New Zealand.”

1921: Biologist Edwin Conklin suggests that “in this era of rampant immigration, God may have withdrawn His ancient promise to His radiant American bride...If God had only continued to sift the nations for our benefit, or if our fathers had exercised only reasonable caution, we might have had here only the choicest blood and the highest types of culture of all lands, we might have replaced the slow and wasteful methods of natural selection by intelligent selection and thus have enormously advanced and hastened human evolution...That chance has gone forever.”

1922: Harry Laughlin of the Eugenics Records Office writes “The mothers of unfit children should be relegated to a place comparable to that of the female of mongrel strains of domestic animals.” About eleven million Americans – “the lowest ten percent” – are “unfit” and are an economic and moral burden on the 90%. They include paupers, drug addicts, the homeless, the blind or deaf and those with TB or syphilis. In *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, Lathrop Stoddard writes that uncontrolled reproduction and intermingling of defective and normal stock is leading to “the twilight of the American mind [and] the dusk of mankind.”

That same year Yale’s Dean Frederick S. Jones: “I think we shall have to change our view in regard to the Jewish element. We should do something to improve them.....If we do not educate them, they will outrun us...We must put a ban on the Jews.”

1923: In *Mankind at the Crossroads*, Harvard botanist Edward East declares “Eugenics is sorely needed, social progress without is unthinkable.” In *A Study of American Intelligence*, Princeton’s Carl Brigham writes “In a very definite way, the results which we obtained by interpreting the Army data by means of the race hypothesis support Mr. Madison Grant’s thesis of the superiority of the Nordic type... Our figures would rather tend to disprove the popular belief that the Jew is highly intelligent.” (Although five years later Brigham refuted his own data and rejected eugenics, the damage was done and in 1924 Congress passed restrictive immigration laws largely based on his work.)

Henry F. Osborn, president of the American Museum of Natural History: “In the US we are slowly waking to the consciousness that education and environment do not fundamentally alter racial values. We are engaged in a serious struggle to maintain our historic republican institutions through barring the entrance of those unfit to share in the duties and responsibilities of our well-founded government...In the matter of racial virtues, my opinion is that from biological principles there is little promise in the melting-pot theory.”

1924: An editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* favors restricting the entry of too many “under vitalized and under moralized aliens now crowding into this country.” President Calvin Coolidge signs the National Origins Act that limits influx of the “wrong types.” Now no Asians will be permitted in and other ethnic groups and Jews will be limited to 2% of their total number present here as of the 1890 census. In effect, this shut “The Golden Door” so that by 1927 more people were being deported from Ellis Island than entering. The catastrophic effect would be fully felt by Jews attempting to flee Europe during the 1930s.

1926: The American Eugenics Society disseminates information to the public emphasizing that the dangerous and defective are reproducing too quickly, the normal and advantaged too slowly. They sponsor contests for “Fitter Families” at state and local fairs (see below) and by 1928 eugenics is being taught at 75% of American colleges.

1927: Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. in the *Buck v. Bell* decision: “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.” Referring to Carrie Buck, her mother and her perfectly normal infant daughter, Justice Holmes opines, “It is necessary to prevent our being swamped with incompetence.... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” By an 8-1 vote, the Court rules to uphold the right of states to mandate sterilization of defectives against their wishes — often against their knowledge.

1932: Historian George Kennan: “Nothing good can come out of modern civilization, in the broad sense. We have only a group of more or less inferior races, incapable of coping adequately with the environment which technical progress has created... No amount of education and discipline can effectively improve conditions as long as we allow the unfit to breed copiously and to preserve their young.”

1933: Margaret Sanger declares that In order to create a decent civilization, a top priority is to rectify fertility imbalance through segregation or forced sterilization of severely feeble-minded persons. She coins the term “birth control” to control the births of those who threaten the genetic integrity of humankind – it is “the most rational and efficient way to avoid race suicide.” Sanger’s motto is “More children for the fit; less for the unfit.” “We need to breed a race of human thoroughbreds.”

1936: Nobel Laureate Dr. Alexis Carrel: “There is no escaping the fact that men are *not* created equal... the fallacy of equality was invented in the 18th century when there was no science to correct it.... Society must identify and encourage those with greatest ability, while the dregs should be disposed of in small euthanistic institutions supplied with the proper gases... Why preserve useless and harmful beings?”

When the University of Heidelberg awards an honorary degree to Harry Laughlin for his commitment to race purification that has inspired their own programs, an American eugenicist laments, “The Germans are beating us at our own game.” In New Jersey birth control advocate Marian S. Olden also admires Germany’s example and argues that misguided policies have aided survival of human weeds: “Defectives are menacing our better stock.” Olden claims that the USA has become the “dumping ground” for Europe’s “subnormal” population who are prone to crime, mental illness and are promiscuous.

1941: Foster Kennedy, President of the American Neurologic Association: “The place for euthanasia, I believe, is for the completely hopeless defective — nature’s mistake... These should be relieved of the burden of living... To allow them to continue such a living is sheer sentimentality, and cruel too; we deny them as much solace as we give our stricken horse. Here we may most kindly kill.

Discussion

With The Great Depression at home, the rise of Fascism abroad and then World War II, American society was restless. There was a new progressive spirit with movements to reform education and prevent crime and poverty. With these cross currents and as scientific thinking was beginning to change, the balance between nature and nurture began to swing in favor of the latter. At the same time, the utopian vision of eugenics gave way to a more critical perspective and more modest claims were made by former supporters.

It’s hazardous to apply current standards to the past. Many people who had used eugenics language didn’t approve of the movement’s most extreme negative agenda and all of them weren’t evil-minded or xenophobic racists. To be sure, many were elitists who wished to preserve a status quo that favored the affluent “fit” like themselves. Among those who supported at least limited aspects of the eugenics agenda were the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Winston Churchill, Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, Alexander Graham Bell, Luther Burbank, Thomas Edison, G.B. Shaw, H.G. Wells and T.S. Eliot.

Even conceding that the motives of early eugenicists may have been well intentioned, events in Europe proved that there could be unintended consequences. In Germany American laws were used as justification for compulsory sterilization of about 150,000 people; soon there were more than a million so-called “mercy killings” — and then mass murder. At the Nuremberg Trials after the end of World War II, American precedent was cited by Nazi defendants, as if to say we were merely following your example. In this country during the 1940s, although mandated sterilizations continued in many states, legal objections gradually began to gain the upper hand. By 1966, nationwide about 65,000 people had been involuntarily sterilized; between 2006 and 2010, 150 inmates in California prisons were sterilized without informed consent and today sterilization laws remain on the books in many states.

In 1939 the Carnegie Institution concluded that work done by their Eugenics Research Office lacked scientific merit and withdrew funding. The Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory transformed into a center of genetics research and eventually eight Nobel Prize winners would serve on faculty.

These days, although the Laboratory's mission statement speaks of its dedication to molecular biology and curing diseases, the word "eugenics" appears only once, obscurely, on its website. For nearly forty years the Laboratory was headed by James B. Watson, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, but when interviewed on BBC television in 2003, Watson employed eugenic rhetoric speaking about getting rid of "the lower 10%." It caused such furor that he was asked to resign.

According to historian Stephen Jay Gould in *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." Eugenics didn't evaporate after the Second World War – it transformed. An international survey of nearly 3,000 geneticists in 1998 suggested that eugenics thought underlies their own perceptions of the goals of genetics. Although current practice promotes individual choice rather than state coercion, the survey concluded that "eugenics is alive and well."

The "new" genetics claims to differ from the "old" oppressive eugenics because it was benevolent and voluntary, but early enthusiasts had considered themselves as having those same qualities. The movement was promoted by individuals and groups with disparate social and political orientations — progressives, environmentalists, peace activists, health enthusiasts, and if their beliefs were self-serving, they felt justified because the agenda seemed to be a scientific way to prevent "race suicide" and promote human progress.

Today's scientists hope that with new techniques they will be able to rewrite flawed genes in people, thereby opening possibilities for treating, even curing, diseases. However, the boundary between healing and enhancing life is not easily demarcated. Tampering with genes in human embryos, eggs or sperm raises the possibility of creating designer babies with enhanced intelligence, beauty or other traits – a "fitter" race? — whatever that implies. Perhaps the promise of genomics is being oversold and the dark history of the eugenics movement should give pause lest science is misused again for sinister purposes.

So what really was wrong with eugenics? The answer is far from obvious, it depends on your point of view. State coerced sterilization certainly was repugnant, but don't we practice a watered-down form of eugenics when we screen for Down's syndrome and other genetic abnormalities? A major distinction between old and new eugenics is that the latter is based on choice, but how about government mandated vaccinations for what is perceived as the greater good? Consider the recent backlash against Covid vaccinations or the uproar over reproductive choices.

With the benefit of hindsight, it's tempting to ask what were our ancestors thinking? It's exactly one hundred years since Congress shut "The Golden Door" and Jewish immigration plummeted — 190,000 in 1920, 7,000 in 1926! A century from now will our descendants be shocked at certain practices that we now feel to be perfectly correct? Indeed, a dose of history-based humility is appropriate because the tragic results of flawed eugenics theory should teach us that scientific imprecision and ethical complacency is hazardous.

Michael Nevins, MD
March, 2024

Portions of this essay were adapted from my books *A Tale of Two "Villages": Vineland and Skillman, NJ* (2009) and *Abraham Flexner: A Flawed American Icon* (2010).



