

American Eugenics: A History of its Evolution from Public Health Initiative to Scientific Racism, Historical Memory, and Modern Genetics

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History

Throughout the 20th century, American Society struggled to deal with the issue of racial equality, which caused tremendous tension in almost every facet of society. At the same time that society was grappling with racial tensions and inequalities, the world of medicine and technology was developing and progressing at an unprecedented pace. While medical and technological advancement allowed for new treatments, eradication of disease, and a new, unparalleled understanding of the human body, there was a distinct dark side of this newfound knowledge and technology.

The introduction of social programs based on eugenics continued and sustained racial segregation. This so-called “medical racism” was prevalent in 20th century American culture. Eugenics programs were legally implemented with a blatant disregard for a standard of patient care, patients rights, and without informed medical consent, in the name of combating a variety of social ills and problems within American Society. This paper will chart the evolution of American eugenics from that of a public health initiative to that of scientific racism and considers the historical memory of such trajectory as well as the current state of genetic research and the fall out from America’s eugenic past.

Background and Foundations of American Eugenics

Eugenics is difficult to define insofar as it had a variety of schemes for social application that differed from one Eugenicist to another and upon which there appears to be no concise universal application. The Eugenics movement may be best defined after being broken down into two parts: the moral basis and the scheme of social application.¹ The moral aspect of the Eugenics movement was in large part propelled by an aversion to “the unfit,” which was meant to prompt legal support for segregation within society and prevent future propagation.² Although it can be argued that literary support for eugenics dates as far back as Plato, its origins are most commonly seen in Darwin’s theory of natural selection and with later Mendelian genetics.³ It is also

¹ G. K. Chesterton. *Eugenics and Other Evils*. London: Cassell, 1922, 1.

² Ralph Brave and Kathryn Sylva. “Exhibiting Eugenics: Response and Resistance to a Hidden History.” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 33-51; 36.

³ Daniel Wikler. “Can We Learn from Eugenics?.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 25, no. 2 (1999): 183-194. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27718281> . (accessed November 1, 2011); 184.

important to consider the motivations of the eugenics movement, and defining them as either positive or negative in terms of the scheme of social application. Both positive and negative eugenicists were concerned with continued and sustained human betterment, positive eugenicists through encouraging those they deemed to have desirable genes to reproduce, while negative eugenicists sought to render the “unfit” or “illfit” incapable of reproduction through sterilization as euthanasia in the transmission of their genetic “weaknesses.”⁴

The term “eugenics” was coined by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, in 1883 and launched a movement to improve the human race through selective breeding, in order to halt its perceived decline. Galton described eugenics as “the science of improving stock—not only by judicious mating, but whatever tend[ed] to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had.” Medical ethicist Daniel Wikler asserts in his article “Can We Learn from Eugenics?” that eugenics was: “a movement for social betterment clothed in the mantle of modern science,” which, “claimed the allegiance of most genetic scientists” and drew allegiances from all over the political spectrum. Wikler is currently the Mary B. Saltonstall Professor of Population Ethics and Professor of Ethics and Population Health at Harvard University and has published extensively on the ethical issues of public health and population science, previously serving as the first Staff Ethicist for the World Health Organization. Darwin himself was persuaded by his cousin’s eugenic arguments and Galton attracted a number of notable scientists as well as a large, faithful discipleship.⁵

Most American eugenicists accepted Galton’s theory, bolstered with August Weismann’s “germ plasm” hypothesis, that selection not environment determined heredity.⁶ Other notable supporters of the American eugenics movement include Dr. Clarence Gamble, of Proctor and Gamble a personal care products company, and James Hanes, founder of Hanes, a hosiery company.⁷ By the 1920’s, the American eugenics movement had attracted a wide variety of middle and upper-middle class disciples led by an array of professionals and academics. American eugenic organizations rapidly introduced eugenic ideas into public discourse, resulting in the creation of terms like “white trash” paired with the warning that unwise reproductive acts would do irreparable damage to American society and the American way of life.⁸

⁴Chloe S. Burke and Christopher J. Castaneda. “The Public and Private History of Eugenics: An Introduction.” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 5-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2007.29.3.5> (accessed November 1, 2011); 7.

⁵ Wikler, 183-4.

⁶ Wikler, 184.

⁷ Michelle Kessel and Jessica Hopper. “Victims speak out about North Carolina sterilization program, which targeted women, young girls and blacks.” *MSNBC: Rock Center with Brian Williams (New York)*, November 7, 2011. http://rockcenter.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/11/07/8640744-victims-speak-out-about-north-carolina-sterilization-program-which-targeted-women-young-girls-and-blacks (accessed November 7, 2011).

⁸ Wikler, 184.

Public Presence of American Eugenics

In light of all of this, one might wonder: how were American eugenicists so adept at reaching their audience? American eugenic organizations maintained exhibits and events at a number of public expositions with activities like “Fitter Families” competitions at state fairs with governors and senators on hand to present awards to the victors.⁹ There was widespread support for eugenic goals and strategies, due in large part to the powerful public nature of the American eugenic movement. As early as 1911, American eugenicists were prominent in the public realm. For example, the 1911 “Million Dollar Parade” of livestock and agriculture at the Iowa State Fair concluded with an automobile filled with pre-school age children draped with a banner proclaiming them to be “Iowa’s Best Crop.”¹⁰

In her article “‘Fitter Families for Future Firesides’: Florence Sherbon and Popular Eugenics,” historian Laura Lovett chronicles the creation and rise of the popular American eugenics movement through the creation of these “fitter family” contests. Lovett asserts that:

Where better baby contests had been developed as part of U.S. Children’s Bureau campaign against infant mortality, fitter family contests were developed as part of the popular education campaigns of the American eugenics movement.¹¹

Fitter family competitions fused eugenics with expansive public health campaigns consequently creating a more widespread type of eugenic reform by coupling heredity with the ideal family home and environment. By merging nostalgia for rural American life on the farm with the modernist promise of scientific control over reproduction and ultimately heredity, eugenicists like Dr. Florence Sherbon and Mary T. Watts succeeded in bringing eugenic thought into public discourse. Dr. Florence Sherbon earned an M.D. from Iowa State University in 1904 where she married classmate Dr. James Bayard Sherbon the same year but financial difficulties resulted in divorce for the couple by 1912 leaving Florence as a single mother to twin girls.¹² Prompted by her own interest in her daughters, Dr. Sherbon joined Mary T. Watts to organize the 1911 Iowa Better Baby Contest. In 1920, Sherbon and Watts orchestrated the first fitter family competition with the goal of stimulating the interest of the intelligent family to “arouse a family consciousness by which each family [would] conceive of itself as a genetic unit with a definite obligation to study its heredity and build up its health status.”¹³

By the 1920’s, eugenic programs were debated, developed and enacted in the public arena using the support of public funding and legislature that ultimately led to the allowance of state

⁹ Wikler, 184.

¹⁰ Laura L. Lovett. “‘Fitter Families for Future Firesides’: Florence Sherbon and Popular Eugenics.” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 69-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525.2007.29.3.69> (accessed December 11, 2011); 69.

¹¹ Lovett, 70.

¹² Lovett, 73.

¹³ Lovett, 76; originally from Kansas Bureau of Child Research “Fitter Families,” 1-2.

jurisdiction over reproductive rights.¹⁴ In all, thirty-three states passed and enacted laws in the early 20th century that allowed for the involuntary sterilization of large numbers of inmates in prisons and state-run mental institutions for “the feeble-minded and insane.”¹⁵ The public nature of the American eugenics movement had to adjust itself to the mentality of the Roaring Twenties, as traditional family, home, and moral values were challenged. During the 1920’s, fitter family contests spread throughout rural America and, according to Lovett, encouraged “families to reimagine their histories as pedigrees subject to scientific analysis and control.”¹⁶

Out of the success of Sherbon and Watts, fitter family contests, and in the wake of the 1921 Second International Congress of Eugenics, arose the establishment of the American Eugenics Society (AES) (See figure 1). Having based its foundation largely on the public works of Sherbon and Watts and the research of Charles Davenport, AES emphasized education and the promotion of eugenic goals in American society.¹⁷ Throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s from their headquarters in New Haven, Connecticut, the AES organized conferences, contests, and distributed publications on a variety of topics pertaining to the American eugenics movement. The AES played a critical role in the propagation of popular American eugenic goals and Lovett contends that they were instrumental in extending the domain of eugenic reform to living conditions, home life, and wider socio-cultural goals.¹⁸

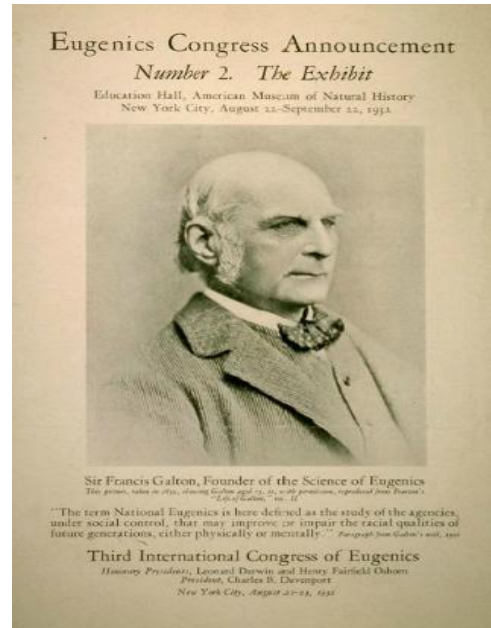


Figure 1: International Congress of Eugenics Announcement.

Evolution of American Eugenics into Scientific and Medical Racism

In their paper “Eugenics as Indian Removal: Sociohistorical Processes and the De(con)struction of American Indians in the Southeast,” authors Angela Gonzales, Judy Kertesz, and Gabrielle Tayac detail the evolution of eugenic discourse from targeting social ills and maladies to that of scientific and medical racism in early twentieth century America. Gonzales, Kertesz, and Tayac argue that eugenics-informed public policy served to allow for the passage of antimiscegenation legislation, arbitrary census enumerations, separate schools systems, and

¹⁴ Chloe S. Burke and Christopher J. Castaneda. “The Public and Private History of Eugenics: An Introduction.” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 5-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2007.29.3.5> (accessed November 1, 2011); 9.

¹⁵ Burke and Castaneda, 9.

¹⁶ Lovett, 71.

¹⁷ Lovett, 76.

¹⁸ Lovett, 77.

bifurcated Southern racial hierarchy that placed all non-whites into one undifferentiated racial group that transformed the American eugenics movement from one based largely on informed public health programs into the “scientific” basis for racial segregation of the “unfit.”¹⁹ Throughout the United States, the practice of hypodescent, race determined and quantified by blood, persons of mixed ancestry were imbricated in policies, which classified their identity as the race of their more socially subordinate parent. Gonzales, Kertesz, and Tayac argue that this systematic categorization of race maintained white power and authority and allowed later for the implementation of involuntary sterilization of the “ill-fit” to preserve this hierarchy.²⁰

Their public presence and support paired with their ability to mount campaigns for coercive measures like sexual segregation and involuntary sterilization allowed for the passage of legal measures to prevent those whom they imagined to have undesirable genes from reproducing.²¹ Gonzales, Kertesz, and Tayac assert that the perceived effects of immigration, rural decline, poverty, criminality, and their perceived connection to “feble-mindedness” had increasingly unsettled white America.²² Eugenic geneticist Richard L. Dugdale, wrote a representative work that furnished the basis of this new “scientific” and social movement of eugenics by utilizing records of county courts, jails, and poor houses to chart generations of the Jukes family and their “genealogy of degeneracy.”²³ Following the lead of Dugdale, other eugenicists like Henry H. Goddard and Charles Davenport wrote other influential works detailing “inbred” rural populations, “feedble-mindedness,” and criminality that served to decontextualize families caught in the cycle of racial discrimination, poverty, and limited access to resources.²⁴ Their studies reinforced the notion of the immutability of the perceived inherited traits of degeneracy, prompting many progressives to lobby for the implementation of legalized involuntary sterilization and legal restrictions limiting immigration and marriage.²⁵ While the perceived possibility of eventual human perfection was a primary motivation for many eugenic scientists, some prominent eugenic supporters were driven by the possibility of saving taxpayer money on public social institutions like asylums, prisons, and welfare programs through the reduction of proliferation by the “unfit.”²⁶

¹⁹ Angela Gonzales and Judy Kertesz, and Gabrielle Tayac. “Eugenics as Indian Removal: Sociohistorical Processes and the De(con)struction of American Indians in the Southeast.” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 3 (2007): 53-67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2007.29.3.53> (accessed December 12, 2011); 54.

²⁰ Gonzales, 56.

²¹ Wikler, 184.

²² Gonzales, 58.

²³ R. L. Dugdale and W. M. F. Round. *The Jukes a study in crime, pauperism, disease, and heredity : also further studies of criminals*. 7th ed. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1902.

²⁴ Gonzales, 58.

²⁵ Gonzales, 58.

²⁶ Burke and Castaneda, 10.

In 1919, 1929, 1933, and 1935 North Carolina passed sterilization laws that were later ruled unconstitutional, with Virginia following suit in 1924 (see figure 2). Despite these laws being ruled unconstitutional it didn't deter eugenicists from continuing to lobby in support of state involuntary sterilization laws. Eugenicists succeeded in the legalization of involuntary sterilization with the ruling in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927, which upheld the constitutionality of compulsory sterilization on the basis of protecting the health of the state of Virginia.²⁷ It is important to note however, that states enacting such

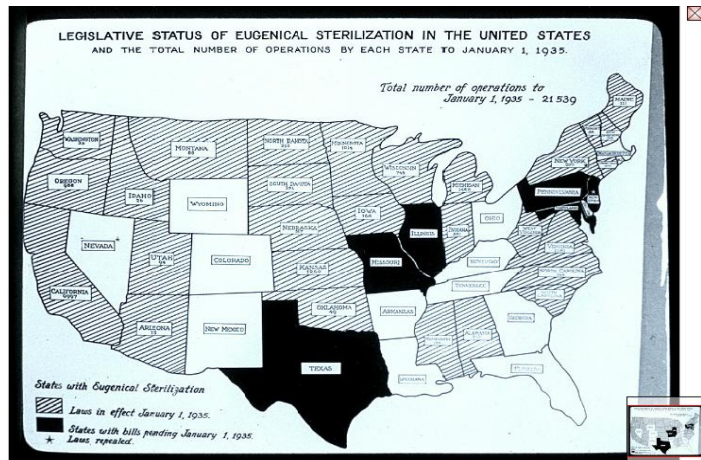


Figure 2: States with Eugenic Sterilization as January 1, 1935 and those with pending laws.

measures were not limited to the American South, other states like New York, California and Oregon all have eugenic pasts. In New York, eugenic programs and policies were developed with the financial support of successful businessmen and women and were promoted with the aid of private institutions such as Cold Spring Harbor. In California with funding from citrus millionaire Ezra Gosney and real estate magnate and banker Charles M. Goethe, the Human Betterment Foundation (HBF) was established.²⁸ James Hanes was also a major benefactor of HBF and their eugenic research programs and goals.²⁹ HBF and other private organizations conducted research into the genetic causes of social problems and the passage of marriage and sterilization laws as well as the identification of and forcible institutionalization of “hereditary defectives” in America can be attributed largely to their research and findings.³⁰

Modern Medical Ethics and American Eugenics

Modern medical ethics finds its roots as far back as the Ancient Greeks and it is important to understand their origins when considering the consequences of America’s eugenic past. The concept of ethics derives from the Greek *ethikos* meaning “theory of living” and ethics can be defined in moral philosophy as: “the study of conduct with respect to whether an action is right or wrong, and to the goodness or badness of the motives and ends of the action.”³¹ Hippocratic

²⁷ *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U. S. 200 (1927).

²⁸ Burke and Castaneda, 9-10.

²⁹ Kessle and Hopper.

³⁰ Burke and Castaneda, 9.

³¹ Francisco Lopez-Munoz, Cecilio Alamo, Michael Dudley, Gabriel Rubio, Pilar Garcia-Garcia, Juan D. Molina, and Ahmed Okasha. “Psychiatry and Political-Institutional Abuse from the Historical Perspective: The Ethical Lessons of the Nuremberg Trial on Their 60th Anniversary.” *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry* 31 (2007): 791-806. www.elsevier.com/locate/pnpbp (accessed November 1, 2011); 792; Bloch et al., 199; 2.

ethics also played a major role in the reformulation of American medical ethics in the wake of World War II with the establishment of guidelines governing medical research and practice like the Nuremberg Code. The moral foundation of Hippocratic ethics is that “the physician will use treatment to help the sick according to his ability and judgment, but never with the view to injury or wrongdoing.”³² It is generally accepted, although it remains specifically unconfirmed, that the Hippocratic Oath, was drawn up by the disciples of Hippocrates circa 400 B.C.³³ In book one on the subject of epidemical medicine entitled *Epidemics*, it is stated that:

Physicians must take a habit of two things—to help or at least to do no harm. The art of medicine has three factors, the disease, the patient and the physician. The physician is the servant of the Art. The patient must cooperate with the physician in combating the disease.³⁴

While American eugenicists may have truly believed that their programs were helping society to avoid further degeneration based on supposed “scientific fact,” the “diseases” of society that they believed they were combating have no actual scientific basis.

The requirement of informed consent was widely implemented with the understanding that this stipulation be seen as an ethical necessity in research and treatment worldwide.³⁵ The medical communities in developed nations like the United States faced the challenge of incorporating social justice, fairness, equality, and solidarity into both research and clinical practice, a goal that was very clearly ignored in American eugenic practices, policies, and aims.³⁶ The maxim of Hippocratic ethics states that the physician “will keep the sick from harm and injustice,” and imposes a respect for patient confidentiality, the prohibition of sexual abuse perpetrated on patients, and, most importantly in the case of eugenics, the acceptance to do no medical act that exceeds one’s knowledge or experience.³⁷ Clearly this fundamental premise of Hippocratic Ethics was ignored by American eugenics and in states like North Carolina, with their legal authority over reproductive rights. While the American government publicly decried the atrocities committed by the Nazis in their campaign of racial hygiene, American state institutions continued eugenic practices long after the conclusion of the Holocaust.

In 1948, Holocaust survivor and scientist Ludwik Fleck assembled a paper discussing the use of humans in medical experimentation, entitled “W sprawie doświadczeń lekarskich na ludziach” (“On the use of humans in medical experiments”) in *Polski Tygodnik Lekarski* (*The*

³² Hippocratic Corpus: Oath and Epidemics 1. Trans. WHS Jones, The Loeb Classical Library. Vols 1, 2. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923.

³³ Lopez-Munoz, Alamo, Dudley, Rubio, Garcia-Garcia, Molina, Okasha, 792.

³⁴ Hippocratic Corpus: Oath and Epidemics 1; Shuster, Evelyne. “The Nuremberg Code: Hippocratic Ethics and Human Rights.” *The Lancet* 351 (1998): 974-977; 974.

³⁵ Evelyne Shuster. “The Nuremberg Code: Hippocratic Ethics and Human Rights.” *The Lancet* 351 (1998): 974-977; 976-977.

³⁶ Shuster, 977.

³⁷ Lopez-Munoz, Alamo, Dudley, Rubio, Garcia-Garcia, Molina, Okasha, 792.

Polish Weekly Medical Journal). Though Fleck never claimed to be neither a philosopher nor a sociologist, he had a deep influence on the work of prominent American historian and scientific philosopher Thomas Samuel Kuhn. Thus today Fleck is viewed as a pioneer of the sociological approach to science and his influence is felt most strongly in the philosophical and sociological communities of medicine. Furthermore, Fleck is acknowledged as having introduced the demand for, and later requirement of, informed consent in medical research and clinical practice.³⁸

In the aforementioned article, Fleck argues that medicine, having its basis in the empirical sciences, demands, for its own progress as well as the teaching of students, medical experimentation on human beings in order to glean an understanding of the human body and its relationship and interactions with disease, etcetera. Fleck continues by asserting that any type of new operation, procedure, or legal action resulting in medical treatment realistically counts as medical experimentation and thus, all patients subjected to treatment are required to have provided informed consent.³⁹

Fleck's propositions assert that any type of medical experiment or treatment would be considered renounceable if: (a) the subject has not been informed about the risks or aims of the procedure / experiment; (b) they had been undertaken without consent (or proxy consent in the case of an unconscious or mentally affected patient); (c) the experiments are scientifically nonsensical; and (d) the procedures or experiments are performed by non-professionals or without the greatest care to reduce risks or complications.⁴⁰ Thus, the legality of American eugenic policies like involuntary sterilization violates a, b, and c of Fleck's propositions and flies in the face of subsequent attempts at medical ethical accountability in American society.

Execution of Eugenic Programs in American Society

While eugenics had emerged popularly in the 1920's, its prominence and practices in America extended well into the late 1960's and early 1970's.⁴¹ Initially sterilizations were largely performed in state-run health service facilities that restricted access to whites because of segregation laws in place and thus white "degenerate" individuals bore the initial brunt of eugenic sterilization.⁴² When access to state-run health clinics and services began to change in the wake of the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* – legislation that mandated educational desegregation and prompted later desegregation of other public facilities like health clinics. The sterilizations of African-Americans and those classified as "black," essentially anyone non-white, increased steadily after 1954 and surpassed the number of sterilizations performed on

³⁸Eva Hedfors. "Medical Ethics in the Wake of the Holocaust: Departing from a Postwar Paper by Ludwik Fleck." *Study of History, Biology, and Biomedical Science* 38 (2007): 642-655. www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc (accessed November 1, 2011); 642-43.

³⁹ Hedfors, 643.

⁴⁰ Hedfors 645.

⁴¹ Kessel and Hopper.

⁴² Gonzales, 59.

white Americans within just four years.⁴³ These state enacted measures allowed for the forcible extermination of entire Native American tribes through “bureaucratic reclassification” of these tribes as “Negro” in the American Southeast.⁴⁴ In the 1970’s, documented sterilizations of Native American Indians by the Indian Health Service (IHS), a federal agency targeting American Indians, recorded widespread, mass sterilization abuse due in large part to coercion and improper consent forms. In the year 1975 alone, IHS sterilized, forcibly or otherwise, 25,000 Native American Indian women.⁴⁵

Another example is that of North Carolina, where involuntary sterilizations were performed from 1929 through 1974. While North Carolina’s eugenic sterilization program was initially implemented in order to control welfare spending on impoverished and “degenerate” white men and women, over time the focus of their program shifted to target more women than men, specifically African-American women. From 1929 through 1974, North Carolina executed 7,600 involuntary sterilizations and of that 7,600, one third of the procedures were done on girls under the age of eighteen, 85% of all sterilized were women, and 40% of those sterilized were non-white.⁴⁶

Some of these sterilizations were done on girls as young as nine years old, who had no idea what was being done to them. One of these young women, Elaine Riddick, was forcibly sterilized by the state of North Carolina after she was raped by a neighbor and gave birth to a child at age thirteen. Riddick was never told by doctors that the state had ordered her Fallopian tubes to be cut and tied, rendering her effectively sterilized. Her records reveal that a five-person state eugenics board had deemed Riddick “feeble-minded,” “promiscuous,” and that “she [did] not get along well with others,” and recommended that she be sterilized. It is also important to note that in Riddick’s case, her perpetrator was never prosecuted for child rape, nor was he even charged with a crime. It wasn’t until Riddick was nineteen, married, and trying to get pregnant that a New York doctor informed her that she had been sterilized by the state doctors and the eugenics panel on the basis of medical racism bolstered by eugenic “scientific fact.”⁴⁷

Even though North Carolina’s Eugenics Board was disbanded in 1977, the law allowing for involuntary sterilization was not repealed until 2003. Despite not being widely utilized or enacted after the mid to late 1970’s, the fact of the matter is that law that both promoted and allowed for the involuntary sterilization of thousands remained in effect into the twenty-first century. The state of North Carolina issued an official apology to victims of involuntary sterilization in 2002 and three task forces have subsequently been assembled to determine the real number of victims and compensate the estimated 2,000 victims who are still alive. Governor Beverly Perdue stated in an interview given to the National Broadcast Corporation (NBC) she was horrified to think that “their doctor told them this was birth control and they were [subsequently] sterilized” by medical professionals when they didn’t have the capacity, nor the

⁴³ Gonzales, 59.

⁴⁴ Burke and Castaneda, 9.

⁴⁵ Gonzales, 59.

⁴⁶ Kessel and Hopper.

⁴⁷ Kessel and Hopper.

opportunity to make these decisions was a startling and disturbing lack of informed consent. Despite the task forces assembled, only 48 of the estimated 2,000 North Carolina still living involuntary sterilization victims have been matched to their records and compensation of victims remains difficult to establish.⁴⁸

Historical and Collective Memory of Eugenics

In their paper “The Public and Private History of Eugenics: An Introduction,” historians Chloe S. Burke and Christopher J. Castaneda, address the legacy of American eugenics programs, specifically in the state of California. Burke and Castaneda explore the ways in which public history is suited to shape the American collective memory of eugenics through the exploration of the California State University of Sacramento’s symposium, *From Eugenics to Designer Babies: Engineering the California Dream*. Through scholarly presentations and two original exhibits, the symposium offered a variety of methods for addressing the state of California’s eugenic past and made evident the lack of awareness surrounding eugenics.⁴⁹

Burke and Castaneda assert the necessity of introducing an active historical memory of eugenics, arguing that public historians are particularly well suited to “give voice” to the victims of human betterment policies that have long suffered due to shame, circumstance, and the public historical amnesia surrounding eugenics. In their article, Burke and Castaneda have assembled a breadth of articles discussing eugenic goals and philosophies, in order to highlight the challenges faced by public historians in developing the appropriate media to address America’s public and private history of eugenic programs. Over the past decade, the history and legacy of eugenic involuntary sterilization has been subject to greater public scrutiny due to recent press coverage of the legal, academic, and political efforts that have been made to document the history of eugenics in America. The media has paid particular attention to the coercive and forcible sterilization aspects of eugenic policies and programs which has re-introduced eugenics into wide public discourse. In 2002 and 2003, the governors of Virginia, Oregon, North Carolina, South Carolina and California issued public apologies for the state use of sterilization in the name of eugenic policy. Several of these aforementioned states have attempted to make reparations for their eugenic actions, with North Carolina proposing financial reparations and counseling for victims and Oregon designating December 10th Human Rights Day.⁵⁰

In the article “Exhibiting Eugenics: Response and Resistance to a Hidden History,” authors Ralph Brave and Kathryn Sylva elaborate on the work of Burke and Castaneda by detailing the subsequent exhibit at the University of California, Sacramento’s exhibit *Human Plants, Human Harvest: the Hidden History of California Eugenics*, writing that: “the disappearance of this history for half a century, and the consequent absence of a ‘collective memory,’ were the

⁴⁸ Kessel and Hopper.

⁴⁹ Burke and Castaneda, 5-6.

⁵⁰ Burke and Castaneda, 6-11.

primary factors for the [University of California, Sacramento] exhibit’s structure and content.”⁵¹ The exhibition showcased high-quality reproductions of historical photographs, documents, and records with the intent of bringing public attention to California’s hidden eugenic past. Brave and Sylva’s article does not attempt to reproduce the exhibit in writing but instead offers further elaboration behind the construct of their proposed collective memory of eugenics.

Brave and Sylva utilize visitors reactions to the exhibit to make their point about the hidden nature of America’s eugenic past, reiterating the “never knew” response. They write:

The general public’s “never knowing” of California’s and America’s eugenics history defined the central dilemma in constructing the exhibit: there could be no assumption that a visitor to the exhibit knew anything about this history, or even had any familiarity with the word ‘eugenics.’ This absence of a shared common background or ‘collective memory’ of the history of eugenics can be grasped through the fact that, unlike other significant historical movements and eras, no image or set of images readily register with the public as representative, or ‘iconic,’ of this history.⁵²

Thus, in order to reassert public consciousness regarding America’s eugenic past, the exhibition utilized the very same imagery of eugenics that was used to propel American eugenics into public discourse during its inception. Phenotypic images, family trees and maps of their supposed hereditary sources, charts, and eugenic propaganda were assembled from their resting place in various archival depositories and brought together to create a visual image of the American eugenics movement (see figures 3 & 4).⁵³

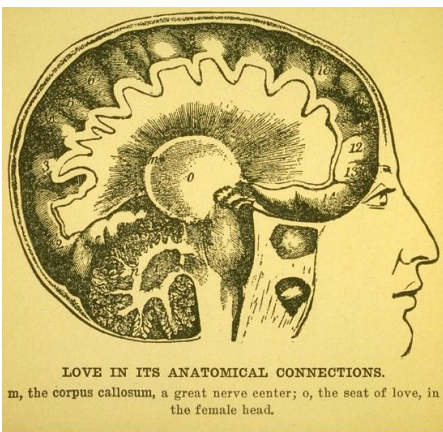


Figure 3: “Love in its anatomical connections.”

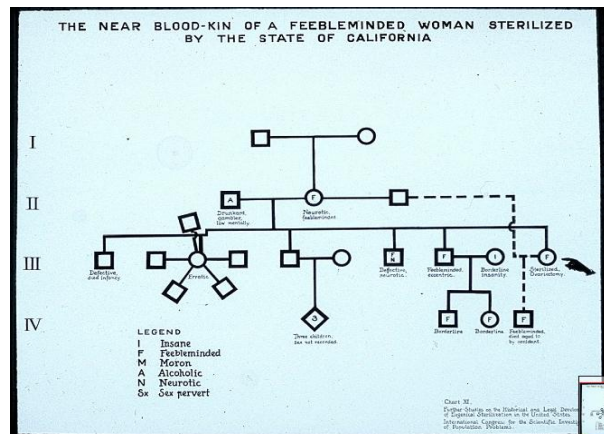


Figure 4: “The near blood kin of a feeble-minded woman sterilized by the state of California.”

⁵¹ Brave and Sylva, 33-34.

⁵² Brave and Sylva, 35

⁵³ Brave and Sylva, 35-36

University of Virginia historian, Professor Paul Lombardo called for collective memory and a public consciousness pertaining to American eugenics in a lecture entitled, “Eugenics: Lessons from a History Hiding in Plain Sight.” Lombardo pointed out that eugenics were still covertly present in American society with the names of prominent California eugenicists memorialized in state parks, schools, and other institutions with no mention made to their eugenic pasts. Therefore, despite the attempts made to remove eugenics from public life, the legacy of eugenics wasn’t just hidden in documents in the state’s archives, but still overtly present in daily life. Brave and Sylva contend that it was Lombardo’s public outcry that led to apology issued by the state of California in 2003. Ultimately, their own desire to ensure that this apology did not allow the history of eugenics to be swept back into obscurity led Brave and Sylva, among other historians and scientists, to assemble the exhibit.⁵⁴

Modern Genetic Work and the Potential Revival of Eugenics

The underlying resistance and unease that surrounds the public history of eugenics is precisely the same source of heightened contemporary interest in that history; the recent advances in molecular biology indicate a possible rehabilitation of eugenics. With the emergence of scientific endeavors like stem cell research, cloning, and genetic modification, or “designer babies,” the idea of a revived eugenics at the very least deems it necessary to bring the history of American eugenics into public discourse again for deliberation in order to protect against the blatant misuse of this history and out of respect for the victims of coercive and forcible sterilization. Serious consideration for the future of possible eugenic and biological science and research require that the history of eugenics be construed and taught in accurate, contextualized terms that take into consideration the social conditions that allowed “race biology” and legally implemented and executed coercive and forcible practices to occur.⁵⁵

Maintaining a public consciousness or ‘collective memory’ of eugenics is crucial in understanding the consequences of modern genetic research as well as the moral lessons that can be gleaned from America’s past eugenic policies and programs. Both recent and past histories of American eugenics have paid little to no attention to the fact that the movement had quantitative goals for segregation or sterilization of the “unfit.” Estimates on their quantitative goals range from ten to fifteen million Americans. While nothing close to this goal was ever achieved, in the state of California alone, 20,108 people were eugenically sterilized between 1909 and 1964, approximately one-third of those eugenically sterilized in the United States.⁵⁶

While the public prominence of eugenic programs in America certainly does indicate several unsavory aspects of past American society through the transformation of eugenic programs from that of public health initiatives to that of scientific racism, they are lessons that cannot be forgotten, especially in light of the renewed interest in genetic alteration. If nothing else,

⁵⁴ Brave and Sylva, 36.

⁵⁵ Brave and Sylva, 43-44.

⁵⁶ Brave and Sylva, 41-42.

America's eugenic past should serve as a warning to future generations of scientists and public health officials to exercise caution in the quest for eventual human genetic perfection as well as to indicate the importance of education and equal opportunity. Furthermore, in order for society to avoid the very degeneration that many eugenicists ultimately feared, the historiography of the eugenics movement must be preserved and taught so that true human betterment can actually occur.

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Appendix of Figures

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4: DOLAN DNA LEARNING CENTER, COLD SPRING HARBOR LABORATORY. "EugenicsArchive.Org: Image Archive on American Eugenics Movement." Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement. <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list3.pl> (accessed November 8, 2011).