

The American Eugenics Movement: A Study of the Dispersal and Application of Racial Ideologies

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I. Introduction

As unthinkable as it may seem today, people from all walks of life supported the eugenics movement in the United States in the late 19th and 20th centuries. It represented a public policy that promised to address the social mores of the time, and as such, it was taught in schools, exhibited at the World's Fair, propagated by scientific journals and conferences, and condoned by prominent social figures, including Theodore Roosevelt, Alexander Graham Bell, and John D. Rockefeller Jr. Yet many American schoolchildren today either have not heard the term or else grow up believing that eugenics was exclusively a piece of National Socialist ideology in Germany in the 1930s-1940s. This paper seeks to examine the largely unrecognized personal and ideological connections between American eugenics, particularly mass sterilization movements, and extremist policies such as racial and ethnic extermination in Germany under the Third Reich.

Much of the literature supports the fact that through research, funding, and laws in the early 20th century, many experts in the United States encouraged the scientific improvement of the human race. I will argue that millions were murdered in Europe under the Nazi regime because they found themselves labeled lesser forms of life, a gruesome classification that began in the laboratories of American institutions and was thereafter verified by research grants and financed by special efforts in the United States. I will explore the so-called "Nazi Connection" as an illustration of the parallels between the two movements in the United States and in Germany, while also recognizing the questions left unanswered.

I consider why eugenics was so popular in the early 20th century and find that despite evident similarities, eugenics was popular in the United States and in Germany for different reasons. In the United States, eugenics proposed a scientifically-backed form of social activism that promised to fix

national problems (Schoenl & Peck, 2010). Under the Third Reich in Germany, race was meant to supplant class as the primary organizing principle in society. To this end, social policies were designed to remodel society in accordance with racial criteria (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991).

I aim to demonstrate that eugenics in the United States was more than a harmless science blown out of proportion. The American eugenics movement was political from its inception and necessarily a product of racialist thinking, particularly white supremacy (Quigley, 1995). Both in the United States and in Germany, eugenics became an agent of social control. It was an instrument designed to be used by an economic, social, and racial elite. But in Germany, the emphasis on race became a platform for extreme anti-Semitism and subsequent systematic killing—a feature that was to some degree present in American discourse, but absent from policy. This difference can be explained in part by the social and political environments of the two nations. However, I will conclude that the racialized nature of American eugenics facilitated the jump to extremist racial policies in Nazi Germany.

II. The American Eugenics Movement

According to Randall Hansen and Desmond King (2013), there are four popular frames of reference through which one can analyze American eugenics. The first compares the movement to a religion, describing eugenics as a comprehensive ideological framework that both accounted for human differences and proposed social and economic policies as solutions. In this view, the movement is similar to a religion because it both offers an explanation for why things are the way they are and also provides a concrete path to change the status quo. Another framework sees eugenics as an offshoot of National Socialism based on the observation that German and American eugenicists figured in the same academic associations, attended

the same conferences, and exchanged congratulatory correspondence on policy victories throughout the early 20th century. The third framework understands eugenics as anti-feminism, referring to the way in which “feeble-mindedness”—a trait that would qualify someone to be sterilized—became associated with women rejecting their purely domestic role and, more drastically, with the “illicit sexual behavior of women adrift” (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 13). The final frame of reference views eugenics as a racist policy designed to purge a nation (and to some extent the world) of those who did not fit the label of upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Hansen & King, 2013). While I contend that all four frames of reference are valid and valuable for gaining a thorough understanding of American eugenics, I propose that the first three frames can be understood as subsets of the racial nature of the movement.

In the early 20th century, eugenics was defined as “A doctrine that states that the fostering of good genes and the elimination of bad ones will serve the cause of national racial health by permitting better breeding of a nation’s stock of people” (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 4). American eugenicists thought it was possible to distinguish between inferior and superior traits in a society’s people and combined this belief with a political agenda geared towards race improvement. The resulting eugenic discrimination against “inferior” people was an expression of racism. While traditional ethnic racism applied hierarchical standards to human racial groups based on morphological and anthropological differences, eugenic racism hinged on the potential of races for procreation, preservation, and development. In other words, rather than creating a fixed system to differentiate people based on qualitative differences, eugenicists focused on eliminating “negative” traits across all kinds of different people (Kühl, 1994, p. 70). The movement can be broken up into positive eugenics, which promoted eugenic education, tax preferences, and support for society’s “fit,” and negative eugenics, which included segregation, sterilization, restrictive marriage laws, anti-miscegenation statutes, and restrictive immigration policies (Quigley, 1995).

Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, paved the way for racial discourse in eugenics. Darwin’s cousin, Sir Francis Galton,

coined the term eugenics in 1863, twisting Darwin’s evolutionary theories to prescribe the ways in which humans could potentially take control of their own evolutionary processes (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). Combined with Gregor Mendel’s recently discovered principles of heredity, this groundwork allowed eugenicists to advance that the same concepts that determine plant color, for instance, could be applied to social and intellectual characteristics in people. Galton stressed the inheritability of human traits and effectively downplayed the importance of environment: “Social classes...are ordained by nature; that it is...not the slums which make slum people, but slum people who make the slums” (as cited in Quigley, 1995). By this token, Galton believed that if we were to somehow improve upon or otherwise “deal” with the people that lived in slums, automatically the slums themselves would cease to exist.

By ignoring environmental factors, which more often than not presented as social constraints, eugenicists assumed that people who were unsuccessful, monetarily or otherwise, were not able to succeed by some fault of their own. And certainly, in the early 20th century, such a classification applied disproportionately to minority races. Galton and likeminded eugenicists believed that the successful race needed to be protected from the less successful, and in this way, humanity would improve overall: “We greatly want...to express the science of improving the stock...to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had” (as cited in Quigley, 1995).

Alongside scientists, respected scholars subscribed to racial theories. In *Blood of a Nation*, published in 1902, Stanford University President David Jordan wrote that qualities such as talent and poverty were passed through the blood, and on this basis argued that minority races were tainting the human blood line (Black, 2003). Others were more concerned with the mixing of the races. Harvard University Professor Louis Agassiz claimed that “The production of half-breeds is as much a sin against nature, as incest in a civilized community is a sin against purity of character” (as cited in Quigley, 1995). Agassiz was a proponent of the theory of polygenism, under which non-white races such as

“Blacks” and “Orientals” were construed as a genus of the human line, rather than as members of the human species. This was important because the scientific definition of a species centers on the ability to mate and produce offspring with its members. But in the wake of the aforementioned propaganda, members of the human species became defined by their ability to produce successful offspring, which eugenicists argued was impossible for descendants of mixed or non-white races (Quigley, 1995).

By far the most radical policy of the American movement was coerced sterilization. The procedure first took hold in mental institutions and correctional facilities. In the early 1890s, F. Hoyt Pilcher, superintendent of the Asylum for Idiotic and Imbecile Youth in Kansas, sought to stop his patients from masturbating, which at the time was thought to be associated with blindness, insanity, early death, and a cursed afterlife. In a drastic move, Pilcher castrated 44 boys and 14 girls, and later extended the procedure to homosexuals, “over-sexual” women and the mentally ill (Hansen & King, 2013, pp. 73-74). There is no evidence to suggest that this treatment had any intended results. It is more likely that it never caught on because the operation was too brutal and lengthy. Eugenicists would look for and quickly find other, simpler alternatives.

In 1899, Albert John Ochsner, a surgeon at St. Mary’s Hospital in Chicago performed vasectomies on patients with various psychological conditions, and thereafter published a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* recommending vasectomies to address social problems: “It has been demonstrated beyond a doubt that a very large proportion of all criminals, degenerates, and perverts come from parents similarly affected....[I]f it were possible to eliminate all habitual criminals from the possibility of having children, there would soon be a very marked decrease in this class” (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 74). Harry S. Sharp, an administrator at Indiana State Reformatory, implemented Ochsner’s procedure. Sharp sterilized 223 inmates and presented his findings at the Mississippi Valley Medical Association meeting in 1901. He also published his results in the *New York Medical Journal* in 1902 and addressed an annual meeting of the National Prison Association in 1908, describing the applicability of his procedure to the justice system

(Hansen & King, 2013). Sterilization was welcomed by eugenicists in the criminal justice system and in the medical community as a simple and relatively painless approach for controlling select populations.

The majority of official sterilizations during these years occurred within mental health institutions. These centers functioned within a strict hierarchy, bestowing the superintendent, who was almost always male at this time, with the unchecked power to regulate staff, spending allocations, medical treatments, and decisions about who would be sterilized (Hansen & King, 2013). This setup was particularly dangerous because these superintendents were often also state officials. They drafted sterilization bills and lobbied for state legislators, who then guided bills friendly to the eugenic cause through the law-making process. Also, since the targets of coerced sterilization were overwhelmingly poor, powerless, and denied voting rights, there was little political resistance to approval of the bills (Hansen & King, 2013). Up until this point, coerced sterilization was inseparable from the mass institutionalization of the mentally ill. But legalization opened the possibility to a much greater population of “unfit” people in society.

Since the United States operates as a decentralized system of government, individual states enjoy wide policy-making autonomy. As a result, lawmakers are more susceptible to interest group pressure (Hansen and King, 2013). Ideas are most powerful when they fall in line with social trends; accordingly, eugenic ideas defined a particular social problem as “feeble-mindedness” and promised a solution via sterilization. On the basis of his medical results, Harry S. Sharp convinced legislators in the Indiana state government to write, and the governor to approve, Indiana’s first sterilization law in 1907 (Hansen and King, 2013). Indiana was the first state to enact such a law, and 28 more would follow suit. Sterilization laws would culminate in the coerced sterilization of over 60,000 people in the United States—a figure that consisted almost entirely of people who could be categorized as non-white, lower class, mentally ill, and criminals (Black, 2003).

The greatest legal victory for coerced sterilization was the Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. The case centered around Carrie Buck, a 17-year-old from Charlottesville, Virginia, who was selected as the first person to be sterilized in

the state under Virginia's 1924 Eugenic Sterilization Act. Carrie's mother, Emma, was a resident at a local asylum, and Carrie's daughter, Vivian, was said to be "not quite a normal baby" at a mere 9 months (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 111). Officials at the asylum argued that Carrie inherited her mother's traits of feeble-mindedness and sexual promiscuity. In his famous opinion, Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: "It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind....[T]hree generations of imbeciles are enough" (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 106). The strength of this decision for eugenics was that Holmes had inadvertently extended the practice beyond the mentally ill. He based his opinion on the premise that sterilization did not violate the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. Thereafter, sterilization could legally stretch beyond mental institutions.

Politicians, various wealthy individuals, and corporations also swayed public opinion in favor of eugenics and sterilization. The Carnegie Foundation supported a 1911 report in which 18 solutions were proposed as the "Best Means for Cutting off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the Human Population." The 8th point in this list was euthanasia for the "unfit," which the report suggested could be implemented through public, locally operated gas chambers. The Harriman railroad fortune paid local charities like the New York Bureau of Industries and Immigration to seek out Jewish, Italian, and other immigrants and deport, confine, or sterilize them. Additionally, California—the state that singlehandedly sterilized half of all the people in the U.S. who underwent the procedure before WWII—republished Nazi propaganda and arranged for Nazi scientific exhibits to support American eugenics in the late 1930s (Black, 2003).

In the realm of "positive" eugenics, family studies became politically important. They provided a scientific basis for claiming that society was being overrun by the menace of the "feeble-minded" and thus heading down a path of "white racial suicide" (as cited in Quigley, 1995). These studies traced the lineages of ancestors of the mentally ill to show that a single person could lead to generations of

poverty-stricken and degenerate offspring (Quigley, 1995). Published in newspapers and distributed in pamphlets nationwide, these studies assured average Americans that the weakening of the healthy white race was an imminent concern.

It was possible to implement sterilization and similar policies in part because they made use of privately supported research and lobbying and were framed around 20th century concerns, including public health, demographic decline, and social engineering. Additionally, racist thinking and white supremacy were not challenged because academics were primarily white at this time, allowing upper-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants to continue to propagate social and political domination. The movement was also not monolithic in that the ideas were flexible enough to be supported by both conservatives and progressives (Quigley, 1995). The backbone of the ideology was consistently national salvation and scientific ideas about innate inequalities. In this light, it was highly beneficial for the movement to hinge on existing immigration concerns.

Charles M. Goethe, a land developer, entrepreneur, and conservationist, founded the Eugenics Society of Northern California and played an active role in campaigning against Mexican immigrants in the 1920s, to which end he established the Immigration Study Commission to determine the alleged threat they posed to American people. As a conservationist, he attempted to compare the disappearance of oak and sequoia trees (which he held were superior) to the "trend toward extinction of the talented in the American population mass"—referring to Nordic and pioneer Americans (Shoenl & Peck, 2010, p. 75). In 1924, Goethe proposed legislation called the Restrictive Immigration Bill, which succeeded in establishing entry quotas for Jews, Slavs, and Southern Europeans—the exact people who later would try to seek refuge in the U.S. from Germany during WWII. Goethe also travelled across Europe in 1925, and upon his return, used mass media to circulate the theory that WWI had resulted in the slaughter of the best European stock (Shoenl & Peck, 2010).

The first anti-immigrant group was founded in Boston in 1894 by Harvard University-educated lawyers and academics, who wrote, "The question

[of immigration] is a race question, pure and simple...It is fundamentally a question as to what kind of babies shall be born; it is a question as to what races shall dominate in this country” (as cited in Quigley, 1995). One strand of nativism purported that immigrants were political and social radicals espousing communist and anarchist ideas, while other eugenicists claimed that immigrants previously thought of as white were actually members of many different races. In this way, by combining the decreased birthrates of “better” races with immigration waves and rising birthrates of the “weak,” the concept of race suicide took hold in the first decade of the 20th century. On this basis, even though the United States had already enacted the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, eugenicists in 1927 continued to urge Congress and the President to extend “the quota system to all countries of North and South America...in which the population is not predominately of the white race” (as cited in Quigley, 1995). Eugenicists had thus succeeded in turning ethnic concerns into racial propaganda (Quigley, 1995). All too soon, this racialized discourse would make its way to Germany and morph into unprecedented extremism.

III. German Eugenics and the American Connection

In Germany, the Age of Romanticism and social Darwinism facilitated the transfer of scientific ideas as applied to plants and animals in the 18th century to human beings. Romantics believed that external qualities of mankind should be seen as a reflection of inner nature. Early eugenicists interpreted this to mean that the whole physical structure of a person indicated his race. A fundamental aspect of German theory was the perspective on life as an eternal struggle for survival and domination among people—specifically races. The Nordic race was believed to be the best suited for survival, with its chief representative being the German people (Holborn, 1964).

The first complete racial theory was presented by the French diplomat Arthur de Gobineau in an 1853 essay, in which he argued that races were the functional agents of history. According to Gobineau, the purity of a race indicated survival, while intermingling resulted in rapid decline in culture

and national strength. He noted that the purest contemporary race was the Aryan race and that racial mixing must be prevented at all costs (Mosse, 1966). Gobineau’s writings were adopted by the Pan-German group in the early 20th century, which was largely made up of teachers in a position to distribute his ideas. German eugenicists in the 20th century contributed to Gobineau’s work with the theory that Nordic or Aryan ideals of beauty were proof of superior racial qualities, working off Gobineau’s presumption that outer qualities like human body proportions and facial composition were marks of inner character (Mosse, 1966). The zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) turned Darwin’s teachings and early racial theories into a humanist philosophy, claiming that “The indogermanic race is superior to the hamosemetic peoples. By virtue of their more highly developed brains, they would triumph over all other races, and in the struggle of existence, cast the net of their dominion over the entire world” (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991, p. 30).

Germany would veer off from the American movement when racial-hygienic and social-Darwinist ideas were fused with anti-Semitism. The early jump can be credited to Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), who claimed that the intellectual abilities and superiority of the Germanic peoples were being threatened by the Jews. Chamberlain was an American scholar, but Germany was in a much better position to latch onto his ideas. Jews had achieved legal equality in Germany relatively late, in the period 1869-1871, which coincided with rapid industrialization and modernization. Therefore, Jews became the scapegoats for the economic crisis in the early 1870s, and even more so after the loss of WWI (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). The rise of the National Socialist Party would ingrain these academic and scientific ideas into German politics and social policy. The National Socialist Party, a branch of fascism, attempted to escape from bourgeois materialism and find new meaning and belonging. In Germany, this flight from reality was popularized by the Nazi Party, who derided existing social and economic systems in favor of modern progression and a nationwide glorification of ideology. Whereas other fascist movements, including those occurring in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy, were primarily

anti-capitalist, the German movement was unique in that anti-Semitism was a primary consideration of a subsequent program of action (Mosse, 1966).

Adolf Hitler's autobiography and manual *Mein Kampf* became one of the most important sources for Nazi ideology. He stressed activist racialism and totalitarian authoritarianism alongside distinct political principles and specific policies. Hitler's breed of anti-Semitism expressed his personal belief that Jews were subhuman, but he also extended this to say that there were other "low" human races like "Slavs" and "Blacks." The loss of WWI confirmed Hitler's belief that his ideology contained the right principles for rebuilding German supremacy. To this end, he sought to destroy liberalism, socialism, and communism in Germany in favor of a common ideology immune to foreign propaganda and with a determination for race superiority (Holborn, 1964). Hitler's racism, however, was hardly unique. He relied on familiar concepts, such as assigning value to different races in his ideological framework, claiming that Aryans were the most valuable race and that interbreeding would cause extinction. It was not an unthinkable step to then support policies to protect the purity and health of the Aryans from the absolute enemy of the race—the Jews (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991).

Although anti-Semitism had been around in Germany for over 50 years, Hitler turned it into a political tactic to personify the "enemy" in the fight for Germany's lost glory. He demanded the eradication of a race that had already been set up as incompatible with Aryans and as exhibiting anthropological differences (Mosse, 1966). The Nazi Party was able to formalize and objectify their ideology in a way that moved masses. Stringent values of discipline and organization allowed the totalitarian leader to completely control the content of the "faith" and channel a political framework toward very definite goals (Mosse, 1966, p. 317). The Party would work towards these goals by latching onto existing American policy.

As early as 1925, the National Socialist Party publicly declared itself in favor of sterilization. Even so, Germany was a latecomer to coerced sterilization. A 1925 meeting of the German Psychiatric Association quoted American policy and called for legislation on sterilizing the mentally

ill (Hansen & King, 2013). German policy makers praised American immigration laws for the ways in which they combined eugenic and ethnic selection. Otto Wagner, head of the Nazi Party's Economic Policy Office (1931-1933), cited Hitler as saying, "I have studied with great interest the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock" (Kühl, 1994, pp. 37-39). In turn, Charles Goethe, president of the Eugenics Research Association in California, wrote:

"The Reich today has her social inadequacies more thoroughly listed than any other nation... [T]o a land whose population approaches the saturation point, elimination by sterilization of those unfit means room for higher power. It is well known...that Germany's leaders in the sterilization movement depended largely upon the material collected by the California data foundation upon which to rear their present remarkable structure" (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 154).

Backed by the German People's Freedom Party, the Nazis pressed for legal sterilization of "hereditarily burdened criminals." Soon after in 1929, the Federation of National Socialist Doctors declared its support of sterilization of "inferiors" (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 143). The National Socialists gave power to German eugenicists by creating an Expert Committee on Questions of Population and Racial Policy in 1933, made up of doctors, professors, and ministry representatives active in the field of eugenics. The committee recommended eugenic population surveys, the training of doctors in racial hygiene, sterilization, and reimbursing large "fit" families. They published their recommendations alongside research claiming that 500,000 hereditary defectives and another 500,000 with milder illnesses currently posed a threat to German racial purity. They also added that Jews from Eastern Europe were immigrating at concerning rates, citing that 4,000 Jewish immigrants came to Berlin in 1930 alone. The committee drafted a bill, drawing heavily on language of existing laws in California and Virginia. The bill was signed by Hitler on January 1st, 1943 as the Law for Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring. To promote the law, the Nazi Party launched a far-

reaching propaganda media campaign to convince the public that the “unchecked breeding of the unfit” was a matter of “victory or death” (Hansen & King, 2013, pp. 147-149).

The National Socialists set up 205 genetic health courts and 26 appellate courts across Germany to rule on sterilization and to specify institutions where operations would take place. Since judges and doctors had close political and economic ties to the Nazi Party, it was not surprising that of the 64,500 rulings issued in 1934, 56,000 were in favor of sterilization. Overall, the courts ruled in favor of about 360,000 sterilizations, and around 5,000 people died as a result of surgical complications. Hitler used this success as a springboard for his euthanasia program. He signed an order on September 1st, 1939 ordering the gassing of mentally handicapped patients in portions of Poland annexed by Germany (as a test run), based on the (American) Carnegie Foundation’s 1911 report suggesting euthanasia. After the killing of 80,000 mentally ill people across the Reich, the program, called Aktion T4, moved to concentration camps for the systematic killing of the “racially inferior.” In fact, to gain support for the 1936 implementation of the euthanasia program, the German government created a poster with the message “We do not stand alone!” with an American flag displayed in the background (Hansen & King, 2013, p. 150-152).

IV. Discussion

The American eugenics movement created a consistent social program that combined eugenic sterilization, anti-immigration advocacy, and anti-miscegenation activism to advance social control (Quigley, 1995). Nazi policy drew heavily on American theory and enjoyed the support and funding of influential American academics and institutions throughout the 1930s. The ideology of race improvement was a prerequisite for the systematic killing of millions in Europe, and it was an idea that started in the United States. American eugenicists were able to sterilize thousands by dispelling ideas of heredity, differential fertility concerns, female licentiousness, and the economic cost of the “unfit.” Moreover, the broad power granted to mental institution superintendents and a government heavily susceptible to interest group

pressure allowed the United States to enact a number of eugenic policies in the early 20th century (Hansen & King, 2013).

The Nazi regime shook an entire social order, something that was never possible in the United States. Luckily, due to political and military priorities during WWII, as well as the short twelve-year reign of the Third Reich, these ideas failed to supersede the post-war depression and arise again. After the war, Germany ended coerced sterilization in 1945 as part of a coordinated effort to purge the medical establishment and scientific research institutions of eugenics-based practices (Hansen & King, 2013).

In the United States by the 1940s, the days of 19th and early 20th century eugenics were numbered. Pro-sterilization advocates found themselves up against scientific challenges to their hereditary arguments as well as the beginning of a new civil rights culture. However, coerced sterilization in the United States did not end at the same time as in Germany. The Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell* was never overturned, and as a result, more than 50% of the total sterilizations would be performed after the end of WWII (Hansen & King, 2013). After the war, welfare programs under New Deal legislation were extended to African Americans, which led to an uptick in sterilizations in the South. Moreover, a federal decision in 1970 to privatize federal funds for sterilization led to the sterilization of hundreds of thousands of African Americans (Hansen & King, 2013).

Eugenic ideas were (and are) malleable. It is difficult to shake the human inclination to improve society, and so it is hardly surprising that certain fields retain the principles of human engineering. One offshoot of this is present in movements concerned with population growth, welfare abuse, and criminality. While the language of race improvement is no longer used, sociologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, and others expend a great deal of effort brainstorming ways to do away with crime, greed, addiction, and other undesirable afflictions. Scientific research, in turn, explores how these traits may be linked to particular cognitive processes, presumably with the goal of developing more targeted interventions.

The other offshoot can be seen in obstetric care and genetics research. Eugenics programs relied on the logic that negative traits and behaviors were

biologically transmitted through generations. Today, pregnant women view prenatal diagnostic testing as an essential part of obstetric care, “designed to save parents from the ‘tragedy’ of having a handicapped child” (Browner & Press, 1995, p. 308). This mainstreamed procedure provides potential parents with information that can be used to abort fetuses with abnormalities. Many women feel social pressure to receive comprehensive prenatal care without a clear understanding of why they are consenting to various tests. In other cases, tests are implemented because of clinical standards, with little regard for bioethical issues (Kelly & Farrimond, 2012). For example, California has a state-mandated program for prenatal screening for defects, arguing for the interests of the state in diagnosing conditions that will require “the public to underwrite a lifetime of social services” (Browner & Press, 1995, p. 319).

Meanwhile, researchers are making strides in locating genetic markers for certain character traits. The science of genetic engineering sees DNA “as a code that can be read and rewritten” (Lemke, 2002, p. 284). Decoding the human genome has already allowed for the isolation of genes associated with diseases such as cancer or heart disease. If other genetic “risks” can be calculated, they too can theoretically be minimized. This implicates not only medical interventions, but also reproductive decisions. Sperm and egg banks, for example, list certain requirements for donors, and potential recipients additionally control for their own preferences by reviewing donor profiles. This idea of individual planning with regards to reproduction is sometimes referred to as “neoeugenics” and, as such, is a practice that applies to all people, not just criminals or the mentally ill. It is possible that with biotechnological advances, genetic testing after birth—postnatal diagnostics—will also become routine practice (Lemke, 2002, pp. 287-288). Unlike the early eugenics movement, which stressed the collective purification of the gene pool, neoeugenics advocates that we should take individual responsibility for genetic risk.

V. Conclusion

The legacy of the American eugenics movement is twofold. First, the movement played a significant role in transmitting ideas to Germany, where racial biases and racial-hygienic thinking led to mass

extermination on a scale the world had never seen before. Second, core eugenic principles were able to persist to some degree in American scientific discourse and also in cutting-edge fields of research such as genetic testing. Now, as before, eugenic ideas are laced with civic purposes: to eradicate poverty, to curb alcoholism and drug abuse, or to reduce the number of families suffering because of children with hereditary diseases. And so, the spirit of eugenics persists. We are still in the business of making normative judgements about human traits, and we continue to engage in selective population control, citing various economic and communal forces as important considerations in these decisions (Kelly & Farrimond, 2012).

Removing the term eugenics from American discourse, perhaps to separate policies enacted in the United States from the legacy of the Holocaust, helped eugenic ideas to persist far past the reign of the Third Reich. As a case in point, sterilization procedures were first implemented on the mentally ill, and today, a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome results in a 90% chance of a fetus being aborted (Browner & Press, 1995, p. 309). Yet is it unclear whether a world without people with Down Syndrome is an objectively better world. Genetic testing, prenatal care, and research into the cognitive bases of criminality undoubtedly have positive clinical applications. I do not argue that any of these programs are overt expressions of eugenic ideology, nor do they stem from any animus on the part of medical professionals and researchers. Yet there is something very similar going on. I worry that once again, we are on the brink of reducing human beings to some streamlined standard of worth and that a sincere desire to help people may morph into a new search for perfection.

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