

on the heels of Mendelism. It developed during a time of extensive immigration, with ethnic ghettos growing, extensive social change, and urban crime rising (Allen 1989), and it was centered institutionally at the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, New York. In England, where Mendelism was more controversial because of the influence of the biometrical school led by Karl Pearson (1857–1936), eugenics was less strongly bound to Mendelism, but highly influential nevertheless, centered around the Galton Society. In Germany, eugenics became widely known as Rassenhygiene.

The movement was, to some extent, a successor to Social Darwinism, which held that the wealthy classes had survived in a Malthusian “struggle for existence” and consequently had become more fit, in a Darwinian sense, than the lower classes. This seemed to imply a social policy whereby assistance to the underclasses would be counterproductive, for it would only promote the survival and proliferation of the unfit. The implication was that the government should not intervene in social issues but should let things follow their natural course—which essentially meant the continued exploitation of the lower classes.

Social Darwinism was falling out of favor by the turn of the century, as it was clear that governmental intervention was required to ensure the dignity of life of working people at the hands of the greedy industrial giants. Eugenics represented a strong pendulum swing in the opposite direction, *toward* governmental intervention—though still at the expense of the lower classes.

### Eugenics

A broad scientific movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eugenics sought to solve social problems biologically.

Eugenics was the focus of the field of human genetics until World War II (Kevles 1985). The term, coined by the British statistician Francis Galton (1822–1911) in 1883, referred specifically to the genetic improvement of the human species, a clearly noble and idealistic goal. As a result, the movement had tremendous appeal within the international scientific community and in society generally (Haller 1963; Ludmerer 1972). However, eugenics in the narrow sense, as the genetic improvement of the species, quickly became bound to *hereditarianism*, the idea that achievements, thoughts, and behaviors are ultimately the results of genetic endowment; to *elitism*, the idea that the wealthy and powerful classes were constitutionally superior to others; and to *racism*, the attribution of (real or imaginary) properties of populations to the constitution of particular individuals composing them. Together, these formed the core of the eugenics movement.

Eugenics flourished during the first two decades of the twentieth century in America,

### *The Major Works of the American Eugenics Movement*

The first major American work on the subject of eugenics was *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911), written by an influential biologist, Charles Benedict Davenport (1866–1944). In this manifesto for the rational, scientific betterment of humankind, Davenport called for people “to fall in love intelligently” (Davenport 1911: 4). More important, however, Davenport used the insights of Mendelism—that unit characteristics are stably inherited—to evaluate the social problems of America. Davenport’s insight was to unite all social problems and antisocial behaviors under a single name, “feeblemindedness.” He then argued that this was a stably inherited unit character, like wrinkled peas or green pods. And though its expression was somewhat heterogeneous, by Davenport’s concep-

tion it played a major role in human biology and evolution:

*The acts of taking and keeping loose articles, of tearing away obstructions to get at something desired, of picking valuables out of holes and pockets, of assaulting a neighbor who has something desirable or who has caused pain or who is in the way, of deserting family and other relatives, of promiscuous sexual relations—these are crimes for a twentieth-century citizen but they are the normal acts of our remote, ape-like ancestors and (excepting the last) they are so common with infants that we laugh when they do such things. In a word the traits of the feeble-minded and the criminalistic are normal traits for infants and for an earlier stage in man's evolution. (Davenport 1911:262)*

Davenport here successfully defined his own standards of behavior and morality as normal, and deviations from them as mutations, indeed as atavistic mutations. Thus social behavior was intimately bound to biological evolution, for what Davenport perceived as the moral superiority of "normal" people was being relegated specifically to their genes.

A year later, psychologist Henry H. Goddard (1866–1957) published *The Kallikak Family* (1912), reinforcing the idea of a single genetic cause for social miseries. Tracing back two sides of a single pseudonymous family, Goddard had his amateur assistant meet or listen to stories about several hundred relatives. The illegitimate son of Martin Kallikak and a "nameless feeble-minded tavern girl," around the time of the Revolutionary War, had spawned 480 descendants, of whom 143 were feeble-minded, 46 normal, and the rest unknown or doubtful. Thirty-three were sexually immoral, 24 were alcoholics, 3 were epileptics, 82 died in infancy, 3 were criminals, and 8 "kept houses of ill fame." The legitimate son of Martin Kallikak and his wife, Rachel, on the other hand, produced 496 descendants, all of whom were normal. None was feeble-minded, none was illegitimate, only 15 died in infancy, 3 were "somewhat degenerate, but not defective," 2 were alcoholics (both doctors), and only 1 was "sexually loose."

"From this comparison," Goddard argued, "the conclusion is inevitable that all the degeneracy has come as a result of the defective mentality and bad blood having been brought into the normal family of good blood, first from the nameless feeble-minded girl and later by additional contamination from other

sources" (Goddard 1912: 68–69). Goddard's genetic morality tale ended with a simple cost-benefit analysis. Had the girl (whose intelligence level they claimed to know, but whose name, paradoxically, they did not) or her illegitimate offspring been sterilized, society would not be paying so dearly as they are now. It was a call for the proverbial ounce of prevention, worth a pound of cure.

The Kallikaks were of Anglo-Saxon stock, and thus the lesson to be learned from them was hereditarian, though not racist. Equipped with a preface by the distinguished paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn (1857–1935), Madison Grant's (1865–1937) popular book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) rehashed the superiority of "Aryans" and "Nordics" that had been sporadically in vogue since Arthur de Gobineau's (1816–1882) *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1855) and Houston Stewart Chamberlain's (1855–1927) *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899). Grant, however, managed to relate this Nordicism to the eugenic ideal of improving the human species—for if Nordics were constitutionally superior to others, then their proportions should certainly be maintained as high as possible.

To Grant, the constitutional differences in mental abilities among humans were largely differences between racial groups. The hereditary makeup of the United States, therefore, was immediately imperiled not so much by the feeble-minded Anglo-Saxon Kallikaks intermingling with the good-blooded Anglo-Saxons, but by the masses of swarthy immigrants from the genetically impoverished stocks outside of northern Europe.

#### *The Height of the Eugenics Movement*

By the end of World War I, the various ideas of elitism, hereditarianism, eugenics, and racism had recombined into a movement that was attractive to both liberals and conservatives: a movement that was progressive, modern, and scientific, yet also took for granted the constitutional superiority of the ruling class, and was, therefore, not threatening to it. Eugenic goals inspired Margaret Sanger (1883–1966) to begin crusading for birth control and inspired others to crusade against the masses of immigrants to the American shores. Though obviously other social forces were at work, the passage of the Johnson Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 was aided by the testimony of geneticists as to the constitutional feeble-mindedness of the immigrants.

The biologist Frederick Adams Woods

(1873–1939) reviewed the second edition of *The Passing of the Great Race* in the journal *Science* in 1918, calling it “a work of solid merit.” Woods, Davenport, and Sewall Wright (1889–1988) were among the seven signatories of the American Eugenics Society’s 1926 report, “Research Problems in Eugenics,” which defined such problems as “mate selection and race mixture” and the “net increase of inferior stocks” (cf. Davenport 1926). Indeed, it is virtually impossible to find a textbook on heredity from the 1920s that fails to advocate the program of the eugenics movement. Though he became an outspoken critic of German racist biology in the 1930s, the first edition of a popular genetics textbook coauthored by Leslie C. Dunn (1893–1974) speaks of “a great many individuals who are always on the border line of self-supporting existence and whose contribution to society is so small that the elimination of their stock would be beneficial” (Sinnott & Dunn 1925: 406).

While the idea of sterilizing people because they are poor sounds foreign to us now, the popularity of the eugenics movement in America cannot be overstated. When Carrie Buck, a poor White woman, was sent to be involuntarily sterilized by the state of Virginia, she was misdiagnosed as constitutionally feebleminded by scientific experts, along with her mother and daughter. The majority decision of the Supreme Court upheld involuntary sterilization in the famous decision of *Buck v. Bell* (1927). Written by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935), the decision was based on the scientific, modern ideas of eugenics:

*We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. 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. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough.* (Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200, 1927)

#### *The Decline of the Movement*

Early opposition to the eugenics movement came from religious fundamentalists, and from a vocal contingent of humanists and social scientists. Franz Boas (1858–1942), who

was instrumental in developing a science of anthropology that distinguished the genetic constitution of peoples from their cultural histories, criticized the basis of the movement (Boas 1916). A.L. Kroeber (1876–1960) wrote an insightful article in the *American Anthropologist* that same year, arguing that eugenics had more in common with folk theories of heredity than with contemporary scientific knowledge. However, criticisms of the movement were generally perceived as being antiprogress, antimodern, antiscience, and even anti-evolutionary. The two major biological anthropologists in America, E.A. Hooton (1887–1954) and Aleš Hrdlička (1869–1943), were (along with the major figures in American biology) among the members of the advisory board of the American Eugenics Society in the 1920s.

By the mid-1920s, social critics such as H.L. Mencken (1880–1956), Clarence Darrow (1857–1938), and Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) were writing strong essays assailing the prejudices tied up in the ostensibly scientific movement. Thomas Hunt Morgan (1866–1945) of Columbia University, New York, who had harbored private doubts about the movement, was the first American biologist of note to express in print some reservations, in 1924 and 1925. Similarly, Herbert Spencer Jennings (1868–1947) of Johns Hopkins University questioned some of the hereditarian excesses of the movement in 1925, but it was Raymond Pearl (1879–1940) of Johns Hopkins who wrote the first major critique of the movement by a biologist, in 1927. All three were decidedly in the minority of geneticists and biologists, however, and, somewhat paradoxically, Pearl himself harbored strongly anti-Semitic feelings privately (Barkan 1992).

The movement’s decline was precipitated by the stock market crash and the Depression, when it became clear that poverty could be far more egalitarian in its distribution than the scientists had supposed, and that wealth was, therefore, probably not a good determinant of who should and should not be accorded civil liberties. In a paper presented to the Third International Congress of Eugenics on 23 August 1932, Hermann J. Muller (1890–1967) questioned “the assumption made by most eugenicists, that our present social stratification is positively correlated with genetic worth,” and proclaiming “the dominance of economics over eugenics” (Muller 1933:40). No new discoveries led American scientists to abandon the eugenics movement, but rather

a new sense of the primacy of human rights and individual liberties in a democratic society (Paul & Spencer 1993).

The American scientific ideas of the 1920s, however, bore bitter fruit in Germany in the 1930s, where they reinforced many of the social ideas of the Nazis. While in prison in 1923, Hitler read the second edition of the influential *Human Heredity* by Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer (1874–1964), and Fritz Lenz (1887–1976). Fischer, who became director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Genetics, and Eugenics in 1927, had been Charles Davenport's personal choice to be his successor as president of the International Federation of Eugenics Organizations in 1932. The sterilization law enacted by the Nazis in July 1933 was inspired by the model Eugenical Sterilization Law drawn up a decade earlier by Harry H. Laughlin (1880–1943) of the Eugenics Record Office (Muller-Hill 1988; Kuhl 1994).

#### *The Legacy of Eugenics*

In a culture that has made use of science to solve its problems for many centuries, science can lend validation to social prejudices if those prejudices can be made to sound "scientific," or if they are merely advanced by scientists. And human science is particularly laden with values in ways that clam or fly science is not; consequently, pronouncements made in the name of human science must be more carefully scrutinized, and the scientists making them bear a greater burden of responsibility for them. Contemporary genetic counseling and screening programs, it is critical to note, are fundamentally different from the programs of the eugenics movement in two ways. First, their target is not the betterment of the race or species, but the reduction of *family* tragedies. And second, the concept of "normalcy" has expanded to the extent that only easily diagnosable clinical pathologies are targeted for screening.

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See also Aryanism; Boas, Franz; Davenport, Charles Benedict; Fischer, Eugen; Galton, (Sir) Francis; Genetics (Mendelian); Hooton, E(arnest) A(lbert); Hrdlička, Aleš; Pearl, Raymond; Rassenhygiene and Rassenkunde; UNESCO Statement on Race

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