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HIST 1493

“Manifestly Unfit”: An Analysis of Eugenics in Relation to Race and Disability

Eugenics was one of the darkest movements of the Progressive era. The eugenics movement argued that preserving “superior” humans will create a more productive and healthy class of people. It dated back to Francis Galton’s idea that encouraging procreation among the supposedly superior would create a fitter group of people and preserve the white race, who eugenicists considered innately superior.¹ American eugenicists persuaded people that certain characteristics such as race and disability were degenerate. In reality, they simply sought refuge in the idea of improving white Americans to justify maintaining power over people of color and the disabled. In fact, this movement led to restrictions on interracial marriage and lifelong sterilization of innocent people. Eugenics perpetuated discrimination under the veil that eugenics would create a better society, however, the underlying goal was to exercise social control and power over African Americans and disabled people.

Eugenicists used racist stereotypes against African Americans to persuade people that African Americans were a setback to society. Herman.H. Rubin, in his article *Eugenics and Sex Harmony*, argued that African Americans were naïve and aloof. Moreover, he claimed that they do not know how to respond to stressful situations due to their “happy-go-lucky” nature and

¹ Gregory Michael Dorr, "Defective or Disabled?: Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 4 (2006): 362.

therefore, white Americans should not marry them.² Rubin created an undesirable image of African Americans that would cause people to believe that black men and women were naturally unsuited for a working environment. He utilized these stereotypes to support the eugenic idea that African Americans cannot be productive members of society.

Eugenicists also forced qualities that were considered “degenerate” upon the African American image in order to prove that African Americans were inherently “unfit”. These qualities included being promiscuous and unintelligent. According to Gregory M. Dorr, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “[black] men were cast as brutal "beast rapists," while women were seen as lewd temptresses- both were riven with venereal disease.”³ This misconception not only suited the eugenicists’ definition of degeneracy but also reinforced the idea that African Americans were a threat to society. Most eugenicists also claimed that being sexually open was hereditary.⁴ This false claim led people to believe that African Americans were genetically inclined to be promiscuous. Moreover, eugenicists compared black and white infants in order to show the physical, innate superiority of white infants. In the photograph, “Comparison of White and Negro Fetuses,” Dr. A. H. Schultz’ has created fourteen plaster models of real white and black infants in order to illustrate that African American infants are smaller than white infants.⁵ However, it is clear Schultz had chosen to include premature black infants to mislead people into believing that the physique of black infants is naturally inferior to white infants. Furthermore, in Schultz’s analysis of these fourteen babies, he stated

² Herman H. Rubin, *Eugenics and Sex Harmony: The sexes, their relations and problems* (Pioneer Publishing Company, 1933), 139.

³ Dorr, 375

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ A. H. Schultz, “Comparison of White and Negro Fetuses,” *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory*, 1921.

http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=563&printable=1&detailed=0

that black babies have much smaller heads, and therefore, smaller brains than white babies. Nonetheless, his statements were invalid because he manipulated his data by using premature African American babies, and premature infants would have smaller heads than full term babies. Unfortunately, manipulated information such as this only proved the eugenicists' argument that white people were physically and intellectually superior due to their white heritage. It also justified discriminating against African Americans by viewing them as innately degenerate.

The racism presented in eugenicist literature and arguments was used to exercise control, and thus maintain white power, in the form of marriage laws and sterilization. W. A. Plecker showed, in his article, "Amount of Negro and Other Colored Blood Illegal in Various States for Marriage to Whites: 1929," that most states had made interracial marriage illegal by 1929.⁶ These laws stemmed from the eugenic ideas that African Americans were a threat to the productivity and well-being of society, and therefore, should not mix with the "fit" white race. Eugenicists believed that procreation between white and black people would diminish white power. In turn, state governments felt the urge to preserve white superiority and began asserting their power over African Americans' choice to marry a white person. These marriage laws not only had control over the people's choice of spouse but the laws also unfairly punished interracial couples who were already married. The *Louisville Courier* included the story of a white man in Indiana who could not receive a license for his marriage to a black woman; his penalty was a fine and ten year prison sentence.⁷ The government exercised such a firm control over marriage because of the racist desire to maintain "purity" among whites and to discourage people from marrying another race. Eugenicists successfully instilled fear in the state

⁶ W. A. Plecker, "Amount of Negro and Other Colored Blood Illegal in Various States for Marriage to Whites: 1929," *Eugenical News* 48, no. 8 (1929): 121.

⁷ "Man believed white weds Negro woman," *Louisville Carrier*, Apr. 13, 1921.
http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=466

governments about miscegenation and caused the governments to devise laws that would preserve the perceived superiority of the white race.

White people not only tried to control marital life, they also controlled African Americans' choice to procreate. Certain Southern physicians advocated the use of castration to prevent African Americans from procreating. Dorr provides an example of a physician, Dr. Jesse Ewell, who advocated castration as the proper therapy for degeneration based on his conventional beliefs that African American men were lustful criminals and therefore, should be prevented from passing on their genes.⁸ The racism perpetuated by eugenicists encouraged doctors to take advantage of their power as white physicians and force African Americans into sterilization. Southern white physicians simply hid behind the eugenic rhetoric that fewer African Americans will create a better society. However, their unnecessarily harsh method to sterilize only showed that doctors wanted to abuse and assert their power over black men.

In addition to the belief that African Americans were a menace to society, eugenicists marginalized the mentally disabled by convincing Americans that they were a burden to society. Eugenicists placed the term "feeble-mindedness," which meant little mental or moral development, in the same category as a mental illness.⁹ Most eugenic papers used feeble-mindedness and mental disability interchangeably. Dr. Louis Morrow and Dr. Olga Bridgeman, in their report, "Delinquent Girls Tested by the Binet Scale," supposedly demonstrated that some girls cannot be productive members of society because of their low intelligence scores and their involvement in immoral activity, such as drinking and sex. They also claimed that their

⁸ Dorr, 378

⁹ Ibid, 368

immorality was innate and a byproduct of their low intelligence.¹⁰ Morrow and Bridgeman not only created a stigma that those who engaged in “immoral” activity cannot contribute to society, but they also perpetuated a misconception about those who were actually mentally disabled by suggesting a relationship between mental illness, immorality, and delinquency. In fact, the eugenic belief that feeble-mindedness, which in this case involved alcoholism and promiscuity, was a mental disability, harmed the image of those who were mentally ill. This image led to an overwhelming fear among the general public that the immoral behavior and perceived lack of intelligence of “feeble-minded” people will pose a threat to society.

To solidify the public’s perception that the mentally disabled were inferior, eugenicists used degrading terms to describe them. The article, “Exhibit of Work and Educational Campaign for Juvenile Mental Defectives,” illustrates the hierarchy of mental development according to the score an individual receives on the Binet scale. However, the lower stages were identified with demeaning terms such as “imbecile” and “moron.”¹¹ These terms clearly discriminated against the mentally disabled and reinforced the notion that the mentally disabled were a burden to society. Essentially, eugenicists wanted to establish a hierarchy that proved their superiority over the mentally disabled. Furthermore, the stages also provide a description of an “imbecile” or “moron’s” capacity to work.¹² This further proved to Americans that the mentally disabled could not be productive members of their community.

The elite class took advantage of the heightened ableism in America by using sterilization to gain power over the “feeble-minded.” In *Buck v. Bell*, the Supreme Court ruled that it was

¹⁰ Morrow, L., Olga Bridgeman, “Delinquent Girls Tested by the Binet Scale,” *American Philosophical Society* 95, no 3 (1912)

¹¹ "Exhibit of work and educational campaign for juvenile mental defectives" *American Philosophical Society* (1906) http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/view_image.pl?id=348

¹² *Ibid.*,

legal to make the “unfit” undergo compulsory sterilization after the guardian of a mentally ill person, named Carrie Buck, claimed that sterilization was unconstitutional. In the court decision, the judges stated that, “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.”¹³ Although the Supreme Court claimed that the goal was to improve society, the true intention was to assert elite power over the mentally disabled. Eugenicists’ portrayal of the mentally disabled as immoral and unable to work created a fear that the mentally disabled will procreate and become a larger burden to society. However, the elite abused the public’s fear in order to maintain their own superiority. Phillip Jenkins, in his article “Eugenics, Crime, and Ideology: The Case Of Progressive Pennsylvania,” stated that the elite felt the need to reassert their power following the changes in social composition following immigration and urbanization.¹⁴ This reassertion of power was concentrated in distancing the elite from the “feeble-minded”. Jenkins further proves his argument by demonstrating that legislators, bureaucrats, and administrators were the main supporters of sterilization among the mentally deficient¹⁵ The politically powerful individuals were not the only ones who discriminated against the mentally disabled. Physicians did not attempt to treat patients with mental illnesses because they claimed that it was a hereditary issue. Instead, physicians sent their patients to an institution or suggested sterilization.¹⁶ This not only demonstrates abuse of power as a physician but it also shows how doctors’ ableist views directly led to the alienation and sterilization of the mentally ill. Therefore, the majority of the elite class sided with the ableist

¹³ “Buck vs. Bell Supreme Court Decision” *American Philosophical Society*, 1927.

http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/image_header.pl?id=260&printable=1&detailed=0

¹⁴ Phillip Jenkins, “Eugenics, Crime, and Ideology: The Case Of Progressive Pennsylvania,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 51, No. 1 (1984); 70,73

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 70

¹⁶ Dorr 371.

eugenic views and exercised social control simply because they wanted to maintain their position in the social hierarchy.

Overall, eugenicists claimed that they wanted to improve society by preserving those who they considered superior. However, in doing so, they increased stigma around African Americans and the mentally disabled. They did this through unfair discrimination against African Americans and the disabled. Eugenicists portrayed African Americans as childish, lustful, and physically and intellectually inferior in order to prove that black people were a menace to a well-functioning society. By perpetuating an undesirable image of African Americans, eugenicists hoped that they could prevent white people from marrying and procreating with African Americans. With eugenic influence, state governments began creating laws that controlled African Americans' choice to marry and procreate. In reality, both eugenicists and the government feared that miscegenation would lead to a loss of white power. Likewise, eugenicists labeled the mentally disabled as people who were inherently immoral and unintelligent in order to prove to the public that they were a burden to society. Thus government legalized the sterilization of innocent people and doctors did not bother to treat mentally ill patients. However, the underlying cause of the discrimination towards the mentally disabled was that the elite members of society wanted to maintain their power and their position in the social hierarchy. Through eugenics, the elite can both distance themselves from the "feeble-minded" while reasserting their power through social control. Many white people and the elites used the racism and ableism perpetuated by eugenics in order to justify social control and maintain their power over African Americans and the mentally ill.