

The Social Impact of the American Eugenics Movement

Hedvika Pohlová

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the American eugenics movement and the manifestation of its ideas in society. American eugenics thought is mainly characterized by its strong focus on the elimination of socially undesirable individuals. The two main targets of American eugenics, the feeble-minded and new immigrants, are discussed in this text, with the main focus legally implemented measures such as forced sterilization and restrictions on immigration, along with the legacy of these actions. This examination of American eugenics points out a clear continuity with Nazi ideology, an association which in the end also contributed to the fall of the official American eugenics movement. To explore the theoretical framework of the movement, works by Charles Davenport and Madison Grant are examined.

KEYWORDS

eugenics, American eugenics movement, negative eugenics, the feeble-minded, new immigrants

Birth of Eugenics

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his revolutionary work *On the Origin of Species* (full title: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*).¹ The book not only caused a scientific revolution, but the ideas quickly began to penetrate social thinking as well. Subsequently, many theorists of the time concluded that natural selection was the destiny of humankind and was the key to progress.² The theory of evolution is also at the foundation of ideas of eugenics, as are positivist efforts to apply scientific methods to shape the social order. Darwin prepared the public for the move away from a religious framework, and when the early genetics findings of Mendel and Weismann emerged, eugenics seemed to be a logical step towards social management that would actively foster and secure the survival and procreation of the fittest exclusively.³

Francis Galton (1822–1911), a fellow Englishman who was Darwin's half-cousin, is considered to be the ideological father of eugenics. Galton first coined the term in 1883 as the word for “the science of improving stock.”⁴ The goal of eugenics was to implement selective and scientifically based breeding to create a population of the finest human species through a process of man-controlled evolution. In Galton's own words: “What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly. As it lies within his power, so it becomes his duty to work in that direction.”⁵ Influenced by the early genetics research, Galton believed that all physical

- 1 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859).
- 2 Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.
- 3 Degler, *In Search of Human Nature*, 42.
- 4 Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 25.
- 5 Francis Galton, “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims,” *American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1904): pp. 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1086/211280>, 5.

and mental characteristics are hereditary, including intellectual, moral, and personality traits.⁶ The destiny of each individual was, thus, predetermined by his or her genetic make-up. In a two-directional intervention, eugenics aimed to both increase the number of those with desirable traits as well as reduce the population manifesting undesirable traits. Galton called for social policies and programs instituted by the state that would help speed up the putative improvement of humankind. As a result, human heredity was politicized, with this tendency strongly evident until 1945.⁷

Galton proposed two methods to practically apply eugenic ideas in society. The first one was to prevent those deemed as unfit from propagating their kind; the measures taken to check the birth rate of the unfit were later called negative eugenics. The second method, conversely labeled as positive eugenics, was aimed at individuals and groups presumed to be “fit,” and represented the encouragement of their procreation, which would supply the human race with superior genes.⁸ In terms of positive eugenics programs in the United States, Kevles mentions especially financial incentives provided to those who were considered capable of contributing to racial improvement. Such inducements were supposed to prompt young people to start families early and encourage reproduction. It was also suggested to offer financial compensations to modern emancipated women to give up education and employment to promote race betterment. Moreover, the wages of fit family men were proposed to be raised in order to allow their wives to remain at home with their children.⁹ On the other hand, negative eugenics aimed at the unfit mainly included marriage restrictions, segregation based on sex and isolation from the majority society, sterilization, and immigration regulations. The most radical negative eugenics practice was euthanasia.¹⁰

The American Eugenics Movement

Galton’s concept of eugenics as a human-operated evolution soon gained prominence abroad. On the other side of the Atlantic, eugenics ideology quickly found devotees who took it upon themselves to disseminate the creed and preach its importance. The popularity of eugenics in American social thought was extensive and its influence much more virile than in England, where the thoughts had originated. By the 1900s, eugenics thought was firmly established within the American scientific community, with its popularity growing since until hitting its peak in the 1920s and the 1930s.¹¹ The reasons for its appeal include the economic problems caused by industrialization and a subsequent reaction in the form of progressivism, deep-rooted racism, and demographic change connected to growing immigration.

6 Diane B. Paul, “Darwin, Social Darwinism and Eugenics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, ed. Johnatan Hodge and Gregory Radick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 214–239, 216.

7 Maurizio Meloni, *Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 66–67, 91–92.

8 Francis Galton, *Memories of My Life* (London: Methuen, 1908), 323.

9 Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 91.

10 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 92.

11 Karen Norrgard, “Human Testing, the Eugenics Movement, and IRBs,” Scitable (Nature Education, 2008), <https://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/human-testing-the-eugenics-movement-and-irbs-724/>.

The economic instability and civil unrest that came hand in hand with industrialization and urbanization posed a threat to the established social order. Therefore, American elites started to move away from the laissez-faire attitude towards the idea of managed capitalism during 1890–1920.¹² As eugenics promised a social reform based on the scientific management of population and reproduction, it perfectly complimented the regulationist tendencies of the time.¹³ Increasing immigration from non-Anglo-Saxon, non-Germanic and non-Nordic countries was another feature of the period in which eugenics entered American social thought.¹⁴ There was rising animosity towards immigrants, with race seen as one of the central determinants of an individual's worth. The traditional social stratum of an Anglo-Saxon origin considered itself superior to other races, which were perceived as inferior. The science of eugenics upheld and reinvented this idea. Ultimately, eugenics generally served the needs of the white upper and upper-middle classes, who identified themselves as the most fit.¹⁵

Although the American eugenics movement rested on the tenets set down by Galton, it had its own distinctive features. The rhetoric of eugenics in England and in the US varied in several aspects. While British eugenicists focused mainly on positive eugenics practices, their American colleagues were advocates of negative eugenics, i.e. reducing the undesirable individuals in society. As a result, most of the proposed measures were of an involuntary nature. British eugenics thought was above all class-biased and, although racist rhetoric was present, the racial struggle was not an acute issue in England at the time. However, the situation in the US was much different due to its high immigration rates. In America, the lower classes as well as what eugenicists called the lower races were the main targets of eugenics. Moreover, there was a major difference in the actual application of eugenics in England and the US. British eugenics was mostly limited to theoretical discourse, with the ideas rarely used in practice. On the other hand, American eugenics thought significantly influenced local legislation and introduced eugenics practices into society.

A particularly interesting systematization of American eugenics thought is offered by Markfield.¹⁶ Her eugenics continuum shows the gradual development and introduction of eugenics ideas into American social consciousness in four main steps: differentiation, alienation, sterilization, and elimination. In the phase of differentiation, the concerned individuals needed to be convinced that they are distinct from others in a significant way.¹⁷ In the case of American eugenicists, they tried to demonstrate differences in the physical and especially mental capacity as inherently tied to family ancestry or often more generally to race. The second step Markfield mentions is alienation. Once the individuals were aware of the differences between them and others, they asserted that the group they belonged to was properly dominant and that others did not fit. After this distinction was made, the problem of what to do with these others arose. Therefore, eugenicists transformed

12 Garland E. Allen, "The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910–1940: An Essay in Institutional History," *Osiris* 2 (1986): pp. 225–264, <https://doi.org/10.1086/368657>, 256.

13 Garland E. Allen, "Eugenics and American Social History, 1880–1950," *Genome* 31, no. 2 (1989): pp. 885–889, <https://doi.org/10.1139/g89-156>, 888–889.

14 Allen, "Eugenics and American Social History," 886.

15 Allen, "Eugenics and American Social History," 886.

16 Miriam H. Markfield, "A More Perfect Union: Eugenics in America," NAELA, 2019, <https://www.naela.org/News-JournalOnline/OnlineJournalArticles/OnlineApril2019/Eugenics.aspx?subid=1063>.

17 Markfield, "A More Perfect Union: Eugenics in America."

their ideas into actual social policies and measures. In American eugenics, the first solution to the problem at hand was segregation as a means of protecting the “proper” society. Naturally, this included the segregation of individuals in institutions such as prisons, asylums, or specially created colonies. Markfield, however, augments the meaning of segregation, extending it to the reduction of immigration as well as marriage restrictions. For Americans, the immigration restrictions put in place were in practice a form of self-segregation. Marriage restrictions, on the other hand, served as an officially set boundary for those already living on American soil. Certain individuals were segregated by not allowing them to live side by side, as this could create undesirable offspring.¹⁸ Going one step further in the continuum, sterilization was introduced. Even though segregation was practiced to shield the population from defective individuals, it still placed a significant burden on American society, especially in an economic sense. The costs of segregation management were high and could be easily avoided by the compulsory sterilization of institutionalized individuals. Moreover, this was seen as even more effective, as it would ultimately lead to the complete eradication of undesirable elements from American society.¹⁹ In American eugenics, sterilization was the final step, one officially and widely applied. However, the theoretical discourse did not stop there. Some eugenicists’ ambitions went as far as to the final phase, later labeled as the “final solution,” which was complete elimination. Although this idea was not as frequently and as openly expressed as the means mentioned previously, it would be false to say that the idea of extermination did not enter the American eugenics movement. Besides, as Markfield argues, the precedent of the authorized killing of criminals had already existed in American society.²⁰

The Undesirable Social Elements

What American eugenicists sought to do was to purify the nation of “the least desirable elements in the nation by depriving them of the power to contribute to future generations.”²¹ Before analyzing the applied negative eugenics measures, it is important to examine who were those least desirable elements that were targeted. Nevertheless, the possibility to determine the undesirable remains partially limited, as any definition would be closely tied to the agenda of an actual eugenicist. As Kevles says, ideas concerning human perfection, and consequently imperfection, varied among the eugenics community as well as society in general.²² Nonetheless, during this period certain definite groups of individuals were in fact identified as undesirable. It was believed that those people posed a threat to American social stability. The undesirable group included in particular the disabled, the poor, those deemed immoral by standards of the time, and new immigrants. Black lists the ten categories of defective individuals as proposed by American eugenicists in 1911: the feeble-minded, the pauper class, alcoholics, criminals, epileptics, the insane, the constitutionally

18 Markfield, “A More Perfect Union: Eugenics in America.”

19 Markfield, “A More Perfect Union: Eugenics in America.”

20 Markfield, “A More Perfect Union: Eugenics in America.”

21 Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 53.

22 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 147.

weak, those with a predisposition to certain diseases, the deformed, and those with impaired sense organs, i.e. the deaf, blind and mute.²³

Charles Benedict Davenport was one of the most prominent figures of the American eugenics movement. In his *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* published in 1911, he describes eugenics as “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding”²⁴ that could ultimately become “the salvation of the race through heredity.”²⁵ In his view, the undesirable elements within American society are threatening the established social order and polluting the gene pool, that was once so noble. The application of eugenics is a means “of saving it from imbecility, poverty, disease and immorality.”²⁶ The American eugenicists believed that not only physical features such as eye or hair color are inherited, but mental traits as well as personality characteristics are passed down from generation to generation as well.²⁷ At the time, the laws of heredity were also applied to the social ills pervading American society. Davenport’s text is no exception, as he highlights the frequently hereditary nature of pauperism, drug addiction, and criminality. Poverty is in his words “relative inefficiency” which “usually means mental inferiority.”²⁸ Similarly, he links alcoholism and criminal tendencies to bad heredity and an innate predisposition.²⁹ The American eugenics movement ultimately grouped all of the above-mentioned populations under the label of “feeble-minded.” Although feeble-mindedness was originally linked to decreased mental capacity, it became an inclusive term for all kinds of undesirable traits that were considered dangerous to society.³⁰

The other group heavily targeted were new immigrants, who according to American eugenicists posed a growing and serious menace to the old American stock.³¹ The hierarchy of races and the need for the conservation of the superior Anglo-Saxon race was the main concern for Madison Grant, who with his publication of *The Passing of the Great Race*³² laid the foundations of American scientific racism. As already mentioned, immigration into the US was increasing as eugenics thought was being introduced into American thought. The immigration of the time was characterized by high numbers of individuals coming from southern and eastern Europe, populations considered inferior to the original “strong, virile and self-contained”³³ Anglo-Saxon settlers. “New York is becoming a *cloaca gentium*,”³⁴ a sewer of the nations, Grant claims, as the worst types of

23 Edwin Black, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (Washington, DC: Dialog Press, 2012), 58.

24 Charles Benedict Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911), 1.

25 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 260.

26 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 260.

27 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 60–63.

28 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 80.

29 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 82–83.

30 Meloni, *Political Biology*, 80.

31 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 219.

32 Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919).

33 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 170.

34 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 92.

Europe are perceived as coming in. America is slowly changing into a dumping ground³⁵ and the old American type, “the white man par excellence,”³⁶ is bound to disappear. With Grant at the forefront, most American eugenicists considered the idea of the Melting Pot as the greatest threat to American nation.³⁷ Racial stereotypes dominated among the old stock American elite and the new immigrants were believed to be the main cause of growing social ills as well as lowering the intelligence of the population.³⁸ This is where the notion of the new immigrants from countries of different ethnicities was conflated with the idea of the threat posed by the feeble-minded.

The feeble-minded and the new non-Nordic immigrants were considered responsible for the so-called “race suicide,” a term used to describe the phenomenon of Anglo-Saxon population decline in the US.³⁹ The fall in numbers and quality of the old American stock was seen as a great menace to American civilization. The phrase “race suicide” was first used by the influential sociologist Edward A. Ross in 1901 to describe his fears about the future of the American race.⁴⁰ Ross pointed out the growing numbers of foreign elements along with the stagnant fertility of the old stock, which taken together could ultimately lead to the non-violent replacement of the superior American nation.⁴¹ Such fears fueled the popularity of eugenics and its application. In the US, the negative direction of eugenics thought led to the adoption of coercive measures aimed at the above-mentioned undesirable individuals. These negative eugenics practices were often legally grounded, as the state was seen as responsible for the interventions. Eugenicists of the time did not seem to find coercion problematic. Davenport, for example, indicated the belief that “the commonwealth is greater than any individual in it”⁴² and society has limitless rights over its members. In fact, it is a duty to enforce eugenics measures benefiting society and, in such case, “society may take life, may sterilize, may segregate [...], may restrict liberty in a hundred ways.”⁴³

The Feeble-minded

So-called feeble-minded individuals were a major target of the American eugenics movement. This term was reserved for those that Davenport sees as “the main hindrance to our social progress.”⁴⁴ As feeble-mindedness in the sense of mental impairment was rather vaguely defined, it was gradually expanded to other individuals who displayed anti-social behavior. As Grant discusses negative eugenics measures, he recommends their application “to an ever widening circle of social discards,

35 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 211.

36 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 27.

37 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 92.

38 Ted L. DeCorte, “Menace of Undesirables: The Eugenics Movement During the Progressive Era,” (Las Vegas: University of Nevada, 1978), 1–2.

39 Philippa Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 86–87.

40 Edward A. Ross, “The Causes of Race Superiority,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18, no. 1 (1901): pp. 67–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271620101800104>, 88.

41 Ross, “The Causes of Race Superiority,” 86–89.

42 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 267.

43 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 267.

44 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 261.

beginning always with the criminal, the diseased and the insane and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives.”⁴⁵ The types of individuals he mentions were frequently grouped under the feeble-minded label.⁴⁶ The situation is similar as Davenport lists some of the antisocial traits that need to be eugenically eradicated “such as feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, delusions, melancholia, mental deterioration, craving for narcotic, lack of moral sense and self-control, tendency to wander, to steal, to assault and to commit wanton cruelties upon children and animals.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, nearly anyone whose fitness was in some way considered to be deficient could end up being classified as feeble-minded. To a high degree, feeble-mindedness simply corresponded to low social status. These members of society were seen as promiscuous and American elites were worried about their high fertility rates as, simultaneously, there was the notion of a declining birthrate among the original settlers.⁴⁸

In accordance with the eugenics canon, feeble-mindedness was believed to be hereditary. Thus, not only physical or mental deficiencies, but also the majority of social ills and inequalities were seen as having biological rather than social roots. American eugenicists believed that better future of the nation could only be secured if the carriers of undesirable traits were prevented from propagating their kind. As Davenport argues, “the collective traits of any person [...] may be passed on to thousands of the persons who will constitute the social fabric of a few generations hereafter.”⁴⁹ Anybody is, thus, a potential creator of the future, and the best common end has to be prioritized over individualism. By making parenthood a special privilege, a fitter society was to be guaranteed⁵⁰ and “the perpetuation of worthless types”⁵¹ to be halted. The three basic ways of demographic management that American eugenicists endorsed were marriage restrictions, segregation, and sterilization of undesirable individuals. Euthanasia and abortion, on the other hand, were not frequently supported.

One of the first attempts to deal with the alleged proliferation of defective traits was marriage regulation, a practice discussed by Bashford. In 1895, the first state to pass a eugenics law banning marriages among the undesirable was Connecticut. By the mid-1930s, more than forty American states illegalized unions of such individuals.⁵² Although statutes restricting unions among the various types of feeble-minded persons were passed, they did not achieve the desired results, as procreation of the unfit could not be avoided simply by denying them a marriage license. They could still reproduce out of wedlock. According to Kevles, since the extensive group of the feeble-minded was associated with immorality, banning marital unions among them would not have prevented them from sexual activity.⁵³ Therefore, the segregation of the unfit was another popularly

45 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 51.

46 Norrgard, “Human Testing, the Eugenics Movement, and IRBs.”

47 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 267.

48 Allen, “Eugenics and American Social History,” 886.

49 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 269.

50 Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

51 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 49–50.

52 Bashford et al., *The Oxford Handbook*, 120.

53 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 92–93.

proposed measure that promised greater efficiency and easier enforcement. First, the individuals considered feeble-minded were isolated from the general society by institutionalization, a common practice long before eugenics. This, however, only prevented the intermixing of the unfit with types considered healthy. Davenport warned that the institutions where defective individuals were housed side by side “constitute[d] one of the country’s worst dangers.”⁵⁴ According to American eugenicists, segregation of sexes during the reproductive period was needed within institutions.⁵⁵

Under the influence of eugenics thought, institutionalization in the form of colonies was established at the time. Colonies were essentially small villages for the long-term confinement of the unfit. These represented self-supporting centers cut off from the regular world.⁵⁶ According to Levine, the 1910s and 1920s saw a sharp increase in institutional confinement when during those years commitment laws ordering permanent institutionalization of certain individuals were introduced.⁵⁷ Even though these colonies were for the most part economically self-sufficient, the operation of other institutions for the feeble-minded such as asylums or poor houses was expensive. The American eugenics movement, thus, turned its hopes to sterilization. Stripping the undesirable individuals of their reproductive power was, according to Lombardo, considered the most efficient and economical way of dealing with the carriers of defects.⁵⁸ As the majority of the institutionalized feeble-minded could be released back into the general society after sterilization, the burden falling on the taxpayer would be reduced. Although Davenport believed in the high efficiency of sterilization, he was careful about endorsing it. His main concern was the precise selection of individuals for sterilization.⁵⁹ Other eugenically minded figures including Madison Grant⁶⁰ strongly advocated for the forced sterilization of the unfit.

The first sterilization law was passed in Indiana in 1907. According to Bashford, it targeted all sorts of individuals including criminals, the insane, epileptics, and the mentally retarded.⁶¹ Between 1907 and 1937, more than thirty states made sterilization legally enforceable. With more than 20,000 sterilized individuals, California was at the negative eugenics pinnacle.⁶² Levine presents the results of a 1937 Gallup poll exposing that 84 percent of the respondents supported sterilization of the chronically mentally ill. While this poll shows the level of popularity sterilization laws achieved in the US, there were also opponents to the practice, and sterilization laws were challenged in court several times.⁶³ The best-known legal battle related to forced sterilization on eugenics grounds took place in Virginia and became known as the *Buck v. Bell* case. As Carlson explains, the Sterilization Act of Virginia passed in 1924 was actually challenged by eugenicists themselves to test whether it

54 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 70.

55 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 259.

56 Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 118.

57 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 37–38.

58 Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 14.

59 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 256–259.

60 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 51.

61 Bashford et al., *The Oxford Handbook*, 221.

62 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 63–64.

63 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 65–66.

could hold up in court. Carrie Buck, a teenage patient of a state colony for the feebleminded, was selected as the first person to be compulsorily sterilized under the Virginia Act. Her sterilization was then brought to court, where the legality of the procedure was sustained. The final test for the Virginia sterilization law was its presentation to the U.S. Supreme Court.⁶⁴

According to Kevles, Carrie Buck was defined as a moral imbecile. Her mother was also an inpatient at the colony and, like Carrie, she was declared feebleminded. For eugenicists, this was evident proof of feeblemindedness running in the Buck family. Moreover, Carrie had an illegitimate baby girl that was also found to be feebleminded.⁶⁵ Ultimately, the alleged hereditary nature of Carrie's defectiveness led the Supreme Court to a decision to uphold the sterilization law by a vote of 8 to 1 in 1927.⁶⁶ When Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. delivered the Court's decision, he infamously declared: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."⁶⁷ In his speech, he stresses that the public welfare outweighs individual interests, a position which entitles authorities to perform sterilization in those who "sap the strength of the State."⁶⁸ Holmes also seems to believe that sterilization is in essence an act of kindness: "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."⁶⁹ Therefore, unless it was performed on sex offenders, sterilization was not considered punitive. Rather, it was claimed to be beneficial for the individual in question, as it often allowed his or her release into the normal population and relieved the individual of reproductive responsibility. As Baynton adds, eugenicists declared their efforts humanitarian, as alleviating suffering and eliminating misery.⁷⁰

The Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell* heightened the confidence of American eugenicists, thus forced sterilization of the undesirable became one of the most prominent features of the movement. As Cohen points out, the ruling of the Supreme Court was never officially overturned. The number of involuntarily sterilized individuals in the US between 1907 and 1983 is estimated to have reached 60,000–70,000. Although this period also covers the decades after World War II in which eugenics was frowned upon by the majority of Americans, even the post-war sterilizations were, in fact, performed under the mentioned eugenics statutes.⁷¹

64 Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001), 250–254.

65 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 110–112.

66 Carlson, *The Unfit*, 254.

67 *Buck v. Bell* Decision (Supreme Court of the United States, May 2, 1927).

68 *Buck v. Bell* Decision (Supreme Court of the United States, May 2, 1927).

69 *Buck v. Bell* Decision (Supreme Court of the United States, May 2, 1927).

70 Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 13.

71 Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 318–320.

The New Immigrants

The rising number of immigrants, especially from South-eastern Europe, who were perceived as inferior to the original American settlers worried many. Immigration, thus, became a central issue for the American eugenics movement. Moreover, it was believed that a significant part of the new immigrants fell into the feebleminded group. Edward Ross described this new wave of immigration as “beaten members of beaten breeds.”⁷² These newcomers to America were seen as carriers of diseases, hereditary mental and physical conditions, immorality, and criminality. In other words, they became scapegoats for whatever problems American society faced.⁷³ As Gillette points out, most eugenically-minded thinkers were themselves of what was considered an innately superior ancestry, usually Nordics or white Anglo-Saxons who belonged to the upper or upper-middle class. For them, the science of eugenics justified the animosity towards the racial other and offered a solution to race suicide.⁷⁴ Within the American eugenics movement, views on racial hierarchy and its manifestation in society ranged from the less to the more extreme. The radical voices, however, were the ones leading the social and political discourse.

One such extremist was Madison Grant, who devoted himself to the examination of races and the promotion of eugenics in order to save Anglo-Saxon America. In his view, race is constituted by the physical and mental characteristics of its members, and the quality of these characteristics determines which races are superior or inferior.⁷⁵ The premise of his work is that intellect, morals, temperament, and cultural distinctions are all associated with physical features, with the whole bundle of traits hereditary. Moreover, if racial mixing occurs, the progeny will always consist of inferior hybrids and a “population of race bastards” will be created.⁷⁶ In *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant discusses race in the European context, viewing America as a continuation of European history that could have been glorious but is instead plagued by race suicide. He divides the European population into three basic races: “Nordics” (including Anglo-Saxons) originating in Northern Europe, “Alpines” connected to central Europe, and “Mediterraneans” inhabiting southern European lands. A distinctive set of physical and mental features is then ascribed to each of these three European races.⁷⁷ According to Grant, the Nordics are at the very top of the evolutionary scale and possess superior physical and mental abilities. This can be demonstrated historically, as Nordics were always the ruling and the intellectual elite of any developed civilization.⁷⁸ It was also the strong and noble Nordics who managed to build the British Empire and founded America.⁷⁹

In America, a distinctive type of a Nordic began developing, although he had “an imperfectly developed national consciousness” with no “instinct of self-preservation in a racial sense.”⁸⁰ This

72 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 93.

73 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 93.

74 Aaron Gillette, *Eugenics and the Nature-Nurture Debate in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 122.

75 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, xix.

76 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 77.

77 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 227.

78 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 100.

79 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 207.

80 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 90.

type of American welcomed all new immigrants. He “taxed himself to sanitize and educate these poor helots” and, what is even worse, “encouraged them to enter into the political life.”⁸¹ What further appalls Grant is that the superior stock not only lifts the inferior up but is actually dying for the sentimental notion of equality. According to Madison Grant, the Civil War “put a severe, perhaps fatal, check to the development and expansion of this splendid type by destroying great numbers of the best breeding stock.”⁸² Grant also repeats the common narrative of the time about the growing gap in fertility rates, integrating it into his racial theory. The inferior races tend to breed faster due to their mental incapacity to realize the subsequent economic disadvantages of supporting many children. On the other hand, the higher races lower the amount of offspring they have, i.e. they lessen the quantity of the next generations to ensure greater individual prosperity. The result then is that the lower races breed the superior individuals out.⁸³ As nature is not allowed to maintain racial harmony “by her own cruel devices,”⁸⁴ eugenics needs to be implemented to save the native American before it is too late.

The alleged scientifically-based racial hierarchy as maintained by Grant penetrated the American immigration debate of the first half of the 20th century.⁸⁵ Eugenacists as well as many prominent figures of the American elites claimed that the influx of inferior races from Europe along with the low fertility of the superior old stock Americans was causing race suicide. The trend, thus, needed to be reversed, and American racial purity salvaged. The eugenics measure that was supposed to protect those of the superior stock from the inferior racial strains already present in the country was the prohibition of interracial marriage. According to Levine, interracial marital unions were permitted only in nine states and the District of Columbia. Anti-miscegenation laws were introduced in the majority of American states and many were legally valid until 1967. Such laws actually predated eugenics thought and, consequently, targeted only unions of whites with “colored” individuals, not the intermixing of superior and inferior races as defined by Grant. Nevertheless, eugenacists cited these laws in their rhetoric to prove their point.⁸⁶ While the anti-miscegenation laws had some effect inside the country, eugenacists believed the root cause, immigration, was yet to be addressed. According to Kevles, immigration was responsible for about half of the total population increase in the first fifteen years of the 20th century.⁸⁷ The threat of immigrants outbreeding the original Americans was seen as very real.

The radical American eugenacists claimed that not only were the new immigrants inferior, but there was also a high rate of feeble-mindedness present among them. Therefore, support for selective immigration policies that would allow only non-defective newcomers into the country was strong, and this ultimately served as the foundation of the immigration policy of the time. Baynton presents a newspaper headline that expressed the attitude of the time: “Government

81 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 90.

82 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 88.

83 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 46–49, 77.

84 Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*, 47.

85 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 97.

86 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 48–50.

87 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 94.

Stands as ‘Doctor of Eugenics’ at Portals of Nation.”⁸⁸ As Levine explains, upon their entry, immigrants were screened for defects that could cause their deportation.⁸⁹ The inspection singled out individuals with mental or moral defects, who were then rejected entry.⁹⁰ Just as the definition of feeble-mindedness, the legal prescriptions were ambiguous and could be applied to a variety of individuals.⁹¹ The first law addressing undesirable immigrants was passed in 1882,⁹² after which the list of subjects to exclusion under the immigration law gradually extended.⁹³ In 1917, immigration officers were to ban any individual for any of the reasons on a list over a page-long that included: the feeble-minded, epileptics, criminals, prostitutes, immoral individuals such as alcoholics or those practicing polygamy, the mentally and physically deficient, whose defect might affect their ability to earn a living, anarchists and those in opposition to organized government, contract laborers, assisted immigrants, natives of specified islands not possessed by the US as well as many more reasons.⁹⁴ The 1917 version of the immigration act also implemented a compulsory literacy test.⁹⁵

According to Baynton, racist eugenicists and other opponents to immigration of allegedly inferior races were eventually disappointed. While they hoped that the literacy test would curb the influx of both lower races and lower classes, the result was not as significant as expected.⁹⁶ Therefore, they were determined to push for more restrictive measures. Eugenics arguments merged with popular racism, hostility toward alien cultures, and a Red Scare climate, which ultimately led to new immigration policies and quota systems.⁹⁷ Although the first law banning entry based on the country of origin was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, this measure targeted only one particular and fundamentally non-white nation, and as such did not address the more general fears of immigration which would come later. This law did, however, set a precedent for the restrictionist policies which were instituted in the years to come.⁹⁸ In 1921, an emergency act restricting immigration from each country to three percent of the immigrants of the corresponding nationality already present in the US was passed. However, many did not find this law sufficient and advocated for even stricter restrictions.⁹⁹ In 1924, the emergency act was replaced by the *National Origins Act* that tightened the quotas. The number of immigrants allowed in the country was reduced from three percent to two percent of the corresponding nationality. Moreover, the final number was calculated from an earlier population census than before, which caused a further reduction, as at that time there were fewer immigrants in general.¹⁰⁰ The 1924 *National Origins Act* was a significant victory for

88 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 14–15.

89 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 93.

90 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 13.

91 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 18.

92 An Act to Regulate Immigration (1882).

93 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 18.

94 An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens To, and the Residence of Aliens In, the United States (1917).

95 An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens To, and the Residence of Aliens In, the United States (1917).

96 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 40.

97 Carlson, *The Unfit*, 258.

98 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 9–10.

99 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 96–97.

100 Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*, 40.

American eugenicists. It represented eugenics at the level of national politics, recognizing its importance and promising its continuous application. On the other hand, for the majority of the immigrants deemed “non-Nordic” by those like Madison Grant, the restrictive policy closed the door to the country they had sought to enter.

The Fall of American Eugenics

The social influence of eugenics movement in the US was significant, as the realization of its ideas in the form of official policies demonstrates. Returning to Markfield’s eugenics continuum, American eugenicists managed to reach the penultimate stage, that of legally implemented sterilization. At the point where the American eugenics movement stopped, the Nazis took up the mantle. While the horrors of the holocaust are well-known today, its roots starting with Galton and continuing in the US are rarely discussed. Nevertheless, the relationship of American eugenics to what came later in Germany eugenics is real, and is sometimes referred to as the “Nazi connection” by American cultural scholars.¹⁰¹ As Kline claims, certain American eugenicists were overjoyed by the successful implementation of eugenics measures in Germany, defending Nazi policies despite international criticism.¹⁰² American eugenicists believed that Nazi Germany was on the right track, claiming that “the Germans are beating us at our own game.”¹⁰³ As the Nazi policies became more and more focused on Jews and the international opposition was mounting, American eugenicists stopped openly supporting Germans, fearing it might tarnish their reputation.¹⁰⁴ The Nazi regime in Germany and its application of eugenics did discredit the movement in the eyes of many and American eugenics started losing mass support.¹⁰⁵

Additionally, new scientific findings have refuted many of the fundamental tenets of eugenics. As Bashford describes, social scientists, modern geneticists, and psychologists have demonstrated how scientifically flawed the ideas of the movement were. They also asserted that there is no hierarchy of human races, refuting the biological determinism of eugenics.¹⁰⁶ Another phenomenon DeCorte believes to have contributed to the fall of American eugenics was the Great Depression, which affected all strata of American society in the 1930s. The whole American population felt the blow, no matter the presumed eugenics fitness. Americans, thus, realized that poverty and social failure were not the results of heredity.¹⁰⁷ While many considered eugenics an unfortunate pseudoscience of the past, some did not reject it in its entirety. So-called reform eugenics are the reason why many scholars claim that eugenics did not disappear with the mainline eugenics movement.¹⁰⁸ The reformists sought to redefine eugenics and dissociate it from its strong racial

101 Kühl Stefan, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

102 Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 105.

103 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 133.

104 Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 104.

105 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 169.

106 Bashford et al., *The Oxford Handbook*, 88.

107 DeCorte, “Menace of Undesirables,” 6.

108 For example: Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 99–101. or Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 170.

and class bias.¹⁰⁹ Although the biological improvement of humankind was still their main goal, they recognized that the laws of heredity were not as straightforward as the mainline eugenicists of the earlier decades had claimed. These theorists believed that the environment was paramount, and that social reforms could improve conditions.¹¹⁰

The development of eugenics thought after 1945 is also discussed by Levine.¹¹¹ In her overview of eugenics thought after World War II, cycles of higher and lower popularity can be observed. The legacy of the American eugenics movement is visible even in the 21st century. Although the repeal of many old eugenics sterilization laws began in the 1970s,¹¹² the practice of coercive sterilization did not completely disappear. Recently, the shocking 2020 documentary *The Belly of the Beast*¹¹³ has revealed the involuntary sterilizations of female inmates in California prisons. According to the film's producer, about 1,400 coerced sterilizations were performed in California prisons between 1997 and 2014. Meanwhile, the infamous *Buck v. Bell* decision of 1924 has yet to be overturned.¹¹⁴ Another report from Oklahoma has exposed a controversial plea deal negotiated with a woman accused of fraud, with the judge in her case offering her a reduction of the sentence if she agreed to undergo sterilization. Although some may argue that her sterilization was not forced, the degree of voluntariness is questionable.¹¹⁵ Also heavily contested, the new genetic technologies make interventions and partial selection of the genetic makeup of unborn children possible. Some practices are not even offered to the prospective parents, as they are considered highly unethical.¹¹⁶ Dolmage examines the eugenics legacy in connection to immigration, claiming that the animosity towards immigrants that led to the restrictive laws starting in the late 19th century has never fully vanished. Exclusionist policies are still used and high numbers of immigrants are detained which suffer from mental illnesses. Just as in the eugenics period, there is no focus on the treatment of such individuals. Instead, they are removed as an alleged national threat.¹¹⁷

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Garland E. "Eugenics and American Social History, 1880–1950." *Genome* 31, no. 2 (1989): 885–89. <https://doi.org/10.1139/g89-156>.
- Allen, Garland E. "The Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, 1910–1940: An Essay in Institutional History." *Osiris* 2 (1986): 225–64. <https://doi.org/10.1086/368657>.

109 Bashford et al., *The Oxford Handbook*, 216.

110 Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 170–173.

111 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*.

112 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 116.

113 *The Belly of the Beast* (ITVS, 2020).

114 Craig Phillips, "Filmmaker Exposes Shocking Pattern of Illegal Sterilizations in Women's Prisons," PBS, November 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/filmmaker-exposes-shocking-pattern-of-illegal-sterilizations-in-womens-prisons/>.

115 Tom Jackman, "Judge Suggests Drug-Addicted Woman Get Sterilized before Sentencing, and She Does," *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/true-crime/wp/2018/02/08/judge-suggests-drug-addicted-woman-get-sterilized-before-sentencing-and-she-does/>.

116 Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*, 111.

117 Jay Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 136–143.

- An Act to Regulate Immigration, 1882.
- An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens To, and the Residence of Aliens In, the United States, 1917.
- Bashford, Alison, and Philippa Levine. *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Baynton, Douglas. *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016
- Black, Edwin. *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*. Washington, DC: Dialog Press, 2012.
- Carlson, Elof Axel. *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001.
- Cohen, Adam. *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017.
- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: John Murray, 1859.
- Davenport, Charles Benedict. *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911.
- DeCorte, Ted L. "Menace of Undesirables: The Eugenics Movement During the Progressive Era." Las Vegas: University of Nevada, 1978.
- Degler, Carl N. *In Search of Human Nature: Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Dolmage, Jay. *Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018.
- Galton, Francis. "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims." *American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1904): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/211280>.
- Galton, Francis. *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*. London: Macmillan, 1883.
- Galton, Francis. *Memories of My Life*. London: Methuen, 1908.
- Gillette, Aaron. *Eugenics and the Nature-Nurture Debate in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Grant, Madison. *The Passing of the Great Race: Or the Racial Basis of European History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919.
- Jackman, Tom. "Judge Suggests Drug-Addicted Woman Get Sterilized before Sentencing, and She Does." *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/true-crime/wp/2018/02/08/judge-suggests-drug-addicted-woman-get-sterilized-before-sentencing-and-she-does/>.
- Kevles, Daniel J. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.
- Kline, Wendy. *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001.
- Kühl Stefan. *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Levine, Philippa. *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

- Lombardo, Paul A. *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Markfield, Miriam H. "A More Perfect Union: Eugenics in America." NAELA, 2019. <https://www.naela.org/NewsJournalOnline/OnlineJournalArticles/OnlineApril2019/Eugenics.aspx?subid=1063>.
- Meloni, Maurizio. *Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity From Eugenics to Epigenetics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Norrgard, Karen. "Human Testing, the Eugenics Movement, and IRBs." *Scitable. Nature Education*, 2008. <https://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/human-testing-the-eugenics-movement-and-irbs-724/>.
- Paul, Diane B. "Darwin, Social Darwinism and Eugenics." Essay. In *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, edited by Johnatan Hodge and Gregory Radick, 214–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Phillips, Craig. "Filmmaker Exposes Shocking Pattern of Illegal Sterilizations in Women's Prisons." PBS, November 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/filmmaker-exposes-shocking-pattern-of-illegal-sterilizations-in-womens-prisons/>.
- Ross, Edward A. "The Causes of Race Superiority." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18, no. 1 (1901): 67–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271620101800104>.
- Supreme Court of the United States. *Buck v. Bell Decision*. May 2, 1927.
- Cohn, Erika, director. *The Belly of the Beast*. PBS, 2020. 82 min.

Hedvika Pohlová completed her Master's degree at the Department of English and American Studies, University of Pardubice, in 2021. In her thesis, she focused on the social impact of the American Eugenics Movement.