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## Idiots, Imbeciles and Immigrants: Racial Attitudes and the Eugenics Movement in Progressive America

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In American history, racism has manifested itself as chattel slavery, exclusionary anti-immigration restrictions and the repression and subjugation of minorities. Sociologist William Powell defines racism as an "assumption that others are inherently inferior or disagreeably different in their fundamental characteristics or capacities."<sup>1</sup> These assumptions, Powell adds, "evolve into beliefs which are defended on the basis of reason and evidence."<sup>2</sup> When humankind entered the "scientific revolution" these foundations of "reason and evidence" were at once systematized, and in the minds of the practitioners of eugenics, legitimized.<sup>3</sup> Despite the subjective and ambiguous nature of racism, combining it with science transformed the already pervasive convention into a monolithic social more that would be defensible on scientific grounds.

The discoveries of Charles Darwin and Gregor Mendel opened the way for scientific study concerning genetics and human heredity. English scientist (and the cousin of Darwin), Sir Francis Galton, pioneered the theory of eugenics, which concentrated on the betterment of the human race.<sup>4</sup> Eugenicians based their convictions on the erroneous belief that all human characteristics were hereditary, independent and unalterable, a "blend-

ing" of traits acquired from both parents. Potentials for environmental, geographic or cultural influences upon individual characteristics were variously ignored, misinterpreted or casually explained away.<sup>5</sup> The result of this blending, the eugenicists feared, would be a "regression" of successive generations toward the norm of the breeding population. Madison Grant, chair of the New York Zoological Society and fervent eugenicist, warned that regression of offspring was guaranteed in the cases of interracial unions.

Whether we like to admit it or not the result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient, generalized and lower type.<sup>6</sup>

Galton's ideas spread across the Atlantic and were rooted in the fertile environs of Progressive America where they connected to strong sentiments of nativism and cultural prejudices and applied as "negative eugenics." The practice of negative eugenics was composed of four main components: use of restrictive marriage laws (which were commonly used in most states before the eugenics movement began), incarceration and gender segregation of degenerates, involuntary sterilization, and immigration restriction. Sexual and criminal deviates (including rapists and prostitutes), alcoholics and drug addicts, the mentally and physically handicapped (including the deaf and blind), orphans and homeless persons, and carriers of transmittable diseases fell within this category.<sup>7</sup> Restriction of immigration was imposed upon anyone of non-Nordic descent.<sup>8</sup> The ambiguity of these criteria suited the eugenicists agenda perfectly.

Due in part to tremendous technological progress during the latter quarter of the nineteenth-century, science evolved into a discipline acknowledged for being just short of—and sometimes exceeding—religion. At the turn of the twentieth-century, the tendency was to accord proven scientific laws as constant and prevailing when applied to specific areas in the natural world.<sup>9</sup> From within this framework, eugenicists attempted to apply scientific, biological solutions to social maladies. Science, the eugenicists believed, would serve to legitimize their racial and cultural prejudices. The practice of eugenics and its application to society can best be described as "scientific racism."

Eugenicists attempted to justify their bigotry and cultural prejudices by cloaking them in the mantle of science. This "scientific racism" was directed not only at "inferior" races, but at any person deemed abnormal. The primary targets of the American eugenicists of the Progressive Era were immigrants of non-Nordic descent, and large segments of the population labeled, generically, "degenerate," the term used to describe persons deficient in some socially important trait.

In 1906, members of the American Breeders Association, an organization formed by government and agricultural breeders to research methods of increasing crop yields and livestock breeding, elected to form a Eugenics Section. Formation of the Eugenics Section was the brainchild of Dr. Charles B. Davenport, described by historian Allan Chase as the "scientific pope" of the American eugenicists. Davenport, a Harvard educated biologist, announced that the function of the Eugenics Section was to "investigate and report on heredity in the

human race and to emphasize the value of superior blood and the menace to society of inferior blood."<sup>10</sup>

The eugenicists celebrated the Anglo-Saxon, Nordic race, from whom the "native" Americans descended. The tremendous accomplishments of American society were attributed to the superior characteristics inherited from their Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Those who could not claim "Nordic" ancestry were viewed as inferior in mental and physical capacity. Charles Davenport, in his 1909 essay, "Influence of Heredity on Human Society," epitomizes the Social Darwinist theory that most eugenicists embraced. In Davenport's opinion—a clear contradiction to Thomas Jefferson's assertion in the Declaration of Independence—some humans were far superior to others.

Until recently at least, human society (in America) was founded on the fundamentally wrong assumption that all men are created equal, capable of willing good or evil, and of accepting or rejecting the invitation to join the society of normal men.<sup>11</sup>

American conservatives perceived moral, physical and spiritual decay of American society, and sought to solve the problem and save society from what they saw as inevitable ruin. In the opinions of the eugenicists, a primary factor in the degeneration of American society was the seemingly endless flood of immigrants pouring into America. Between 1890 and 1914 an estimated 15 million immigrants, mostly southern and eastern Europeans, arrived on the shores of the "land of liberty." Dissimilarities of dominant physical traits expressed in different ethnic groups were the cornerstones of the assumption of racial inferiority; people lacking "Nordic" fea-

tures were assumed to be inferior in mind and body. The "inferior mentality" of these immigrants, noted sociologist Edward A. Ross, was easily seen by the "practiced" eye. "The shortness and smallness of the crania were very noticeable," continued Ross, "in every face there was something wrong—lips thick, mouth coarse, upper lips too long, cheek bones too high . . . or else the whole face prognathous."<sup>12</sup> The implication of Ross' description is that people who looked that way were more closely related to primates, man's evolutionary ancestors.

The influx of the eastern and southern Europeans was regarded as a conspiratorial attempt to destroy the "purity" of America. The immigrants, according to Ross, would conquer America "by childbearing", the men using their women as "weapons in the struggle with the older, superior Americans."<sup>13</sup> There were two points of contention involved in the struggle: the economic well being of "native" Americans (even the right of the true natives of America to be considered as such was taken from them) and the fate of democracy as established and practiced in America. Compounding the eugenicists' alarm was the fact that these "inferior" groups were reproducing faster than the superior, thus leading to a pronounced increase in the population of degenerates. The Feminist Movement was believed to be a factor in the low birth rate among the superior class, as the most suitable (fit) women were removed from marriage and motherhood. The unavailability of the best American women would lead to the entire extinction of intelligence. The result of this was certain, as Davenport explains:

Unless preventive measures against the continuously progressive increase of the defective classes are adopted, such a calamity as the gradual eclipse, slow decay and final disintegration of our present form of society and government *is not only possible, but probable*.<sup>14</sup>

Those who possessed weak, inferior characteristics should be prevented from reproducing, and as far as Davenport was concerned no means of prevention should be excluded. "If segregation is inadequate protection and since reason cannot overcome the destruction of the lowest grade imbeciles, at least operations should be required that will prevent the reproduction of their vicious germ plasm."<sup>15</sup>

Any reluctance of the body politic to accept the reason of the eugenicists was short lived. In 1907 the Indiana State Assembly passed the world's first compulsory sterilization law, which empowered the administrators of state prisons and asylums with the authority to sterilize all "confirmed criminals, idiots and imbeciles."<sup>16</sup> The passage of the law merely legalized what had been common practice in the Hoosier state for half a decade. Beginning in 1899, Dr. Harry Sharp, of the Indiana State Reformatory in Jeffersonville, had performed nearly 200 vasectomies on inmates he deemed to be hereditary criminals or defectives.<sup>17</sup> Sharp cited the "scientific discoveries of heredity" as justification for his actions and demanded that society "cease permitting idiots, imbeciles and degenerate criminals to continue the pollution of the race ."<sup>18</sup>

The passage of the Indiana law set into motion a flurry of political activity. By 1909 the legislatures of California, Washington and Connecticut had suc-

cessfully introduced and enacted similar laws. By 1915, thirteen states had passed similar sterilization laws, and by the eve of the Second World War, seventeen more states had followed suit. Gender discrimination became more blatant and prevalent with the passage of the sterilization laws. The language of the Indiana law illustrates that women were held accountable for the propagation of degenerate offspring. All feebleminded children aged six through sixteen, and all feebleminded women aged sixteen to forty-five, were to be incarcerated upon diagnosis of their feebleminded condition.

The criteria used in determining who was feebleminded was biased against women. The standard belief was that degenerate traits were inherited from the mothers. Alexander Johnson, General Secretary of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, noted that "the mothers of most of the next generation of feebleminded and idiotic are such themselves; but most of the fathers are strong-minded."<sup>19</sup> Johnson, and other eugenicists believed this reason enough to "protect women from the passions of vicious men and from the effects of their own weakness."<sup>20</sup>

For the most part, eugenicists believed they were working toward the betterment of humanity. In truth they were advocating, indeed instigating, the policies associated with a bigoted, elitist and discriminatory agenda legitimized by science. For their efforts, the eugenicists' program was adopted and sanctioned by the government and used as an instrument of repression against the least represented segments of society. The eugenicists succeeded in persuading Congress to institute immigration

restriction in 1924. The practice of sterilization continued well into the second half of this century. Their crowning achievement came in 1927 (*Buck v Bell*) when the Supreme Court ruled that the state of Virginia was warranted in sterilizing Carrie Buck against her will. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. justified the state's action commenting:

She may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization. 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, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It [sterilization] 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 breeding their kind...Three generations of imbeciles are enough [*Buck v Bell* 1927].<sup>21</sup>

Holmes' comment shows the general eugenical sentiment and denotes a definitive shift in the target groups. From that time forward, eugenical sterilization became an issue of reproductive control with women being the primary targets for sterilization.

The eugenicists' influence was in no way proportionate to their numbers, as the eugenics movement did not generate widespread public support. Rather, their influence is indicative of the emphasis put upon science and of the willingness of Americans to accept the "scientific truths" offered

by the eugenicists. This should not be surprising though, as "racism persists precisely to the extent that Americans find racist beliefs and attitudes useful."<sup>22</sup> History shows that Americans have traditionally tolerated discrimination—as long as the consequences do not negatively affect the oppressors.

#### NOTES

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1. William Powell, *The Persistence of Racism in America*, New York and London: University Press of America, 1992, p.1.

2. Powell, *The Persistence of Racism*, p.1.

3. William Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research*, Chicago and Urbana: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.88.

4. For insight to Galton's influence on science see Karl Pearson, *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1914-1930. Authors note: the term eugenics is derived from the Greek word Eugene, meaning "well born".

5. Kenneth Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society; A Historical Appraisal*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, p.33. See also William H. Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research*, Chicago and Urbana: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.22.

6. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918, p.18.

7. Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p.16.

8. Charles B. Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911, p.9.

9. For example the Newtonian Laws of gravity and motion. Both were thought to apply without exception to the natural world until 1919 when Einstein's studies and resultant

theory of relativity proved there were exceptions.

10. Quoted in Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p.114.

11. Charles B. Davenport, "Influence of Heredity on Human Society," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Philadelphia: The American Academy, vol. 34, July, 1909, pp.16-21.

12. Edward A. Ross, *The Old World and the New*, New York: Century, 1914, pp.285-6. Prognathous is defined as: "having jaws that project forward to a marked degree."

13. Ross, *The Old World and the New*, p.134.

14. Davenport, "Influence of Heredity", p.17. The emphasis is original.

15. Davenport, "Influence of Heredity", pp.20-21.

16. Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus*, p.15.

17. Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968, p.87.

18. Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus*, p.125.

19. Alexander Johnson, "Race Improvement By Control of Defectives," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Philadelphia: The American Academy, vol.34, July, 1909, p.23.

20. Johnson, "Race Improvement By Control of Defectives," p.23.

21. Quoted in Thomas Shapiro, *Population Control Politics: Women, Sterilization, and Reproductive Choice*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985, p.3.

22. Powell, *The Persistence of Racism*, p.301.

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