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Eugenics in America

by DAVID ROSEN

On December 10, 2011, the *New York Times* ran a front-page article exposing the painful legacy of one of America's hidden social crimes, forced sterilization. The article examines how the policy played out in one state, North Carolina, and the on-going effort to address the suffering of the approximately 3,000 still-living victims of the state's eugenics program.

The program was in effect for over four decades, from 1933 to 1977, and some 7,600 people suffered sterilization at the hands of the state.

In 2002, and after decades of grassroots organizing, NC's Governor Bev Purdue issued a formal apology to those who had been victims of the program. The *Times* article focuses on the current campaign to offer compensation (i.e., reparations) to the still-living victims so as to bring this ugly phase of state history to an end.

Today, the notion of race purification is associated with Nazi Germany. However, the theory of race improvement was originally put forth in 1893 by the noted British scientist Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, as the science of "eugenics."

Galton argued: "Eugenics is the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, whether physically or mentally." From the turn-of-the-20th century until the late-70s, eugenics found a welcoming home in the good-old U.S. of A.

Eugenics is an ideology of the Gilded Age and its aftermath. This was a period when the American elite championed a belief in Social Darwinism, a self-serving misreading of Darwin's biological "survival of the fittest" hypothesis onto social relations, hierarchy. They believed that biology was destiny and that the white race sat atop the throne of human evolution, civilization.

Not surprisingly, many of the Gilded Age elite also believed that those least "developed" were doomed by heredity to be not merely biologically inferior but socially unfit. Eugenics was espoused as the science of breeding (Galton wanted it to be a religion), of race improvement for the betterment of civilization.

An estimated 60,000 people were sterilized as biologically inferior humans in the seven decades that eugenics was in vogue in the U.S. Steven Jay Gould noted: "Sterilization could be imposed upon those judged insane, idiotic, imbecilic, or moronic, and upon convicted rapists or criminals when recommended by a board of experts." He fails to mention the feeble-minded, the promiscuous woman and the homosexual. Sterilization was most often imposed on youths, the poor, women and African-Americans.

Now, as America succumbs to a second Gilded Age, the call for new forms of eugenics can be heard. Some racist and anti-immigrant groups raise the specter of the end of "white America."

Other, more serious medical professionals, like Dr. Christopher Hook of the Mayo Clinic, warn, "Eugenics is back in America." He and other physicians are concerned about the increased use of pre-natal testing and genetic engineering. These tests allow doctors, insurance companies and prospective parents to determine whether the fetus in the womb is likely to be born so-called "normal and healthy," thus which baby is likely to be born with a disability like Down syndrome or Autism Spectrum Disorder. They warn that this is leading to growing incidents of fetal abortions.

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The first legal state-sanctioned sterilization took place in Indiana in 1907. NC began sterilizations in 1933; other states started earlier.

In 1924, Virginia passed its sterilization law and, in 1927, Carrie Buck, a 17 year old, became the state's first person to be sterilized. She was judged by a state-appointed authority that had the power to determine the feeble-minded, an imbecile or an epileptic.

In 1927, the Supreme Court decided that state-sanctioned sterilization was legal. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled against Carrie Buck, writing most memorably:

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... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.

The new law of the land led to the increased use of sterilization throughout the country. Obviously, the definitions of imbecile and feeble-minded were essentially arbitrary, thus meaningless.

The increased use of sterilization is illustrated in Utah. It was the 23rd state to legalize state sterilization in 1925. The rate of sterilization between 1930 and 1935 was 6 per year. However, the annual rate grew significantly after the opening of the Utah State Training School in 1935. Between 1935 and the early-'50s, about 33 persons (more than 2 a month) were sterilized annually. Sterilization ended in Utah in 1960 and a total of 772 people were sterilized, more than half of them (54%) women.

The "science" of eugenics was founded on the shared belief among the socially elite that human evolution culminated in the Anglo-Saxon "race." All other races lacked the spiritual, mental and physical capabilities of the white man! This belief system and worldview was shared by the "leading" people of the day, whether politician, industrialist, minister, college professor, scientist, journalist or social activist.

An often-stated corollary assumption that was equally shared by these esteemed citizens was that more "primitive" races were inferior mentally, physically and socially. Most remarkable, both church and science concurred. Protestant adherents of the Social Gospel saw the eugenics movement as a scientific method that would help usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.

To appreciate just how deformed was the mindset of those advocating eugenics a century ago, it's useful to cite one of their leading theorists on race purification. In 1911, Dr. Charles Benedict Davenport authored the then-influential book, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*. Shocked by the massive influx of Eastern and Southern Europeans to cities, Davenport warned:

[T]he population of the United States will, on account of the great influx of blood from South-eastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial, more attached to music and art, [and] more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape and sex-immorality.

Most telling, he predicted, "the ratio of insanity in the population will rapidly increase." His analysis does not include the African-Americans, Jews, Asians, Middle Easterners and Native-Americans who likely only further polluted the race pool.

Eugenics was an ideology backed most enthusiastically by both the local and national gentry. As the *Times* points out, the NC campaign was led by such notables as James Hanes, the hosiery magnet, and Dr. Charles Gamble, heir to the P&G fortune. It also notes the strong support among notable progressives like Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Margaret Sanger; Sanger had opened America's first birth control clinic for Brooklyn immigrants in October 1916. With backing from the Carnegie, Rockefeller and

Harriman fortunes, eugenics was legitimized and used to justify the draconian Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921 and 1924. Their efforts culminated in the 1927 Supreme Court decision approving forced sterilization.

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The eugenics movement was as much a symptom of Gilded Age ruling-class arrogance as the real threats they perceived from a nation undergoing profound change.

Between 1890 and 1920, America was transformed. The population nearly doubled, jumping to 106 million from 62 million, reshaping the nation's demographic character. Some 23 million European immigrants, many of them Catholics and Jews, joined 2 million migrating southern African Americans and whites to recast the cities of the North and West.

Black migration culminated in the legendary Harlem Renaissance. However, migration was driven, in part, by punitive Jim Crow laws, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and a series of lynchings, race riots and other violence that swept the nation in the years preceding and following the Great War. This was also the era of "Scopes monkey trial" immortalized in Stanley Kramer's classic 1960 movie, "Inherit the Wind," and the rise of the "new woman" who earned a wage, wore a shorter skirt, put on lipstick and, with the passage of 19th Amendment in 1921, secured the vote.

Today, the U.S. is again in the midst of a great transformation. Globalization is restructuring the national economy; immigration is recasting the nation's demographic makeup; and the widespread, popular demands for abortion rights, gay marriage and sex education are fueling a new round of culture wars.

As the political climate heats up in anticipation of the 2012 election, Americans need to guard against the emergence of a new eugenics movement. This one may likely seek new justifications for anti-immigrant policies, basing them on an alleged "scientific proof" of the collective inferiority of immigrants.

Similarly, the policing of sex "predators" may involve the discovery of a new predator gene that both expands the category of those classified as predators and increases the number of those suffering indeterminate prison sentences. And who knows, perhaps other, more old-fashioned, Social Darwinian efforts will be proposed by Republican presidential candidates to control sexual excess; why not the forceful sterilization of teen girls who get pregnant? Moral rectitude knows no limit.

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