

ADVOCACY OF THE AMERICAN  
EUGENICS MOVEMENT,  
1880-1920

By

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Indiana enacted the first state law allowing sterilization for eugenic purposes in 1907. In 1914, when Harry Laughlin of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, drafted his Model Sterilization Law as part of a proposal advocating the benefits of compulsory sterilization, twelve states had already enacted some type of sterilization legislation. By 1924, various states had sterilized approximately 3,000 people, the vast majority (2,500) in California. Sterilization became increasingly popular throughout the 1920s and at the end of the decade thirty U.S. states participated in government sanctioned eugenic sterilization.<sup>1</sup>

In 1924, Virginia passed a sterilization law intended as a cost-saving strategy to relieve the tax burden in a state where public facilities for the "insane" and "feeble-minded" had experienced rapid growth. Legislators also intended the law to protect physicians who performed sterilizing operations from malpractice lawsuits. Virginia's law asserted, "heredity plays an important part in the transmission of insanity, idiocy, imbecility, epilepsy and crime..." It focused on "defective persons" whose reproduction represented "a menace to society."<sup>2</sup>

That same year, the state of Virginia chose Carrie Buck, a seventeen-year-old girl from Charlottesville, as the first subject for sterilization and a test case for the state's sterilization law. Carrie's foster parents committed her to an institution against her will after she gave birth to an illegitimate child. Officials at the Virginia Colony for the Epileptic and the Feeble-minded, where Carrie and her mother Emma were institutionalized, said that the two shared the hereditary traits of "feeble-mindedness"

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lombardo, "Eugenic Sterilization," (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Dolan DNA Learning Center, 2001): 1; Andrew Scull, "A Chance to Cut is a Chance to Cure," *Research in Law Deviance, and Social Control*, 8 (1986): 56.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia State Sterilization Law, quoted in J. David Smith and K. Ray Nelson, *The Sterilization of Carrie Buck: Was She Feeble-minded - Or Society's Pawn* (New York: New Horizon Press, 1999), 15.

and sexual promiscuity. To those who believed that such traits were genetically transmitted, Carrie fit the law's description as a "probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring."<sup>3</sup>

A legal challenge was arranged on Carrie's behalf to test the constitutional validity of the law. At her trial, several witnesses offered evidence of Carrie's hereditary "defects" and those of her mother. Colony Superintendent Dr. Albert Priddy testified that Emma Buck had "a record of immorality, prostitution, untruthfulness, and syphilis." Summing up the opinion of the experts regarding the Buck family more generally Priddy stated, "These people belong to the shiftless, ignorant, and worthless class of anti-social whites of the South." The Virginia court found in favor of the state and upheld the legality of the sterilization law.<sup>4</sup>

The decision was appealed to United States Supreme Court. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., himself a student of eugenics, wrote the formal opinion for the Court in the case of *Buck v. Bell*. His opinion repeated the "facts" in Carrie's case, concluding that a "deficient" mother, daughter, and granddaughter justified the need for sterilization. The decision includes the now infamous words: "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."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Priddy, testimony quoted in Lombardo, "Eugenic Sterilization," 1; J. David Smith *The Eugenic Assault on America: Scenes in Red, White, and Black* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press: 1993), 3-5; Robert J. Cynkar, "Buck v. Bell: 'Felt Necessities' v. Fundamental Values," *Columbia Law Review*, 81 (November 1981): 1418-1461.

<sup>4</sup> Smith and Nelson, *Carrie Buck*, 15-17, 20, 23-5; Cynkar, "Buck v. Bell," 1425-27; Ruth C. Engs, *The Eugenics Movement: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver W. Holmes, "Opinion of the Court," *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200, 1927.

Recent scholarship has shown that Carrie Buck's sterilization resulted from a false "diagnosis" and her defense lawyer conspired with the lawyer for the Virginia Colony to guarantee that the courts upheld the sterilization statute. Carrie's illegitimate child was not the result of promiscuity; the nephew of her foster parents had raped her. School records also prove that Vivian was not "feebleminded." Her first grade report card showed that Vivian was a solid "B" student, received an "A" in deportment, and had been on the honor roll. Nevertheless, *Buck v. Bell* supplied a precedent for the eventual sterilization of approximately 8,300 Virginians.<sup>6</sup>

In 2002, Virginia Governor Mark Warner issued an official apology from the state of Virginia to the victims of the state's sterilization policies. In his statement, he referred to eugenics as a "shameful effort in which state government should never have been involved."<sup>7</sup> Warner encouraged people to "remember past mistakes in order to prevent them from recurring...the marker is a reminder of how our government failed its citizens and how we must strive to do better."<sup>8</sup> That same year, to make amends for a state program that sterilized 7,600 people against their will, North Carolina's governor created a panel to probe the history of the effort, interview survivors and consider reparations. In Oregon, then-Governor John Kitzhaber apologized in person to some of the 2,600 people sterilized there, and he created an annual Human Rights Day to commemorate the state's mistake. In 2003, Governor Gray Davis issued a similar apology to the victims of California's sterilization program; Davis also warned that this

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<sup>6</sup> Smith and Nelson, *Carrie Buck*, 25; Smith, *Eugenic Assault*, 10; Harry Bruinius, *Better for all the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 13-15.

<sup>7</sup> Mark G. Warner, "Statement of Governor Mark G. Warner – on the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Buck v. Bell*," May 2, 2002, Virginia Board of Historic Resources, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

“regrettable chapter...must never be repeated again.”<sup>9</sup> In spite of these demonstrations of remorse, the *Buck v. Bell* decision has never been overturned.

To ensure that this “regrettable chapter” of so many state histories, in fact, never happens again we must strive for greater understanding of the movement’s causes and analyze of its guiding forces. That is the purpose of this paper, to determine whether American eugenics was, as many scholars assert, a drive by small group a of powerful and radically racist elites to engage in genocide and eliminate “unfit” on the basis of their racial status. I propose, instead that eugenic programs were not motivated solely by considerations of race and that they reflected the goals of a broad section of the population who hoped that use of scientific reform would secure stability and the betterment of human lives in a time that was tumultuous and unsettling. Analysis of the social climate and psychological processes that led people to deprive their brothers, sisters, and neighbors of their basic individual freedoms is essential to the study of Eugenics. Instability, fear, and prejudice created the climate necessary for a group of people with varied interests to unite under the agenda of eugenics and subsequently commit a series of cruel acts to defend themselves from the threats they perceived the urban underworld of the “unfit” posed. In this environment, the “respectable” classes accrued the social and financial power that allowed governments, and the reformers who influenced them, to impose their social vision upon those deemed unable to have power over their own lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Ingram, “California; State Issues Apology for Policy of Sterilization,” *Los Angeles Times*, California Metro, Part 2, Page 1, March 12, 2003; Aaron Zitner, “Davis' Apology Sheds No Light on Sterilizations in California; Lack of an inquiry into the state's ambitious eugenics effort and its 20,000 victims angers some historians and disabled advocates” *Los Angeles Times*, Main News; Part 1, Page 26, March 16, 2003.



Genetic research did not end with the decline of eugenics in the late-twentieth century. We continue to look to science as a means of solving a variety of social problems. However, society must recognize that science at times creates more problems than it solves. Philosopher J. Glover expresses this sentiment, stating, “The French Revolution guillotine and the Nazi gas chambers show how naturally inhumanity combines with technology, something must be done about this fatal combination. It is too late to stop the technology. It is on to the psychology we should now turn.[sic]”<sup>10</sup> Science remains important, but there exists a growing dichotomy about science’s actual uses; it can create a more comfortable, technologically advanced world but it can also enable the powerful to commit with ease genocide. The most pressing dilemma is to prevent public fear of instability from overpowering our sense of morality and enabling the medical profession to do no harm. Historically, the way that scientists and others deprived individuals of their rights and by-passed basic moral principles was to classify targeted groups as “others,” distinctly different from and inferior to the dominant group.

Deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida was among the first to discuss the phenomena of turning another person into an amoral being and noting the preponderance of “others” concluded, “Every culture is haunted by its other.”<sup>11</sup>

Formation of national and cultural identities requires the drawing of a line between those who belong and those who do not. The process of alterity – marking one’s own group off from those seen as different – is a central component of group self-definition. Marginalization and exclusion of those deemed “other” allow the shapes and boundaries of a group’s

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<sup>10</sup> J. Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 414.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1984), 116.

own identity to come into focus. Alterity springs from a dualistic mindset, placing group relations in an “either-or” situation in which, as the binary opposite of “self,” the “other” becomes a symbol of the fears, anxieties and negative images from which the dominant group wishes to dissociate itself, reinforcing its own positive identity. Xenophobia, racism, ethnic wars, prejudices, stigmas, segregation, and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class are the often-violent result of this dualistic worldview. These phenomena are expressions of the failure to recognize others as full human beings with equal rights, often leading to situations where difference provokes intolerance, hatred, and the urge to eradicate the “other.”<sup>12</sup>

Understanding the concept of “otherness” is particularly useful for examining the rise of eugenics ideology at the end of the Gilded Age, because it highlights the ideological nature of the hierarchies that shaped popular thought and determined the power relations between dominant and oppressed groups. It allows us to examine the majority group’s negative projections of marginalized persons, and uncovers a great deal about the dominant group’s efforts to maintain hegemony and stability in the face of perceived danger. Within the context of eugenics, the strict binary notion of alterity is too simplistic to convey the complex ways marginalization functioned. Therefore, to obtain an analysis sufficient to explain eugenics requires modifications to account for the multiple “others” eugenics supporters projected their anxieties upon.<sup>13</sup>

For eugenicists, the “other” became the “unfit,” a more malleable term, which designated a body as “other” but allowed for a variety of “others” and the possibility of those marginalized possessing a degree of similarity to the “self.” Categories of the

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<sup>12</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, “The Unstable Other: Locating the Jew in Progressive-Era American Racial Discourse” *American Jewish History*, 16, (Spring 2002): 384. Alterity and the “other” is explored further in David Roediger and James Barrett, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the New Immigrant Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 16 (Spring 1997): 3–44; Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990); David Berreby, *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Goldstein, “Unstable Other,” 385; Elizabeth Jelin, “Citizenship and Alterity: Tensions and Dilemmas,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 30 (March 2003): 101.

“unfit” reflected the group that most threatened a particular city or region’s stability and potential for progress. This allowed for virtually unlimited marginalization and persecution within society as eugenicists cast an ever-widening net in hopes of discovering and eliminating the source of societal ills. When the targeting of a specific “other” failed to ameliorate social problems, reformers turned their attention elsewhere and subsequently, a new group was designated inferior, creating multiple “others” within the category of the “unfit.”<sup>14</sup>

Initially, “race” was the central arbiter of otherness in America. Racist and nativist agendas targeted first those whose racial difference was most obvious - Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, and African Americans. White Americans identified these groups as “other” at first sight, and marginalized them with relative ease for decades. Urban dwellers were less concerned about these groups than rural residents were, mainly because the latter had little contact with these racial groups. Society marginalized these groups through occupational availability, predominantly in rural areas. Latinos worked in the Western region as migrant farm workers, a large number of blacks were locked into sharecropping in the South and West, and Asian immigrants worked on Western railroads and farms and in frontier mines. In these locations, racial minorities posed little threat to “polite” society. The black-white dichotomy also allowed whites to place themselves atop a clear color-based racial hierarchy, underscoring their confidence that they could survive in the modern world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Goldstein, “Unstable Other,” 385; Jelin, “Citizenship and Alterity,” 103.

<sup>15</sup> A.W. Carlson, “One Century of Foreign Immigration to the United States: 1880-1979,” *International Migration*, 23 (September 1985): 311-13; John P. Jackson, Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman ed., *Race, Racism and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2004), 133-36; Goldstein, “Unstable Other,” 385-86; Mark W. Summers, *The Gilded Age, or the Hazards of New Fuctions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 105-107.

However, by the late nineteenth century, changes associated with the modern, industrial age complicated Americans' understanding of racial differences. Increased immigration of Irish and eastern Europeans around the turn of the century presented a new problem for society. These groups were cultural "others" with different religions, languages, and customs, but they were difficult to identify as physically different and therefore, initially considered white. At first, these groups proved easy to marginalize, in part because they marginalized themselves by living in communities with family and fellow immigrants who shared their language and customs. As the immigrant population increased, it became more difficult for white society to ignore them. Unlike the minority groups relegated to the agricultural occupations of the frontier, the new immigrants flocked to urban centers where they worked in industrial settings, increasing white Americans' awareness of their presence, and there they generated concerns about the impact of immigration on society.<sup>16</sup>

Scientific racism effectively ended America's ambivalence towards the new immigrant population. Essentially, scientists concluded that one could be white and still racially distinct from other whites, fracturing whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races. "Old-stock" Anglo Americans considered the Irish and eastern European immigrant groups as inferior, developing a notion of tainted whiteness. This marked a transition in American racial discourse; people were no

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1988): 52-68; Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America* (New York: Oxford Press, 1979), 36-42; Roediger and Barrett "Inbetween Peoples," 42-43. The influence of immigrant industrial workers is also discussed in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Oxford Press, 1991). Historical connections to and a sense of shared experience with Europeans made it difficult to classify the immigrants as completely "other." As a result, the racial image of European immigrants was often ambivalent, more a reflection of Americans' own uncertainties about their society than a vehicle for the displacement of their fears. Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 75-77; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 118

longer concerned solely with the conception of race or the understanding that racial differences existed, but now with the perception of race and how a particular race was seen by society.

The new racial conception of immigrant difference dramatically changed relations within society. The eugenic nativist began to see the immigrant, “not as a source of cheap or competitive labor, nor as one seeking asylum from foreign oppression, nor as a migrant hunting a less strenuous life, but as a parent of future-born American citizens [sic].” The question was would their “hereditary stuff” be compatible with “American ideals.”<sup>17</sup> Nativist rhetoric extolled the ideal of racial superiority, and racial superiority had given the republic its greatness. Diversity intensified the constantly present threat of decline because it diluted the feature that made the country great. Tainted whites were “off-white,” poor, or lacking civilization-building skills. White elites feared declining birth rates among pure whites, high rates of immigration, high birth rates among tainted whites, and reproductive mixing among tainted and pure whites. The “off-white” elements were “not only *displacing*, but literally, *replacing* the rightful heirs of the republic.”<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, whiteness was about power and control. It allowed Anglo-Saxon Americans to envision a society ruled by clear, hierarchical categories and gave them the confidence that they possessed the racial qualities necessary to meet the challenges presented by modern life. Understanding whiteness as the source of their power made them less insecure about the changes they were undergoing. The exceptional efficacy

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<sup>17</sup> Harry H. Laughlin, *Analysis of America's Modern Melting Pot: Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, November 21, 1922* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1923), 731, 757.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 162.

of white identity was rooted in the notion of “civilization.” The fixation on civilization and whiteness provided important psychological benefits to white Americans during a time of massive change.<sup>19</sup>

New understanding of race shored up the identities of Americans and temporarily soothed their anxieties. However, such ideas fell short of eliminating all of the uncertainties and ambivalences they felt. They remained uncertain largely because discrimination, segregation, and immigration restriction failed over time to produce the desired results. The progress achieved was minimal and lacked the permanence necessary to eradicate all of the perceived dangers in American society. In a racially and culturally diverse society, elites welcomed a concept that reinforced their superiority and allowed them to exercise greater control. This self-image of civilized superiority also assured Americans that they inherently possessed the transcendent source of strength that allowed them to meet the challenges of modernity.<sup>20</sup>

The streets, prisons, and poor houses overflowed with so-called degenerates who continued to raise concerns about the future of American society. Race proved too specific a designation of “otherness” to allow for marginalization or elimination of all problematic groups. Eugenicians worked to create a much broader category of “other” that would be sufficiently ambiguous to serve the needs of a wide variety of people with an even wider variety of concerns about their society. By the early twentieth century,

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<sup>19</sup> Ritchie Witzig, “The Medicalization of Race: Scientific Legitimization of a Flawed Social Construct” *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 125 (October 1996): 676; Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 75-77; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 118; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, (London: Routledge Press, 1993), 41-43.

<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 45-7; Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 79; Thomas A. Guglielmo, “White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2000), 15. See also; Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

the hordes of “unfit” Americans suddenly seen lurking everywhere became the most obvious “other.” The blanket term “unfit” was so open to interpretation it served the needs of every nativist, elitist, Eugenicist, and fear-monger in the nation.<sup>21</sup>

This innovative form of “other” operated as a continuation of the racial “other” and created new ways in which whiteness could be tainted. Race, gender, poverty, crime, promiscuity, and a myriad of other perceived defects of moral character now signified threats to the quality of American society. Most significantly, this form of marginalization was not exclusive to the immigrant population. For the first time, native-born white Americans were targeted as a source of societal degeneration. Americans turned their attention to the “poor white trash” of American society, a group that experienced many of the same hardships as the racial minorities in America, but had been spared a good deal of the disdain and persecution because they were generally accepted as white. However, by the onset of the twentieth century, Eugenicists were successfully arguing poor whites exhibited the same degenerate character traits as their racially inferior counterparts and as such, were an equal threat to the purity and superiority of white society. The intellectual, psychological, and moral degeneracy among poor whites was a sufficient taint of their “whiteness” to warrant marginalization and eventually their eradication from society.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Elof A. Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001), 77-80; Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 79; Smith, *Eugenic Assault*, 15; Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Eugenic Assault*, 3-7; Nicole H. Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 13; Jelin, “Citizenship and Alterity,” 102. Influential studies of family degeneracy are found in Henry Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Hereditary of Feeble-Mindedness*, (New York: Ayer Co. Publishing, 1912) and Richard Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Disease, Pauperism, and Heredity*, (New York: Arno Press, 1970 reprint). These studies trace the lineage of two families, illustrating the healthy beginnings, corrupted at some point by marriage to a genetic defective leading to the spiraling of degenerate traits in subsequent

The possession of intellect, defined as the capacity to produce civilization, was the principal distinction drawn by white elites to mark the difference between white and non-white races. Research conducted to confirm this belief resulted in the formalization of the concept of “feeble-mindedness” in contrast to white intellectual superiority. “Feeble-minded” became the umbrella term deployed by whites to link the various different versions of white impurity and “unfits” together. The concept was based upon a racialized construction of intelligence, according to which, whites had normal and above normal cognitive ability. The level of cognitive ability correlatively decreased as the “whiteness” of the subject decreased, with Asians, Blacks, and Native Americans occupying the lowest level of subnormal intelligence.<sup>23</sup>

The inability to achieve the markers of civilization attained by middle- and upper-class Americans seemed a clear indication that the lower classes possessed little or no intelligence. Crime, prostitution, drunkenness, violence, poverty, and substandard living conditions were the antithesis of “civilization” according to the pervading worldview and therefore, signified that individuals associated with these circumstances were a danger to society and unfit to reproduce. The acceptance of this view officially institutionalized the “feeble-minded” and the “unfit” as the most dangerous “other” Americans would face in the twentieth century. Evidence provided by experts, concluding that the undesirable, uncivilized characteristics of the “unfit” were hereditary, ended attempts at environmental reform to ameliorate the deplorable conditions; reformers turned instead to removing the defectives from the gene pool

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generations. For decades, these studies validated the theory that crime, poverty, and immorality could be inherited, infinitely accelerating the decline of society.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Eugenic Assault*, 15-17; Anna Stubblefield, “‘Beyond the Pale’: Tainted Whiteness, Cognitive Disability, and Eugenic Sterilization” *Hypatia*, 22 (Spring 2007): 163, 168-69.



through incarceration, institutionalization, and sterilization. When tainted white Americans were legally distinguished as different, they, in effect, lost the full protection that whiteness conferred in a white supremacist society. The ease with which society marginalized its defectives allowed eugenicists to influence state legislatures and assert control over the composition of society.<sup>24</sup>

Given the implications of Eugenics and hereditarian thought in future genetic engineering, it is puzzling that the topic continues to comprise such a minimal portion of the historiography of twentieth-century America. The study of Eugenics' principles and practices provides modern historians with broad and varied possibilities for further research. Major themes of the existing literature include foundations of the movement; aim and scope; development and propagation of ideology among professional and academics; disbursement of dogma to the public; medical practices; legislative action; and consequences, both at home and abroad, of the quest for human perfection. Notable omissions from the literature are an examination of the movement's nineteenth-century roots and discussion of the attitudes and social climate that facilitated people's acceptance of the movement.

The earliest works on the American Eugenics movement appear between 1920 and 1950. Written by members of the American Eugenics Society or other related groups, these works tend to be strict institutional histories, providing little analysis of the movement. While they are quite detailed, most of the works paint the authors, their cohorts, and the movement as a whole in an exclusively positive light.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Carlson, *The Unfit*, 168-73; Rafter, *White Trash*, 22-26; Stubblefield, "'Beyond the Pale,'" 170-71, 174-75, 178-80.

<sup>25</sup> Caleb W. Saleeby, *The Progress of Eugenics* (New York: Funk and Wagnall's Company, 1914); Frederick Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1940) and C. P. Blacker,

A ten-year gap exists in the literature, but analysis of the movement picks up again in the 1960s. The works between 1960 and 1975 portray eugenicists as well meaning but naïve scientists, who did not understand the limitations or implications of their work. According to these authors, Eugenicists intended to facilitate reform and societal improvement, rather than further prejudiced agendas. These apologist authors conclude that geneticists have learned from the horrors of Nazi race science and will abstain from that type of radical research in the future. While these works provide more analysis and benefit from hindsight absent in previous studies, they fail to recognize that some still practiced radical eugenics in the United States and continued to do so well into the 1970s.<sup>26</sup>

Overlapping with the last phases of the apologist literature and extending into the 1990s, historians began to examine eugenics as a legitimate attempt at social reform, asserting that the eugenicists were not naïve about what they were doing, they simply failed to account for the limitations of heredity and the role of environment. These historians were among the first to address the intentional targeting of racial minorities, immigrants and the poor as the sources of societal decay. In this light, eugenicists become active participants in the development of policies, rather than passive idealists manipulated by racist politicians. This school of thought also notes that eugenics did not die out because of association with the Nazis, but rather redirected its focus towards a more moderate agenda.<sup>27</sup>

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*Eugenics: Galton and After* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952) are the standards among the institutional histories.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Haller, *Eugenics; Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Kenneth Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

<sup>27</sup> Carl J. Bajema, *Eugenics: Then and Now* (New York: Halsted Press, 1976); Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985);

Since 1990, a wealth of new histories examining the movement from a multi-disciplinary approach has dominated the field. These works address the social, economic, racial, and personal motivations of the movement. Some authors, like Edwin Black, find that the movement was inherently racist, and eugenic supporters committed academic fraud to support their unfounded claims. Others take a more moderate approach, condemning the results, but acknowledging the validity of the scientific principles eugenicists based their work upon and attempting to understand the complexities of the situation. Most of these works focus on widespread concerns regarding poverty, feeble-mindedness, and the threat posed by immigration. In addition, a number of new fields have opened up, including economic interpretations and a variety of regional studies examining the variations in the movement based on location.<sup>28</sup>

While historians have made a great deal of progress towards an understanding of the Eugenics impulse, a number of important questions remain unanswered. The study of economic motivations and uses is still a limited body of work and the topic would benefit greatly from exploration into these topics. Aside from the work of Edward Larson and Alexandra Stern, historians have devoted little time or attention to regional studies of Eugenic reform. We can learn much from studying the variations of the

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Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: the Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Elof A. Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001); Edward Larson, *Sex, Race and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Edwin Black, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create the Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003); Christina Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alexandra Stern, *Eugenics Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Harry Bruinius, *Better for all the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

movement in different areas. The field is significantly lacking in three areas: investigation of the nineteenth-century origins of American Eugenics, discussion of the usurpation of political power by the social and economic elite to exert control over others, and examination of the diverse arguments posed by eugenics supporters within their historical context rather than through the lens of the post-holocaust twenty-first century. That is the purpose of this work, to examine the origins and the psychosocial development of eugenics advocacy amidst the chaos of late-nineteenth century industrialization and urbanization. Examination of the mentality of eugenics supporters leads to greater understanding of the choices made by a diverse group of people to unify and support a common goal.

## CHAPTER II

### “A DARK, UNCERTAIN TIME”: GILDED AGE AMERICA AND THE RISE OF EUGENICS

The drive to improve human society scientifically is one of the most contentious issues in the history of the twentieth century. Linked with issues of ethics and reproductive rights, the term eugenics conjures images of the Holocaust, Nazi doctors, fascist regimes, and lives destroyed by botched medical experiments, all in the name of improving the race. This association between biological engineering and Nazi race science is so prevalent it has spawned its own variation of a logical fallacy known as *reductio ad hitlerum*. American eugenics was much more diverse than this one-dimensional representation implies. Eugenics arose out of a unique set of circumstances, involving a sudden increase in the awareness of social instability, conflict, and danger from people locked into inferior positions.<sup>29</sup>

Much of the dread of life at the lower level came during the late-nineteenth century as America shifted from an agrarian society towards a modernized, industrial nation. The former was rooted in island communities, local autonomy, exclusivity, and tradition. The latter was comprised of industrial cities linked by a transcontinental railroad system, increasing dependence on state and federal governments and change. This was not an easy adjustment for most Americans. Old-stock Americans watched as their economy shifted its focus from agricultural production to manufacturing; their society became increasingly stratified with a new professional middle class and an expanded working class of uneducated, untrained laborers, usually immigrants, or Southern blacks, performing menial jobs.

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Lane, "The Paradoxes of a Death Penalty Stance," *Washington Post* (June 4, 2005): 26; Gary DeMar, "Abortion and the *Reductio ad Hitlerum*," *American Vision*, (June 30, 2006). The term *reductio ad hitlerum*, coined by University of Chicago professor and ethicist Leo Strauss, is a variation of the well-known logical argument *reductio ad absurdum* and is a variety of association fallacy. The relative frequency of such absurd lines of reasoning in online discussions led to the founding of Godwin's Rule of Nazi Analogies (Godwin's Law) in 1990, asserting that "the longer an online discussion continues, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler or Nazis approaches one." [www.godwinslaw.org](http://www.godwinslaw.org), Accessed 11/6/2006.

To see clearly how and why the eugenics movement developed as it did, it is necessary to consider the circumstances and attitudes of the Gilded Age gave rise to the need for Eugenic practices. In the four decades between the end of the Reconstruction and the onset of the “Twenties,” American society went through a number of developments that significantly altered and challenged the place of individuals within the social order. Changes in government, economics, and ideology pushed the nation away from its agrarian roots and toward a new commercial, urban society. This transformation of America began around 1877 with “the triad of rapid industrialization, sprawling urbanization, and massive immigration.”<sup>30</sup>

After the Civil War, American industry expanded at a spectacular rate, and by 1900, the nation was a world leader in manufacturing with its output exceeding the combined output of Great Britain, France, and Germany. Expansive market and labor conditions encouraged investors to provide large amounts of capital. Technological progress increased productivity in existing industries and created several entirely new industries. Government at all levels was eager to support economic growth and gave money, land and other resources to manufacturers. Freedom from government regulation and the flood of capital directed at innovation and production invigorated existing industries and facilitated the development of new industries. The expansion of industry provided the catalyst for numerous changes in the way people worked, lived, and related to one another, creating a society decidedly different from any that had preceded it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 25; Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 5.

Among the most significant changes to come out of the industrial boom was the alteration of workplace culture. Industrialization necessitated changes in the structure, function, and demography of the workplace. As industry grew, the workplace became more impersonal, machinery replaced skilled artisans, and unskilled workers operated machines for employers they had likely never met. Because the work was impersonal, many felt little obligation to their employers and frequently left their jobs for better opportunities. Workers also began to organize, creating trade unions that, to varying degrees, protected the rights and interests of laborers against the exploitations and abuses of employers.<sup>32</sup>

The types of people comprising the workforce also changed during the late-nineteenth century. As industry increasingly used machines to manufacture goods, women and children became a viable source of labor. Women also entered clerical fields, replacing men as bookkeepers, typists, secretaries, and store clerks. An overwhelming majority of women became schoolteachers, nurses, and librarians, resulting in a feminization of those jobs. While women made progress in their endeavors working outside the home, change was slow and society still believed a woman's primary role was as a wife and mother. Most working women were young, single, and usually working only to help their families. Once married, women who could afford to often left the workforce to raise children and manage their own households, making turnover in women's occupations higher than in most men's occupations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage Press, 1976), 67; Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 35; Ray Ginger, *Age of Excess: The United States from 1877 to 1914* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 90-91.

<sup>33</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 7; Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 56; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 36. Dumenil notes that this shift occurred for two reasons. First, crowded



Employers, looking to increase production at minimal cost, also exploited foreign immigrants and ethnic minorities, who typically worked longer hours for lower wages and were often willing to perform jobs most native-born, white Americans refused to do. Immigrants were quickly absorbed into the industrial workforce by employers who wanted capable, low-wage workers to make products in factories and then, as consumers, purchase them in the American marketplace. Asians and Latinos migrated into the western United States, finding jobs in large-scale agriculture and railroad construction, while the “New Immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe settled in cities of the northeast and took factory jobs. The nation also experienced the exodus of a large portion of the southern black population, known as the “Great Migration,” leaving behind failing agricultural endeavors for the promise of jobs in the North. Blacks worked on the fringes at menial jobs and earned less than other workers at all skill levels.<sup>34</sup>

Native-born Americans grew concerned about the dangers they perceived in the new labor pool. Workers worried about the threat of wage-cuts and job shortages as they competed with minority laborers. Employers enjoyed the cost effectiveness of hiring women and non-whites, but worried about the radicalism of foreign workers and violence between competing worker groups. The upper classes expressed alarm at the correlation

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factories operated with bulky machines that provided limited access for operation and maintenance; because women and children were smaller than most men were, factories increasingly began to utilize them as a labor source. Second, and more importantly, it cost less to employ women and children. Women received a little more than half the wages men earned, and children received less than that; therefore, an employer could attain double the production with no increase in labor costs. A few men stayed in managerial positions, but most left for other jobs, as the presence of women lowered the status of the position.

<sup>34</sup> Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2001), Second Edition, 9-11; Ginger, *Age of Excess*, 75.

they found between the rising non-white population and the rising levels of crime and immorality in industrial society.<sup>35</sup>

A final significant development of industrial society was the emergence of a distinctly different class structure. The wealthy elite maintained their position at the top of society although new members made wealthy by industrial entrepreneurship joined them. Industrialization also created a large, highly visible working class, comprised of native-born white laborers, immigrants, and southern blacks. However, the most dramatic change to the class system was the emergence by the 1890s of a new middle class, rapidly gaining strength. Too wide-ranging to create a tightly knit group, the middle class divided into two broad but manageable categories. One included those with professional aspirations in fields like medicine, law, and social work. The second comprised specialists in business, labor, and agriculture. Members of the middle class took pride in identification with their individual skills and specializations gaining respectable, profitable positions at the tops of their fields in the new social order. Formal entry requirements protected the prestige and exclusivity of the professional class and assured the deference of their neighbors.<sup>36</sup>

Not everyone was pleased with the outcomes of industrialization and concerns about long workdays, low pay, hazardous conditions, and child labor led to unrest. The working class addressed undesirable working conditions by organizing in trade and labor unions. Labor unrest tended to turn violent, as in the cases of the Pullman Strike and the Haymarket Square Riot. Fearing the threat to individual safety and property, as well as

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<sup>35</sup> Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 11; Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 64-66; Ginger, *Age of Excess*, 79; Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 7; Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 112-113.

social disorder, many Americans became increasingly concerned about the behavior of the new working class.<sup>37</sup>

Some contended the factory system made work more impersonal and eradicated feelings of social obligation to maintain order. Fluid labor populations maintained few ties to the community and were, therefore, less likely to invest in that community. Labor unrest increased tensions between the property-owning class and the working class. Competition for jobs increased conflict between native-born white workers and foreign-born workers, whom, regardless of their nationality, many saw as racially inferior to white Americans. Industry also increased the number of female workers, whom society subsequently blamed for the perceived rise in depravity because they were working rather than fulfilling obligations to raise responsible, moral children and blamed for increased labor unrest because they competed with men for jobs.<sup>38</sup>

Accompanying the dramatic rise in industrialization was an equally remarkable increase in urbanization. The city, like the factory, became a symbol of the new America. Between 1860 and 1910, the number of people living in urban areas increased sevenfold;<sup>39</sup> however, this increase was not the result solely of natural growth but also the migration of people from rural America, and immigration from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. People poured into the cities, lured by the excitement and entertainment, by friends and family already living there and, most importantly, by increased opportunities

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<sup>37</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 11; Carl Resek ed., *The Progressives* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xviii-xix.

<sup>38</sup> Ginger, *The Age of Excess*, 79; Thomas C. Leonard, "Protecting Family and Race: The Progressive Case for Regulating Women's Work," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 64 (July 2005): 757.

<sup>39</sup> Added together, the twenty biggest urban centers accounted for less than two million people in 1850, but New York alone had more than three million half a century later; Chicago and Philadelphia had more than a million; St. Louis, Boston, and Baltimore had more than 500,000. Summers, *The Gilded Age*, 7.

for jobs and higher wages. The ease of commuting to the cities on streetcars and subways allowed the cities to expand outward; those who could afford to pay the fares, usually the professionals of the middle class, moved away from the crowded industrial areas at the heart of the city and into the residential areas of the suburbs. As the middle class moved out, the working classes poured in. Newcomers occupied the older brownstones and row houses vacated by the middle class, with foreign immigrants living in distinctive enclaves. The streetcar city, sprawling and specialized, became a more fragmented and stratified society with middle-class residents surrounding the business and working classes at the city's center.<sup>40</sup>

Like industry, urbanization produced a number of problems in society. Cities at once exemplified the best and the worst of modern society; while displaying innovation and progress, they also exhibited the worst cases of degeneration. Reformers felt that cities were plagued with overcrowding, poverty, crime, prostitution, and various other indications of moral decay and degeneracy. The greatest concern about these urban problems came from newly arrived small-town or rural people, unaccustomed to the phenomena of urban life. To the rural migrant, this was not a new social order but a threat to civilization itself.<sup>41</sup> Many, like Josiah Strong, worried that the city, if not somehow tamed, would lead to the downfall of the nation. "The first city," Strong wrote,

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<sup>40</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 44-45; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1972), 127. For detailed discussion of urban development in America during the nineteenth century, see also David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>41</sup> Edward A. Ross, "The Criminaloid Type" in *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915*, edited by Richard Hofstadter (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963), 73; Jane Addams, "an Ancient Evil," in *The Progressive Movement*, 87-88; Resek, *The Progressives*, 15; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 175-76.

“was built by the first murderer and crime and vice and wretchedness has festered there ever since.”<sup>42</sup>

While a sizeable number of these new urban dwellers migrated from the farms and small towns of rural America, the majority arrived from Europe. Between 1877 and 1890, more than six million people entered the United States, and by 1910, the number had climbed to well over thirteen million foreign-born residents. Immigration diversified the cultural, religious, and linguistic landscape of the cities, but this diversity made it difficult for groups to interact; therefore, immigrants often resided in close-knit communities and clung to native customs, languages, and religions. Like many of their native-born counterparts, immigrants came from rural backgrounds, which forced them to make similar adjustments to life in an industrial society.<sup>43</sup>

Industrialization and urbanization coupled with a breakdown of the relative homogeneity of the population created a fear of immigrant invasion. Forty years of migration rapidly increased the population of Europeans whose religion, traditions, languages, and sheer numbers made easy assimilation into mainstream American culture impossible. In the city, the native-born American encountered immigrants and slums, crowded tenement housing, unsanitary misery, and alien tongues and religions that horrified him. A steady supply of immigrants willing to work for lower wages in worse conditions threatened the economic opportunity of white Americans. Feeling outnumbered and overwhelmed, native-born Americans looked for the source of society’s present state. The same things that made immigrants difficult to assimilate – language, religion, lack of political understanding – also made them easy to marginalize and to

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<sup>42</sup> Josiah Strong, *The Twentieth Century City* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1898), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 176-177; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 43-47.

blame for the degeneration of urban society. Belief that declining ethnic homogeneity imperiled society and democracy increasingly allowed nativism to taint civic reform.<sup>44</sup>

Josiah Strong summed up the nativist agenda when he wrote,

The Anglo-Saxon was being schooled for the final competition of the races, during which he would spread his civilization all over the world. Is there room for reasonable doubt that this race, unless devitalized by alcohol and tobacco, is destined to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others and mold the remainder until, in a very true and important sense, it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind? [sic]<sup>45</sup>

In spite of the positive aspects present in the new urban-industrial society, many Americans found cause for complaint. The rapidly changing structure of society brought diverse groups into contact with each other and placed many in unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations. Prior to 1870, America was comprised of small, autonomous communities; relatively homogenous and usually Protestant, they enjoyed an inner stability created by loyalty of the members due to dependence on the community. As communities expanded, they became more fluid and less homogenous. America became a society without a core, afflicted by a general splintering process, rendering it incapable of facing the challenges of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. To the middle-class citizens brought up to think in terms of the nineteenth-century order, the outlook seemed grim. The overwhelming feelings of helplessness in the face of

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<sup>44</sup> Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 8, 177-79; Ginger, *Age of Excess*, 77-79, 187; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 157-60, 177-182. Contemporary views of racial and ethnic distinction are illustrated in John R. Commons, *Races and Immigration in America* (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1907); Julie Novkov, *Racial Constructions* (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914); Edward A. Ross, "The Causes of Race Superiority," *Annals of American Political and Social Science*, 18 (1901): 35-57; Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920). An excellent source for recent analysis of the contingent quality of immigrants' "whiteness" is Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country, Its Possible Future, and Present Crisis*, quoted in Ginger, *Age of Excess*, 187.

challenges to the old order created a catastrophe mentality among native-born Americans.<sup>46</sup>

This new and chaotic social order, rife with evil, negligence, and moral depravity concerned many Americans who realized something was happening in their lives they had not intended and did not want. In response, they struck at whatever enemies their worldview presented. They fought to preserve the society that gave their life meaning. Once roused, the sense of emergency was self-perpetuating. Men from all walks of life, already shaken by an incomprehensible world, responded to any new upheaval as an immediate threat. Unrelated incidents took on the suspicious undertones of conspiracy and, when placed in a framework of jeopardy, furthered anxieties about imminent danger. Anxiety quickly turned to paranoia, and it appeared collapse was on the horizon.<sup>47</sup>

Hardly content to do nothing and wait for society's downfall, a number of individuals and groups pursued reform measures to end the perceived deterioration of society. The "machine-made problems of monopoly and automation; the urban problems of slum, transportation, and crime; and the rural problems of material and cultural poverty matured during the Gilded Age" and initiated the emphasis on social control and reform gave birth to the period of active participation known as the Progressive Era.<sup>48</sup> Reflecting the high-tensions of the period and encouraging a humanitarian approach to urban reform, Progressivism initially sought to elevate the condition of the individual and

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<sup>46</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 1-3, 11, 25-27; Ginger, *Age of Excess*, 187. For further discussion of the catastrophe mentality, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), Reprint Edition.

<sup>47</sup> Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 149; Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 45-47, 138, 196; Ginger, *Age of Excess*, 186-189; Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 39, 44-46, 76-77.

<sup>48</sup> Ari Hoogenboom and Olive Hoogenboom ed., *The Gilded Age* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 1-2.

society and thereby relieve apprehensions while Populism attempted to reform government and business by eradicating corruption.<sup>49</sup>

The intellectual developments in England during the late-nineteenth century regarding the role of environment in developing characteristics and the ability of a species to evolve in response to its environment, provided the framework for understanding how society had reached its present state and, more importantly, how the Progressives might reverse the situation. The British scientist Charles Darwin was the first to demonstrate various species of animals adapted to suit the demands of their environment through a process he called “natural selection.” According to Darwin, organisms better suited to their environment gained some survival advantage and passed their genetic advantages to their offspring. Those unable to adapt to their environment died out, replaced by those who evolved, eliminating the people carrying the deficient traits over time.<sup>50</sup>

The work of British philosopher Herbert Spencer gave the biological function of evolution sociological implications American social reformers later adopted and adapted. According to Spencer, human society is always in a kind of evolutionary process in which nature selects the fittest to dominate while the unfit struggle for survival. Just as nature weeds out the unfit, an enlightened society ought to weed out its unfit and permit them to die off so they do not weaken the racial stock. Spencer’s view eventually came to be known as “Social Darwinism” although Darwin officially rejected the ideas of

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<sup>49</sup> Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, vii-viii.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (London: 1859)



Spencer. Spencer gained substantial following in Britain, but his ideas became even more popular among Progressive reformers and American scientists.<sup>51</sup>

Progressives based their reform efforts on two precepts: first, the importance of environment and second, faith in Spencer's notion of Social Darwinism advocating the "survival of the fittest." Believing environment determined the development of people in society, Progressives initiated a broad spectrum of reforms intended to ameliorate social problems as the upper classes perceived them. Reformers saw this as a way to reinforce acceptable behavior, direct morality, and control the portions of society that made them uncomfortable. Through reform efforts, the upper classes gained power over the lives of the "degenerate" classes who threatened the social order.<sup>52</sup>

Reform started with industry and an attempt to better society by changing the conditions of the working environment. Progressives asserted that better working conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages would ease labor tensions, reduce poverty, and reduce degeneracy by giving parents more time with their children. They also hoped the benefits of higher wages would solve problems of crime and prostitution. When labor reforms proved difficult to procure and insufficient to eliminate all urban problems expediently, reformers increased their efforts to improve the urban environment by creating conditions less suitable for crime and degeneracy. Urban reform took a variety of shapes, including settlement houses, temperance unions, welfare, and medical care. Urban reformers encouraged labor reform, in hopes a "living wage" would decrease poverty and with it reduce crime and prostitution as means of supporting families. Early

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<sup>51</sup>Degler, *In Search of Human Nature*, 15-27; Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, (New York: Bacon Press, 1992), 45. Not coincidentally, those Spencer considered "fit" were also those white members of the middle and upper classes who had the most opportunity to excel in society, usually at the expense of the lower classes, whom he deemed "unfit."

<sup>52</sup>Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 67; Kraut, *The Huddled Masses*, 179-182.

social reformers generally believed that once they had created an acceptable living environment, natural selection would take over, enabling the fittest individuals to benefit from their environment while the weaker element, unable to adapt and take advantage of the favorable conditions, would perish.<sup>53</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the Progressive movement became a national reform effort. However, in spite of its apparent popularity, environmental reform movements exhibited a variety of shortcomings. Environmental reform was slow to produce tangible results in society, and people were unwilling to support costly reform efforts if they produced no results. In addition, individuals backsliding into old, familiar ways or being replaced by the seemingly endless “tide of moral degenerates” hindered the permanence of environmental changes.<sup>54</sup> The failure of environmental reform to satisfactorily ease social tensions, accompanied by the perpetuation of “race suicide” rhetoric by notable Progressives, including Theodore Roosevelt and David Starr Jordan, renewed fears that American society was in great peril. This resurgence in crisis mentality accompanied a shift away from Gilded Age anti-intellectualism towards a society that embraced advances in science and other academic fields. The combination of paranoia and renewed faith in the supremacy of rational, scientific thought provided the perfect environment for the development of American eugenics programs.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Resek, *The Progressives*, xx; Degler, *In Search of Human Nature*, 57. Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model, Nature as Threat* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, *The Revolt against Civilization* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 23.

<sup>55</sup> David Starr Jordan, *The Blood of the Nation: a Study of the Decay of Races through the Survival of the Unfit* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1903); Theodore Roosevelt, “A Letter from President Roosevelt on Race Suicide,” *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 35 (May 1907): 550-551. Proponents of this alarmist rhetoric posit that through infertility and the choice to have fewer children, the Anglo-Saxon race was committing race suicide by allowing inferior races, namely the Slavs, Irish, Jews, and Blacks, to surpass it in reproduction.

Eugenics is a social philosophy based on scientific principles advocating the improvement of human hereditary traits by selection of the “fit.” The American eugenics movement was a part of the “nature versus nurture” debate and the broader search for understanding of the roles of heredity and environment in creating human differences and the potential improvement of human beings. The researchers who developed and supported eugenic thought subscribed to the belief that nature and heredity exert stronger influence upon human development than environmental factors do.

English biosocial scientist Sir Francis Galton coined the term “eugenic” meaning “wellborn,” in 1883. Galton observed that the leaders of British society were far more likely to be related to each other than chance alone might allow and began investigating the reasons for this. He explained adult leadership in terms of inherited qualities, insisting the superior biological inheritance of members of the ruling classes determined their social position. Galton, drawing on the work of his cousin Charles Darwin, developed a theory of hereditary human characteristics asserting humans inherited intellectual and behavioral characteristics the same way they inherited hair and eye color.<sup>56</sup>

Galtonian geneticists focused on the inheritance of degenerate or “cacogenic” characteristics such as poverty, criminal behavior, feeble-mindedness, and insanity as well as desirable or eugenic characteristics like intelligence, morality, and mental stability. Galton believed increased breeding of people who shared desirable characteristics, and restricted breeding of those with undesirable characteristics, could improve society in much the same way a livestock herd was improved. He called this

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<sup>56</sup> Francis Galton, *Essays in Eugenics* (London: Eugenics Education Society, 1909), 3, 7-10.

theory “Eugenics,” meaning, “to be well-born”. Galton’s vision of eugenics took two forms; “Positive eugenics” encouraged the fit to have more children and “Negative eugenics” aimed at forcibly preventing the unfit from procreating. In Europe, where there existed a longer tradition of stratification and social hierarchy, positive eugenics enjoyed a degree of popularity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries because it reinforced society’s inclination to “marry well”. Negative eugenics however, was less successful, as few saw the need to take such restrictive measures.<sup>57</sup>

The late-nineteenth century was a revolutionary period in biology during which many scientists rejected environmentalist interpretations of human improvement. Augustus Weismann concluded that Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s assertions about the transmission of acquired characteristics were wrong and posited instead that germ plasm determined inherited traits and was unaffected by environmental changes. Scientists based their new theories of heredity on the “rediscovered” work of Moravian abbot Gregor Mendel. Mendel, in his experiments with pea plants, discovered he could control inherited traits and predict the quality of future generations. Mendel’s work supported eugenicists’ theories that a variety of complex intellectual and social traits could be explained by heredity.<sup>58</sup>

The acceptance of Galtonian eugenics by American scientists and academics along with the rediscovery and examination of Gregor Mendel’s work on hereditary traits excited a number of reformers. They believed determination of inherited traits would

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<sup>57</sup>Galton, *Essays in Eugenics*, 9-12, 27, 60-68; Haller, *Eugenics*, 34.

<sup>58</sup>Mendel’s work commonly known as Mendelian inheritance or Mendelian genetics was published in 1865-66, but was “rediscovered” in 1900 as “nature” gained momentum in the nature-nurture debate. Initially the ideas were very controversial, but later, when combined with Thomas Hunt Morgan’s chromosome theory of inheritance, became the core of classical genetics. Peter J. Bowler, *The Mendelian Revolution: The Emergence of Hereditarian Concepts in Modern Science and Society*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 36-8.

allow for the development of programs to eliminate those traits reformers and scientists considered undesirable. In 1910, the Eugenics Record Office was founded at Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Under the leadership of biologist, Charles B. Davenport, the Cold Spring Harbor laboratory became the foremost institution for genetic research in the country, and in 1920, it merged with the Station for Experimental Evolution to become the Department of Genetics at the Carnegie Institute. Davenport and his researchers emphasized the role of genetics in creating societal problems and the importance of using scientific means to eradicate those problems. They claimed poverty, crime, immorality, and even radicalism were inherited traits; some possessed genetic predispositions to success and other to destitution. The only way to improve society and eradicate degeneracy was to utilize scientific means to curtail the transmission of undesirable traits. Scientific reform became popular among a wide variety of people because it promised permanent change and an expedient elimination of the “bothersome classes.”<sup>59</sup>

Eugenicists believed the key to a successful program was education, making the dissemination of their ideas of the utmost importance. The first step was to reach out to the young, educated populations; many college professors who supported eugenics gave lectures on the benefits of eugenics from the view of sociology, anthropology, anatomy, and economics. Paul Popenoe’s *Applied Eugenics* became standard reading in biology classes at many universities. Starting in the 1920s, Harry Laughlin at the Eugenics Record Office, along with Frederick Osborn at the American Eugenics Society, oversaw the production of a number of professional publications, including the *Eugenics Review*, *Journal of Heredity*, *Eugenical News*, and *American Journal of Eugenics*. Eugenicists utilized a different approach for reaching the public outside the classroom: competition.

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<sup>59</sup>Saleeby, *Progress*, 15.

Two highly effective tactics were Fitter Family competitions and the sermon contests. Fitter Family competitions were held at state fairs for people to compete with other families based on their hereditary “fitness.” Accompanying the contests were exhibits educating passersby on the importance of eugenic living, allowing the eugenicists’ message to reach a large number of people. The other method for reaching large populations was through the church. Eugenics societies held contests and offered cash prizes to the ministers with the best sermons encouraging eugenics. Church leaders preached eugenic messages because they supported the emphasis on morality, clean living, and good marriage choices. The prevalence of eugenics material in everyday life meant a number of people were acquainted with some of its basic premises, even if they did not fully understand the full implications of the program, and based on the knowledge they had, seemed agreeable to scientifically based social reform.<sup>60</sup>

Eugenicists argued that charity and science made Social Darwinian notions of “survival of the fittest” invalid in modern society. According to William Howell, “science defends man from nature and agencies of civilization strive to improve the quality of the individual,” and as a result, nature is no longer able to eliminate the weakest elements of society.<sup>61</sup> Eugenicists also rejected the theory of improvement through environmental change. Believing all characteristics are inherited, they claimed even the most amiable environment would make little difference in the state of society if defective individuals continued to propagate. Environment was no longer the culprit in social outcries against degeneracy; rather, eugenicists argued, the defective biology of the

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<sup>60</sup> Saleeby, *Progress*, 25-7; Morton Aldrich, ed., *Eugenics: 12 University Lectures*, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1914), 3; Christina Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 5-9, 22.

<sup>61</sup> William H. Howell, “Eugenics as Viewed by the Physiologist,” in *Eugenics: 12 University Lectures*, 81.

degenerate classes caused undesirable environments to develop. Finally, eugenic reform shifted focus away from Gilded Age ideals of laissez-faire individualism and towards a society in which an active government placed the good of society above the rights of the individual. As enthusiastic eugenicist Sidney Webb stated, “No Eugenicist can be a ‘Laisser Faire’ [sic] individualist unless he throws up the game in despair. He must interfere, interfere, interfere!”<sup>62</sup>

Once they constructed a basic framework for reform policies, eugenicists set about determining whom they would target with the new reform efforts. In short, they needed to determine who was ultimately responsible for the present state of society so they could eliminate that detrimental influence. Naturally, the targets were the groups most easily marginalized and vilified, such as the poor, the insane, criminals, urban laborers, and racial minorities. Eugenicists characterized the unfit as:

...unhygienic and alcoholic...they raised the rate of illiteracy and insanity...fostered bad morals, and threatened the position of women, they spurred over growth in the cities... and threatened to overwhelm ‘American Blood’ and bastardize American civilization.<sup>63</sup>

“Unfit” was a multi-purpose term used to categorize individuals with a variety of physical, mental, and moral defects, all of which portended the downfall of society. Surprisingly, in spite of rampant racism and nativism present in American society, biological superiority was not based entirely on racial hierarchies. Early eugenic research

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<sup>62</sup> Frederick Osborn, *The Future of Human Heredity: An Introduction to Eugenics In Modern Society* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), 22-25; Degler, *In Search of Human Nature*, 47; Alfred Russel Wallace, “Human Selection,” *Fortnightly Review*, 48 (September 1890), 326-28; Sidney Webb, “Eugenics and the Poor Laws: The Minority Report,” *Eugenics Review*, 2 (1910-1911): 237; N.A., “Social Problems Have Proven Basis of Heredity,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1913, SM10.

<sup>63</sup> Edward A. Ross, *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People*. (New York: The Century Company, 1914), 219.

focused on white families thought to have “degenerate” attributes - criminality, pauperism, alcoholism, and prostitution were the chief concerns. As a result, the native-born physical, mental, and psychological defectives received the designation of unfit first. Criminals and individuals with a family history of poverty, joblessness, or deviant behavior, regardless of race comprised the next division of the unfit. Emphasizing the inheritability of degenerate traits early, eugenicists sought to prevent these groups from raising families and perpetuating a defective population.<sup>64</sup>

Following these designations, and extending their understanding of inherited characteristics, eugenicists’ research began to reflect the nativist and racist sentiments of society. Racial science begins with the view that racial differences are real, significant, scientifically measurable, and inheritable; this science based on the premise of a racial hierarchy is scientific racism. During the early twentieth century, scientific racists used measurements of the skull and other body structures to determine desirable traits and expose inferior races. For many, scientific racism provided concrete evidence that the large immigrant population was filled with inferior individuals, justifying the segregation and persecution of immigrants living in America and the restriction of future immigration.<sup>65</sup>

Upon establishing the scientific basis for determining the unfit, scientists and social workers initiated an American version of eugenics similar to the British program. American eugenicists wholeheartedly adopted the British movement’s belief that the primary goal of eugenic programs was to bolster the strength and numbers of the fit classes. Proponents of positive eugenics advocated education programs to inform young

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<sup>64</sup> Carlson, *The Unfit*, 245; Thomas C. Leonard “More Merciful and Not Less Effective” *History of Political Economy*, 35 (Spring 2003): 691.

<sup>65</sup> Leonard, “More Merciful and Not Less Effective,” 690.



people about the importance of choosing genetically desirable mates, as well as pre-marital counseling to determine if a couple's genetic qualities were complimentary. Many advocated requiring a certificate verifying the eugenic fitness of each party before obtaining a marriage license.<sup>66</sup>

The fit were encouraged to marry young and have as many children as they could afford to support comfortably. Advocates often used the Mormons as examples of good, eugenic marriages, stating they were, "inclined to early marriage and large families having at least two more children, on average, than other sects. They also exhibit a more rigidly selective choice of mates." Eugenicists proposed the use of competitions and incentive programs to encourage eugenic marriages. They initiated the "Fitter Families" and "Better Babies" competitions at state fairs and lobbied for tax cuts and cost of living stipends for fit couples who produced large families.<sup>67</sup>

A final aspect of positive eugenics was the hygienic living campaign. While initiated by Sylvester Graham to improve health through sanitary environment and balanced diet in the 1830s, his successor John Harvey Kellogg, an avid eugenicist, brought the notion of hygienic living into the eugenics orbit in 1906. He founded the Race Betterment Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan, as an institution for eugenic research. He believed the unhealthy effects of alcohol, tobacco, improper dress and unhealthy foods led to feeble-mindedness, insanity, pauperism and crime which could be passed on to future generations. Kellogg contended sanitary conditions and proper nutrition were essential for fit parents to continue producing fit children. The emphasis

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<sup>66</sup> Galton, *Essays in Eugenics*, 22-27; Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 115; N.A. "Must be Normal and Well to Wed," *New York Times*, March 25, 1912, 3.

<sup>67</sup> N.A. "Want More Babies in Best Families," *New York Times*, September 25, 1921, 16; R. H. Johnson "Lauds Mormon Marriages," *New York Times*, November 12, 1921, 13.

on environmental improvement for eugenic aims is called euthenics. While eugenicists generally agreed heredity was more important, many realized even the most stringent eugenic policies could not operate under conditions of extreme poverty, ill health, and isolation.<sup>68</sup>

American eugenicists believed simply encouraging the fit to have more children was insufficient to reverse the decline of society and actively advocated a widespread negative eugenics campaign. Supporters of negative eugenics aspired to eliminate defective and degenerate classes by preventing the perpetuation of their kind. Restrictive efforts began with a drive for segregation. Initially, social workers and scientists believed that confining criminal classes to prisons and persons who were diseased, insane, or mentally deficient to asylums and hospitals would sufficiently slow their reproduction rates and protect fit society from degeneracy.<sup>69</sup>

This approach proved impractical on a number of levels. First, segregating the unfit from fit society did not stop them from having children within the confines of a prison or asylum. Second, the judicial system was not constructed to incarcerate low-level criminals indefinitely, so they were eventually released back into society. Finally, the unfit came predominantly from the poor and therefore, provided no compensation for their own care, meaning the cost of segregating them fell to the government and the

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<sup>68</sup> James C. Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 289, Engs, *Eugenics*, 135-36; Harvey E. Jordan, "Eugenics: Its Data, Scope and Promise as seen by the Anatomist," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 109-112; Frederick Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics* (New York: Harper Brothers Press, 1940), 198.

<sup>69</sup> Ian Dowbiggin, *Keeping America Sane: Psychiatry and Eugenics in America and Canada, 1880-1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 5-7, 254-62.

People. In light of these complications, reformers began to explore other means of restricting the unfit.<sup>70</sup>

At the fore of potential restrictive programs emerged marriage restriction and birth control. Marriage restriction advocates usually came from the same group of positive eugenicists who advocated health certificates for couples wishing to get married. They believed restricting marriage to only those deemed eugenically fit would solve the problem of the disproportionate expansion of the unfit. However, like segregation campaigns, this proved impractical because restricting marriage did not guarantee the unfit would not find an anti-eugenics official willing to marry them or simply produce children outside the bonds of marriage.<sup>71</sup>

The birth control movement developed separately from eugenics, under the direction of Margaret Sanger and Raymond Pearl. Struggling to gain acceptance of birth control ideology in mainstream society, Sanger and Pearl promoted their cause to the eugenicists, hoping to gain support for their own venture. Sanger advocated educating women about the voluntary use of contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies among all classes and encouraged the provision of low-or no-cost birth control to the poorer classes. Initially receptive,<sup>72</sup> many eugenicists distanced themselves from Sanger's agenda when she began to advocate voluntary motherhood among the fit

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<sup>70</sup>N.A. "Degenerate Family Costly to State," *New York Times* (December 17, 1911): 12; Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics*, 30-31.

<sup>71</sup> Carlson, *The Unfit*, 175-77; Dowbiggin, *Keeping America Sane*, 137-41.

<sup>72</sup> Of the 50 members of the American Birth Control League's Council in 1920, at least 23 were involved in eugenics at prominent levels either as members of the American Eugenics Society Board of Directors or by otherwise publicly supporting the eugenics agenda. Angela Franks, *Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2005), 9.

classes, because her position diametrically opposed their view that prolific motherhood was a woman's duty to her country.<sup>73</sup>

Some eugenicists contended segregation and birth control could not be utilized effectively while degenerates continued to pour in from other countries and therefore, lent support to immigration restriction. Immigration restriction was neither a new endeavor nor exclusively a eugenic measure during this period. Limitations on immigration had been imposed long before eugenic thought arrived from England. The 1882 Act to Regulate Immigration prohibited entry to "any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge". The law was designed to exclude immigrants whose undesirable conditions might prove costly to society – including convicted criminals, the poor, and the mentally ill. In that same year, the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first measure to target immigrants specifically by race or ethnicity. The sheer number of new arrivals troubled many U.S. citizens. As the numbers of immigrants increased, eugenicists allied themselves with other interest groups to provide biological arguments to support immigration restriction.<sup>74</sup>

In 1911, Immigration Restriction League President Prescott Hall asked his former Harvard classmate Charles Davenport of the Eugenics Record Office for assistance to influence Congressional debate on immigration. Davenport recommended a survey to determine the national origins of "hereditary defectives" in American prisons, mental

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<sup>73</sup> Ellsworth Huntington, "Its Advocates are Seeking Intelligent Birth Control," *New York Times*, October 23, 1927, E5; Margaret Sanger, *The Case for Birth Control* (New York: Modern Art Printing Co., 1917) 2-5, 15-19; N.A. "To Raise New Race is Woman's Problem," *New York Times*, March 19, 1911, 12; Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 75.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Lombardo, "Eugenic Laws Restricting Immigration," (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Dolan DNA Learning Center, 2001): 1; N.A. "Eugenics and Immigration" *Journal of Heredity*, 5 (September 1914): 422.

hospitals and other charitable institutions. Davenport appointed colleague Harry Laughlin to manage the research program.<sup>75</sup>

Congress by 1917 had expanded the legal definition of those "likely to become a public charge" to include "all idiots, imbeciles, feebleminded persons, epileptics, and insane persons...persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority...and mentally or physically defective." Later involvement of eugenicists further broadened that definition by specifying the immigrant groups most likely to represent what Laughlin called the "socially inadequate." In 1920, Laughlin appeared before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and a survey of the number of foreign-born persons in jails, prisons and reformatories, he argued the "American" gene pool was being polluted by a rising tide of intellectually and morally defective immigrants – primarily from eastern and southern Europe. Eugenicists exchanged scientifically based support of the nativist agenda for nativist political support of eugenic reform programs, but to little avail. Reducing the number of undesirable immigrants produced few real changes.<sup>76</sup>

Realizing all other eugenic measures either proved impractical or failed to produce permanent results, reformers initiated their most drastic reform plan, the drive for sterilization. Frederick Osborn, a leading sterilization advocate, summed up the prevailing view, stating, "The inexcusable process of allowing the feeble minded, when they leave an institution...to reproduce their kind is on the way to being checked in a number of states, where such persons may be sterilized prior to their release." Sterilization of both male and female degenerates provided a rapid, economical, and most

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<sup>75</sup> Engs, *Eugenics* 12, 23-5, 37. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 89-91.

<sup>76</sup> Lombardo, "Eugenic Laws"; Laughlin *Eugenical Sterilization*, 27-31; Clarissa Henry, *Of Pure Blood* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 195-96.

importantly permanent solution to the preponderance of the unfit and with it the eradication of the main source of society's problems, namely poverty, crime, disease and moral degeneracy.<sup>77</sup>

Opponents in state legislation debates objected to sterilization on Constitutional grounds. They claimed the practice violated Eighth Amendment protections against cruel and unusual punishment. Supporters denied any violation on the assertion that the Eighth Amendment did not apply to state legislatures and also that sterilizations were therapeutic rather than punitive; therefore, they were not open to attack under the cruel and unusual clause. Opposition also contended compulsory sterilization of feeble-minded persons violated the right to due process of law; however, because sterilization laws provided for personal notification, opportunity for defense, and right of appeal, due process was not violated. Finally, some claimed that sterilization involved an unreasonable use of police power.<sup>78</sup> Eugenacists countered this argument by asserting, "The state has the right to protect good citizens from those who are evil. To secure protection from the evil doer the state may and often does take his life, may it not therefore render him incompetent to reproduce his kind?"<sup>79</sup> Most often, they equated sterilization for the prevention of degeneracy with the compulsory vaccination of children to prevent spread of disease.

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<sup>77</sup> Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics*, 31;

<sup>78</sup> William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1952 reprint), 45, N.A., "Constitutional Law, Validity of Sterilization Laws," *Harvard Law Review*, 39 (April 1926): 770; N.A., "Constitutional Law: Sterilization of Mental Defectives," *Michigan Law Review*, 25 (June 1927): 908; S.W.C., II, "Constitutional Law: Insane and Defective Persons: Sterilization of Defectives," *California Law Review*, 17 (March 1929): 271-3; N.A., "Constitutional Law: Class Legislation: Sterilization of the Mentally Defective in State Institutions," *The Yale Law Review* 28 (December, 1918): 189; W.W.S., "Public Opinion and Judicial Opinion," *Michigan Law Review*, 14 (June 1916): 663.

<sup>79</sup> Victor C. Vaughan, "Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 75.

By 1924, twenty-one states had adopted legislation based on Harry Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law. The laws varied, fitting within the confines of state constitutions and regional attitudes. However, the sheer number of states advocating some type of eugenic statute indicates a sizeable number of people shared the views of Supreme Court Chief Justice Holmes when he concluded in 1927, “three generations of imbeciles is enough.”<sup>80</sup>

While eugenics attracted the interest of people across the spectrum of society, no group influenced the movement more greatly than the new, urban middle class did. They became the frontrunners of the movement for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the middle-class was comprised of professionals in the fields of science, medicine, psychiatry, academe, and industrial management.<sup>81</sup> They were the first to examine British theories of Eugenics and they were the people with the most contact with the

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<sup>80</sup> Leon Whitney, *The Case for Sterilization*, (New York: Frederick A. Stocks, 1934), 15-19; Angela Gugliotta, “Dr. Sharp with his Little Knife: Therapeutic and Punitive Origins of Eugenic Vasectomy, Indiana 1892-1921,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 57 (Winter 1998): 371-406; Vaughan, “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician,” 75; Frederick Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics*, 27-30; Scull, “A Chance to Cut is a Chance to Cure,” 55. Harry H. Laughlin, *Eugenical Sterilization in the U.S.* (Chicago: Psychopathic Laboratory of Chicago, 1922) 33-36; Smith and Nelson, *The Sterilization of Carrie Buck*, 278. In 1924 the states that allowed for compulsory sterilization were: Alabama, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

<sup>81</sup> Analysis of the backgrounds of the 144 leading eugenicists who contributed to the pamphlet *What I Think About Eugenics* (New York: American Eugenics Society, 1920) provides the following statistics:

Occupation		Geographical Area Represented	
Educator	47	West	24
Scientist	22	Midwest	24
Clergy	19	South	20
Professor (lib. art)	10	East-Northeast	68
Physician	8	Undetermined	8
Author-Journalist	5		
Politician	5		
Lawyer	4		
Philanthropist	2		
Banker-Businessman	2		
Other	9		

urban population. Therefore, they understood, and to some degree fabricated, the dangers society faced. In this capacity, they had the greatest opportunity to develop and share their ideas on eugenic reform.

The middle class also held a greater portion of the risk in an unstable society; a non-laboring, specialized middle class was a new development of urban-industrial society and, as a result, the least stable part of the social structure. Many feared crime, moral deficiency, and social unrest among the lower classes would topple society and oust the professionals from their new position near the top of the social hierarchy. Crime and degeneracy, while potentially problematic, were much less significant to the wealthy, living in their country estates and having little contact with the poor, the criminal, and the diseased. The middle class, however, lived near and worked in the cities, where alleged degenerates were their patients, clients, and employees. Popular reform sentiment portraying these classes as unable to extricate themselves from the cycle of poverty, crime, and degeneracy, in tandem with the inherent patriarchal underpinnings of their professions, created an ethos of responsibility. This led to active involvement in the reform effort and a great outpouring of philanthropy by those with the means to do so, creating an alliance between the middle-class reformers and wealthy patrons who supported their endeavors as a vanguard against underworld depravity.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Charles A. Ellwood, "The Eugenics Movement from the Point of View of a Sociologist," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 214-16; Eugene S. Talbot, *Degeneracy, its causes, signs and results*, in *The Contemporary Science Series*, edited by Havelock Ellis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), 63-7; Ferdinand C.S. Schiller, *Social Decay and Eugenic Reform*, in series *The History of Hereditarian Thought*, edited by Charles Rosenberg, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1932, reprint 1984), 17-19. Analysis of the reform impulse is found in Hofstadter, *The Age of*; Hofstadter, editor, *The Progressive Movement*; Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*. Emphasis on the role of the middle class in reform is found in R.D. Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 317.



Reasons for advocating eugenics varied from person to person, but all consistently sought an explanation for the dramatically different and often unstable social order thrust upon them by the new society. The problems of crime, poverty, immorality, and racial tensions had existed in the nation since its inception. However, industrialization exacerbated the problems, and negated many of the existing solutions. Rigid class structures, sense of community and strict moral codes were no longer sufficient to control individual behavior in the fluid society marked by migrant laborers, increased social stratification, and breakdown of social networks. Many were also unsure about race relations in the post-Reconstruction world as a large, free-black population entered urban society. Prior to 1865, slavery served as the means of control, but following the Civil War, emancipation forced whites to find new ways of exerting dominance over this population. Black codes, Jim Crow Laws, and sharecropping served to perpetuate many of the pre-war conditions, but these did not ease anxieties about the integration of ex-slaves into white society. The integration of immigrant populations, which had rapidly increased alongside industrialization, created similar anxieties. Native-born Americans, felt outnumbered in their communities and workplaces. They sought understanding, stability, and continuity in a rapidly changing world, where existing rules and solutions no longer applied.<sup>83</sup>

New opportunities to regain control and shape society as the upper and middle classes envisioned it presented themselves with the advances made in science during the

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<sup>83</sup> Strong, *The Twentieth-Century City*, 13, 33-5, 105-7; Frederic Houssay, "Eugenics, Selection and the Origin of Defects," in *Problems in Eugenics: Papers Communicated at the First International Congress of Eugenics held at the University of London, July 24<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 1912* (London: Eugenics Education Society, 1912), 159; Alfredo Niceforo, "The Cause of the Inferiority of Physical and Mental Characters in the Lower Social Classes," in *Problems in Eugenics*, 189; N.A. "Some Causes of Poverty, Much Due to Physical, Mental, and Moral Degenerates," *Nebraska State Journal*, December 11, 1890, 6; N.A. "Eugenists Dread Tainted Aliens," *New York Times*, September 25, 1921, 25; N.A. "Effects of City Life, Its Degenerating Influence Over the Human Race" *Decatur Morning Review*, XII, June 6, 1890, 1.

late-nineteenth century. Eugenics not only explained the ineffectiveness of older reform efforts like charity and temperance, but also promised efficient and permanent amelioration of social problems. Decisions about the designation of “unfit” enabled eugenicists to exercise control over the lower classes and reinforce the class structure by emphasizing the differences between “respectable” and “degenerate” behaviors. Ultimately, people put faith in eugenics because it seemed like a practical way to alleviate suffering, eliminate problematic individuals, and create solidarity in a fragmented society.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FEEBLE MINDED AND SOCIAL INADEQUACY

In the minds of eugenics theorists, the most troublesome problem facing American society was that of defective heredity. They asserted that all “social evils” resulted from the existence of individuals with undesirable character traits such as feeble-mindedness, criminality, or disease. Defective parents passed these problems on to their children, increasing the rate of social decay. In light of their new belief in the power of heredity, eugenicists proposed that the nation could achieve the amelioration of all social problems and elevate the “fitness” of society by directing the course of reproduction to eliminate the socially inadequate strains from the genetic material of the population.<sup>84</sup>

In 1914, the Eugenics Record Office estimated that the anti-social varieties of the American people comprised ten percent of the total population. Aside from those clearly expressing unfit qualities, there existed a multitude of parents who, in many cases, appeared normal but who produced defective offspring. This great mass of humanity was not only a social menace to the present generation, but it harbored the potential parenthood of the social misfits of the future. According to eugenics’ authorities, guarding against hereditary degeneracy answers the demands of society’s humanitarian and racial instincts. For eugenicists, humanitarianism demanded that every individual born be given the opportunity for decent and effective life that our civilization can offer. Racial instinct demanded that defectives should not continue their unworthy traits to menace society.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Charles B. Davenport, *Eugenics, the Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding* (New York: Holt & Co., 1910), 3-5; Charles B. Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 16-19; Harry H. Laughlin, “Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population,” *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin*, 10A (February 1914): 5; Michael Guyer, *Being Wellborn: An Introduction to Heredity and Eugenics*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1916), 7-10

<sup>85</sup> Laughlin, “Report of the Committee,” 15-16; Robert Wolcott, “Eugenics as Viewed by Zoologists,” in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 16; Charles B. Davenport, “The Eugenics Programme and Progress in its Achievement,” in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 13.

Society grouped the socially inadequate into five categories: defective including the insane, senile, and manic-depressive; dependent consisting of tramps and paupers; delinquent covering thieves and truants; deficient referring to idiots or imbeciles; and finally degenerate including sadists and moral imbeciles. Eugenicians found this classification insufficient and constructed a list of cacogenic classes and their threat to society based on hereditary potential. Often the classes overlapped and an individual might exhibit traits of more than one class; however, the classifications provided a basic framework from which one could determine the social fitness of a subject.<sup>86</sup>

According to eugenicists, the greatest problem facing society was that of feeble-mindedness. Varying degrees of functionality existed within this class, namely the idiot “so deeply defective from birth that he is unable to guard against common physical dangers,” the imbecile “incapable of earning a living, but capable of defending against common danger,” and the feeble-minded “capable of providing a living under favorable conditions, but because of defect unable to compete with normal fellows.”<sup>87</sup> The incapacity of the feeble-minded to care for themselves made them an incredible drain upon the resources of society, as they required constant care. In addition, this class was prone to fall into poverty or commit crimes.

The prevalence of feeble-mindedness and its high correlation with traits of the pauper class, the inebriate class, and the criminal class led many to believe that members of these classes engaged in specific behaviors due to their deficient mental capacity. Other classes upon which feeble-mindedness had no apparent influence included the

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<sup>86</sup> Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 27; Laughlin, “Report of the Committee,” 17-19; Schiller, *Social Decay and Eugenic Reform*, 37-39.

<sup>87</sup> Harry H. Laughlin, “The Socially Inadequate: How Shall We Designate and Sort Them?” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 27 (July 1921): 62-65.

epileptic, the insane, the asthenic or physically weak with no other cacogenic traits, the diathetic exhibiting predisposition or susceptibility to certain diseases, the deformed including all types of physical deformities, and the cacaesthetic exhibiting hereditary absence or defects of various organs. These traits would only be factors in determining social adequacy if they were hereditary. Acquired characteristics, with the exception of some diseases, are not hereditary and are therefore of little concern in race development. Those cacogenic traits, which could be inherited, however, caused great concern among the adherents of eugenics ideology.<sup>88</sup>

However, the preponderance of individuals believed to possess genetic defects was cause for concern. Discovery of cacogenic families was achieved through extensive physical examination and genealogical research to investigate the occurrence of degeneracy in a family's history. The repetition of degenerate behavior or the widespread occurrence of multiple defective traits in a family history demonstrated the genetic transfer of undesirable traits and provided grounds classification as unfit. Eugenists were concerned about the effects of the socially inadequate upon society. They argued that inadequacy and degeneracy exacerbated social decay, drained the financial resources of the state, and hindered the progress of the nation. Therefore, the unfit were the source of the new problems in the industrial age. The unfit created the

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<sup>88</sup> David Starr Jordan, *The Heredity of Richard Roe a Discussion of the Principles of Eugenics*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1911), 88; Charles A. Reed, *Marriage and Genetics; Laws of Human Breeding and Applied Eugenics* (Cincinnati: The Galton Press, 1913), 21-22; Laughlin, "Report of Committee," 35-40, 42-46; Alfred Mjoen, "The Effect of Alcohol on Germ-Plasm," in *Problems in Eugenics*, 353; F.W. Mott, "Heredity and Eugenics in Relation to Insanity," in *Problems in Eugenics*, 401; S.A.K. Strahan, "The Propagation of Insanity and Allied Neuroses," *Journal of Mental Medicine* (July 1890): 6; Housay, "Eugenics Selection and the Origin of Defects," 158.

chaos that propelled society towards destruction and only their elimination would slow the perceived collapse of society.<sup>89</sup>

Eugenicists responded to concerns of urban society regarding urban decay with evidence that social problems were the result of defects in germ-plasm, the material that transmitted genetic traits from parent to child. They rejected the notion that the hardships of industrial capitalism and the deplorable city environments were the cause of social unrest. Instead, they attributed the behaviors and the unsavory living conditions of societal misfits to innate mental and moral defects. Bad environments did not create the degenerate classes of paupers, criminals, drunkards, and prostitutes, rather, bad environments arose from the continued existence of the socially inadequate. By propagating their kind, the unfit perpetuated undesirable results in future generations. Eugenicists believed that elimination of the individuals who engaged in crime, drunkenness, and prostitution would improve society by eliminating both the criminals and the individuals whose patronage allowed saloonkeepers and prostitutes to remain in business. The movement also argued that environmental improvements and charity were to be avoided because they inhibited natural selection by allowing the unfit to survive. According to eugenic theory, living conditions would improve in tandem with the improvement of the quality of persons populating the cities.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Jordan, *Richard Roe*, 26; Schiller, *Social Decay*, 25-27. The most widely used examples of family studies demonstrating heredity of cacogenic traits are found in: Richard Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Disease, Pauperism, and Heredity* (New York: Arno Press, 1970 reprint); Arthur Estabrook and Charles B. Davenport, *The Nam Family: A Study in Cacogenics*. (Long Island, NY: Eugenics Record Office, 1912); and Henry Goddard, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Hereditary of Feeble-Mindedness* (New York: Ayer Co. Publishing, 1912). See also "The Family History Book," compiled by Charles B. Davenport, *Eugenics Record Bulletin* 7 (September 1912): 6-101.

<sup>90</sup> N.A. "Social Problems Have Proven Basis in Heredity," *New York Times*, January 12, 1913, SM10; Schiller, *Social Decay*, 30; Jordan, *Richard Roe*, 76-77;

Propagation of the unfit inspired financial concerns among eugenics advocates. The cost incurred by families and the state in caring for the socially inadequate proved substantial. While no accurate figure was calculated for private expenditures to care for defectives outside state institutions, several eugenicists estimated that by 1914 the cost for the care of the three million defectives in the seven thousand state-run institutions totaled one hundred million dollars annually. Harry Laughlin found that between 1890 and 1900, the cost of state expenditures for care of socially inadequate comprised approximately twenty-five percent of state budgets for the decade and the average increased slightly between 1901 and 1910. Additionally, the cost increased because of the increased need for law enforcement and legal services.<sup>91</sup>

In spite of the urban and financial concerns, the threat social inadequacy posed to the progress of the human race was eugenicists' greatest fear. Victor Vaughan asserted, "The American people is threatened with the spread of degeneracy through the multiplication of the unfit [sic]."<sup>92</sup> Charles Reed encouraged "proper protection of society against the burden imposed upon it by the rapidly increasing army of the unfit."<sup>93</sup> Finally, David Starr Jordan articulated the central concern, that "society is as good as man has been able to make it and will only improve when the quality of man has improved."<sup>94</sup>

The aim of the eugenics program was to improve the quality of man, thereby rejuvenating the progress of society. Improvement was to be achieved by encouraging

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<sup>91</sup> H.T. Webber, "Eugenics from the Point of View of the Geneticist," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 141; Jordan, *Richard Roe*, 77-83; N.A. "Degenerate Family Costly to State," *New York Times*, December 17, 1911, 12; Laughlin, "Report of the Committee," 147.

<sup>92</sup> Vaughan, "Eugenics From the Point of View of the Physician," 74.

<sup>93</sup> Reed, *Marriage and Genetics*, 52.

<sup>94</sup> Jordan, *Richard Roe*, 29.



replenishment of good stock and preventing multiplication of bad stock. Frederick Osborn argued that science, if used properly, could reduce hereditary defects and it was worthwhile to consider practical measures by which dysgenic trends might be attacked.<sup>95</sup>

Many asserted that the destruction of the “unadapted” was the chief element of race progress; however, advances in society prevented that and it was up to eugenics to compensate for the inhibited process of natural selection. Most eugenicists promoted either segregation or compulsory sterilization. Because “the lowest stratum had neither intelligence nor self-control enough to justify the State to leave its matings in their own hands,” defectives were, so far as possible, to be segregated during the reproductive period or otherwise forcibly prevented from procreation.<sup>96</sup> According to Victor Vaughan, “The state will not permit the reproduction of the unfit...and will deny parenthood to those suffering diseases which cripple offspring.”<sup>97</sup> As a matter of societal preservation, every imbecile of reproductive age should be held in such restraint that reproduction is out of the question, if this proves impracticable then sterilization is necessary. David Starr Jordan believed “When the life of the state is threatened, extreme measures may and must be taken.”<sup>98</sup>

Concerned about the rise of social problems and degeneracy, eugenicists struggled to gain control of a situation they felt was rapidly overwhelming society. Their belief in the power of heredity over environment and the role of cacogenic traits in the decline of civilization led them to believe that eliminating the defective traits through reproductive control would ameliorate society’s problems. They willingly sacrificed the

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<sup>95</sup> Vaughan, “Eugenics from Point of View of the Physician,” 57; Frederick Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 30.

<sup>96</sup> Davenport, “The Eugenics Programme,” 10.

<sup>97</sup> Vaughan, “Eugenics from Point of View of the Physician,” 74.

<sup>98</sup> Jordan, *Richard Roe*, 79.

rights of the “socially inadequate” believing that their elimination would ensure the betterment of the human race.<sup>99</sup> W.H. Howell summed up the eugenic position nicely when he stated, “The unfit are weeds in the garden of civilization and we should be glad to eradicate them by any means that does not offend our sense humanity or endanger those bonds of sympathy which hold society together.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Alexander Johnson, “Race Improvement by Control of Defectives (Negative Eugenics),” *Annals of the American academy of Political and Social Science* 34 (July 1909): 28-29.

<sup>100</sup> Howell, “Eugenics as Viewed by the Physiologist,” 94.

## CHAPTER IV

### DEGENERATION AND THE INDUSTRIAL CITY

Industry was the great impetus of change at the end of the nineteenth century; it expanded the economy, increased the wealth of the nation, and facilitated the mobility of people both physically and socially. While many enjoyed the improvements in their lives that industry made possible; they also worried about the changes accompanying industrialization they found less appealing, poverty, crime, increased moral turpitude, and a persistent threat to white dominance in society. Eugenicists criticized the new society, claiming that the supposed progress of industrial society was not real; factory life spurred on the advance of degeneration more rapidly than it did the rate of societal progression.<sup>101</sup>

The new fields of manufacturing, along with increased productivity in existing fields like mining and railroad construction, created a demand for labor. However, machinery eliminated the need for specialized laborers and many whites considered the remaining jobs beneath them. Enterprising industrialists began to hire immigrants, blacks, and women to fill the jobs passed over by white men. Many feared that this abundance of cheap labor was a threat to the more deserving, white Americans' job security.

For the eugenics community the problem was far greater than the perceived threat to American jobs. The groups hired by industrialists were often among the classes designated unfit. According to eugenicists, the problem now became two-fold; first, hiring the unfit perpetuated their survival by providing them a small wage to subsist upon, while forcing fit American workers into poverty. Second, the availability of work led the unfit to congregate in the urban centers, where they commingled with others like them and exacerbated the process of degeneration. By creating jobs and bringing

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<sup>101</sup> Newell Dwight Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment, January 8-12, 1914, Battle Creek, Michigan*, edited by Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 350

degenerates into greater proximity to one another, industry, like charity, hindered nature's ability to eliminate the unfit.<sup>102</sup>

Eugenicists were not hostile to industry itself; they appreciated the advances made in society with the expansion of industry as well as the financial support eugenics research received from wealthy industrialists like the Carnegies, Rockefellers, Kelloggs, and Harrimans. The main concern was that imprudent hiring practices increased the numbers of the unfit in American society, "enabling a greater population to live the same life of drudgery."<sup>103</sup> They argued that hiring eugenically fit workers would increase the productivity of the factory by ensuring that capable, industrious workers operated the machines. In addition, lack of jobs would reduce the number of unfit significantly. Industrialists were reluctant to enact changes for the betterment of society that appeared costly to them personally, and eugenicists contended that because of this, degeneracy continued to accelerate. To slow the rate of degeneration, reformers focused their efforts on the element of the new society that caused them the greatest concern, the industrial city.<sup>104</sup>

The city was the site of emerging civilization and became the symbol for the new world shaped by industry. For many, gaining influence over the development of the urban city was also a chance to guide the expansion of the nation. For eugenicists, the

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<sup>102</sup> Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," 351; Schiller, *Social Decay and Eugenic Reform*, 144-45; Talbot, *Degeneracy*, 16.

<sup>103</sup> Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," 351.

<sup>104</sup> Schiller, *Social Decay*, 145, 150-52; Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," 351; Victoria C. Woodhull, *The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit* (New York: N.P., 1891), 7-8; N.A. "Social Problems Have Proven Basis of Heredity," *New York Times*, Jan 12, 1913, SM10; Leon J. Cole, "The Relation of Philanthropy and Medicine to Race Betterment," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, 494-96. The Carnegie Foundation established the Carnegie Institute for Genetic and Eugenic Research at Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Mrs. E.H. Harriman funded the establishment of the Eugenics Record Office at the Carnegie Institute. John Harvey Kellogg founded the Race Betterment Institute at Battle Creek, Michigan. The Rockefeller Foundation contributed to race betterment research through the Pioneer Fund.

cities were the great storm centers of population where Americans faced the challenges to their supremacy. The human element of the city's life was their chief concern; the filthy slum, the dark tenement, the unsanitary factory, the long hours of toil the lack of living wage, the backbreaking labor, and the dismal future weighed down the hearts and lives of multitudes living in the cities, leading to unrest among the inhabitants.<sup>105</sup>

While they at times adopted the rhetoric of urban reformers and proponents of the social gospel, eugenicists never fully allied with groups advocating improvement of the individual's status through better environments. Instead, eugenicists blamed the problems of urban society on the hereditary defects of the poor population. City life did not create the pauper, the prostitute, the drunkard, or the criminal; rather the cities, being overrun with the degenerate classes and ineffectively managed by officials who profited from degeneracy, provided a safe haven for the unfit to propagate their kind. From the eugenicists' view, urban unrest resulted from the overcrowding and increased crime, which they attributed to hereditary defects.<sup>106</sup>

Overcrowding in urban areas created a number of concerns. First, it made the spread of disease easier, not only contaminating other undesirables, but also endangering the healthy individuals who encountered them. Diseases like tuberculosis and Bright's disease were particularly problematic because they were highly communicable and believed to be hereditary; therefore, contamination threatened the fitness of generations.<sup>107</sup> Second, many complained that the congested cities were "producing a

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<sup>105</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country*, 32; Charles Stelzle, *The Social Application of Religion*, The Merrick Lectures, 1907-8 (New York: Jennings and Graham, 1908): 13-17.

<sup>106</sup> N.A., "Phases of Heredity and Environment" *New York Times*, June 27, 1910, 7; N.A., "Social Problems Have Proven Basis of Heredity," SM10.

<sup>107</sup> Woodhull, *Rapid Multiplication*, 5; N.A., "Phases of Heredity and Environment," 7; Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," 351.

physically and mentally inferior stock at so rapid a rate, that the average ability and capability of the whole community are being lowered.”<sup>108</sup> The view perpetuated by eugenics rhetoric was that the “most prolific of the urban dwellers were wretchedly poor, and often vicious and criminal.”<sup>109</sup> Overcrowding also increased tensions between oppositional groups in society, as Josiah Strong noted: “Where relationships are closest and most complicated, there the maladjustment of society creates the sorest friction.”<sup>110</sup>

For most urban dwellers, the increase of crime was the most disconcerting maladjustment of all. In 1913, Thomas Mosby noted, “the cost of crime in the United States amounted to one-third the total cost of government and crime was seven times more prevalent in proportion to the population, than it was sixty years ago.”<sup>111</sup> Cities were partly to blame for the increase of crime as they afforded many inducements to criminal behavior such as the “immoral theaters, low saloons, gambling dives, houses of ill-fame.”<sup>112</sup> The accessibility of the places criminals typically frequented encouraged the criminal class to move to the cities and increase their numbers. However, facilitating the behavior was not the ultimate cause of crime; eugenics research “proved” that individuals were genetically predisposed to crime and that the inducements of criminal behavior existed only because the criminalistic were allowed to perpetuate their kind. The prevalence of crime through several generations of the same family, they believed argued strongly for hereditary transmission of criminal tendencies, especially if the persistence of crime occurs in a community otherwise good. In his yearly address as

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<sup>108</sup> N.A. “Effects of City life,” *Decatur Morning Review* (June 6, 1890): 1

<sup>109</sup> N.A. “Effects of City life,” 1; N.A. “Phases of Heredity and Environment,” 7.

<sup>110</sup> Josiah Strong, *The Twentieth Century City*, 57.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas S. Mosby, *Causes and Cures of Crime* (St. Louis, MO: C.V. Mosby Company, 1913),

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2.

President of the Eugenics Research Association, Chicago Municipal Court Chief Justice Harry Olson stated, “Mental deficiency is the root from which criminality springs and with its suppression, crime will be prevented.”<sup>113</sup> The prevailing theory concluded that all criminals are defectives and no man of normal mental and physical status commits a crime. Put simply, crime breeds crime, and if the criminals were eliminated from the gene pool, the accoutrements of their lifestyle would disappear with them.<sup>114</sup>

From a eugenical point of view, the criminal class was comprised of individuals who commit crimes against society because of a lack of social morality. If punishment and moral precept have little effect on their behavior, they are moral imbeciles, “the fated unfortunate, upon whom more unfortunate parents have wrought their work and then too late for any improvement have turned him over to long-suffering society.”<sup>115</sup> This type comprises a biological variety of the human stock. Criminals were of a retrograde type, falling appreciably below the generally recognized standard of normality. The class is marked by distinct characteristics, “they are social outcasts; biologically feeble-minded but possess selfish instincts, certain types of cunning, laziness, irritability, love of cruelty, lack of inhibition and lack of social appreciation,” the development of which is not fully understood.<sup>116</sup> These characteristics prevent the individual from leading any type of

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<sup>113</sup> Harry Olson quoted in N.A. “Asserts Eugenics Can Stop Crime” *New York Times*, June 17, 1903, 9

<sup>114</sup> N.A. “Social Problems Have Proven Basis in Heredity,” SM10; Arthur Holmes, “The First Law of Character-Making,” in *Eugenics, Twelve University Lectures*, 202-3; R.B. von Klein Smid, “Some Efficient Causes of Crime,” in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, 533-34.

<sup>115</sup> Holmes, “The First Law of Character-Making,” 202-3. Holmes supports this assertion with the statistics from an 1871 study of 2800 criminals where it was determined that 26.8 percent had a criminal parentage. Study in “*Twentieth Century Practice of Medicine*” Vol. XII, 406-7.

<sup>116</sup> Von Klein Smid, “Some Efficient Causes of Crime,” 533.



normal and socially adequate existence; heredity has rendered him cacogenic and placed him under the ban of unfitness.<sup>117</sup>

The unfitness of the criminal class made them targets for segregation and sterilization measures proposed by eugenicists because the state had a right to protect honest citizens against the evils of the criminal class. Victor Vaughan cautioned, “The bad multiplies and the good is contaminated, while crime breeds in our midst. We enact and attempt to enforce laws against it while we permit it to grow and scatter its seed year to year...children by birth are doomed to be prostitutes and criminals.”<sup>118</sup> Promoting sterilization as the best solution, Dr. William Howell remarked, “The dismal frequency of criminality and general worthlessness will convince any one who consults the record that our race would have been saved much humiliation and expense had some high authority exerted a stern compulsion to prevent them propagating their breed [sic].”<sup>119</sup> Because cities comprised an increasingly larger portion of the nation, advocates argued that crime prevention should be the first step in any eugenics program and that newly enacted laws should embody the modern scientific knowledge, giving the legal profession and the courts the opportunity to become better instruments in curing crime.<sup>120</sup>

Eugenicists focused their efforts on the cities for a variety of reasons. First, the city was the symbol of the new industrial nation and therefore the area most able to present America in the way the dominant classes wished it to be seen, as a pinnacle of progress and civilization. Many eugenicists lived in or near urban areas, making these

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<sup>117</sup>Von KleinSmid, “Some Effective Causes of Crime,” 534; Harry Laughlin, “The Scope of the Committees Work,” in *Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population*, (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Eugenics Record Office, 1914), 21-22.

<sup>118</sup>Vaughan, “Eugenics from the Point of View of the Physician,” 75-6.

<sup>119</sup>Howell, “Eugenics as Viewed by the Physiologist,” 94.

<sup>120</sup>N.A. “Asserts Eugenics Can Stop Crime,” 9; N.A. “Scientists See Eugenics Aid in Doing Away With Crime” *New York Times*, July 29, 1923, X3.

the places that most greatly affected their lives. In addition, the vast numbers of unfit who accumulated in urban slums caused greater concern because they were visible and their numbers threatened the security of the fit classes that encountered them. Finally, eugenicists emphasized the dangers of the city and the need for reform because it was easy to gain support. Advocates of Populism argued against *laissez-faire* capitalism and its effects on society, while Progressives and Social Gospel advocates berated the conditions of urban society. Eugenicists exploited the existing social reform sentiment and promised a better solution. Rather than blaming the environment of the industrial city for creating problems of disease, crime, and degeneration, eugenicists blamed the heredity of the unfit classes. According to eugenics rhetoric, environment did not create the degenerate, the degenerate created the environment. Extinction of the defective heredity would result in the amelioration of urban social problems.

The promise of permanent results made eugenics popular. Unlike charity, labor reform, temperance and other environmental reforms that alleviated some problems temporarily, eugenic programs of segregation and sterilization offered a means to eliminate both the social problems and the groups responsible for them. The emphasis on heredity also shifted theories of blame away from corruption and exploitation, let the upper classes off the hook, and thrust responsibility upon the defectives. The city and its fit inhabitants became the victims of a degenerate class rendered socially inadequate by its genetic composition. Eradication of the unfit freed the fit from their fears of degeneracy and facilitated unhindered progress of the nation.

CHAPTER V

IMMIGRATION, MISCEGENATION, "RACE SUICIDE,"

AND THE EUGENIC FAMILY

By the 1890s, the “closing” of the Western Frontier, the Great Migration of blacks from the South, and the flood of New Immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia compounded the overcrowding of the American city. Fear of job competition, social decay, and the dangers of Race Suicide led many activists to lobby for immigration and marriage restrictions that benefited various social, racial, and economic goals. Eugenicists also expressed concern about the inadequacy of immigrant stock entering the country and proposed eugenic-based programs to ensure quality of immigrant contributions to society. Eugenics rhetoric and support provided a scientific basis for the exclusion or segregation of immigrant and minority groups in American society. The alliance of eugenicists with various anti-immigrant groups played a fundamental role in garnering support for the movement, but also resulted in the appropriation and misinterpretation of eugenic evidence to support nativist agenda.

Immigrants flocked to urban centers looking for work and factory bosses hired them because they were willing to take jobs and wages that American workers refused. Tensions rose as Americans began blaming immigrants for driving wages down and taking jobs from American workers, placing them at the center of labor unrest. Low wages and the cost of supporting large families forced most immigrants into the tenement housing and slums of the inner cities, where they contributed to overcrowding, sometimes engaged in the problematic activities of crime, drunkenness, and prostitution, and became the cause for concern among many urban reformers. Tainted with racism and nativism, some urban reformers targeted immigrants based on race and argued for the restriction of all non-white groups. In their estimation, belonging to a particular racial group was

enough to condemn anyone, regardless of his or her personal attributes.<sup>121</sup> Francis A. Walker articulated the general belief, stating, “The problems which so sternly confront us to-day are serious enough without being complicated and aggravated by the addition of some millions of Hungarians, Bohemians, Poles, south Italians, and Russian Jews.”<sup>122</sup>

Initially, eugenic arguments for immigration restriction were not overtly racist. In fact, much of the early eugenic rhetoric acknowledged the existence of desirable characteristics and potential for genius in all races.<sup>123</sup> The aim of early eugenic policies on immigration was to ensure that the most genetically fit immigrants were entering the country and that the numbers of unfit were not increased. Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr. of the Immigration Restriction League affirmed this goal, stating, “It’s the object not to advocate the exclusion of laborers and other immigrants of such character and standards that fit them to become citizens...but to recognize the necessity of exclusion of elements undesirable for citizenship or injurious to national character.”<sup>124</sup>

Immigration created a crisis, in the opinion of the eugenicists, not because of the immigrants’ ethnic and racial variation, but because of the high level of defective traits found among the new immigrant population. Nativists asserted that the immigrant

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<sup>121</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color against White Supremacy*, 21; Ross, *The Old World in the New*, 219; Schiller, *Social Decay*, 67; Mosby, *Cause and Cures of Crime*, 46; Paul Kellogg, “Immigration and the Minimum Wage,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 48 (July 1913): 68. See also John R. Commons *Races and Immigration in America* (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1907).

<sup>122</sup> Francis A. Walker, “Restriction of Immigration,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 77 (June 1896): 828.

<sup>123</sup> In discussions of genius and the effects of race on history, eugenicists lauded the accomplishments of Italian Renaissance artists and authors, as well as German and Russian composers. They also noted the contributions of individuals alleged to be immigrants or of immigrant stock to American progress, men like Charles Goodyear who invented the vulcanizing of rubber, Eli Whitney inventor of the cotton gin, Elias Howe inventor of the sewing machine, Samuel Colt of the revolver, and Samuel Morse inventor of the telegraph system. Charles B. Davenport, “Some Social Applications of Eugenics,” in *Medical Genetics and Eugenics*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, 1943), 45-6; W.C.D. and C.D. Whetham, “The Influence of Race on History,” in *Problems in Eugenics: Papers Communicated to the First International Eugenics Congress Held at the University of London, July 24<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 1912*, (Kingsway, W.C., England: Eugenics Education Society, 1912), 245.

<sup>124</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., quoted in N.A., “Eugenic Test for Aliens,” 8.

population was comprised largely of poor, sick, feeble-minded individuals and families looking to find work and escape poverty or famine in their native country. Criminals, given the choice of death, imprisonment, or exile to America, chose exile in the land of opportunity; they therefore, constituted a sizeable number of the newcomers.

Statistically these potential Americans were the lowest and most undesirable of the population, the ones that American officials would unequivocally reject if they were able to travel abroad and handpick the individuals most eligible for citizenship.<sup>125</sup> Victor C. Vaughan reminded the public that two presidential assassins, Charles Giteau and Leon Czolgozs, were of criminal immigrant stock and that eugenic immigration and reproductive policies would eliminate those dangerous elements from society.<sup>126</sup> Dr. Charles Davenport of the Carnegie Institute at Cold Harbor, New York, asserted, “The population of the United States will, on account of the great influx of blood from South-eastern Europe, rapidly become more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sexual immorality,” and that “the ratio of insanity in the population will rapidly increase.”<sup>127</sup>

The first measure proposed to remedy the problem was the institution of stringent physical and psychiatric health assessments as well as intelligence and literacy tests. In theory, these types of screening would not discriminate against people of any particular

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<sup>125</sup> Davenport, “Social Applications,” 41; Charles A. Ellwood, “The Eugenics Movement from the Standpoint of Sociology,” in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 229; Maynard Metcalf, “Relation of Eugenics and Euthenics to Race Betterment,” in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, 457-8; Grace Abbott, “Immigration and Crime, Report of Committee ‘G’ of the Institute,” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 6 (November 1915): 522; Roswell H. Johnson, “Eugenics and Immigration,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1924, 12; N.A. “Eugenic Test for Aliens,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1913, 8; Charles B. Davenport, “Unsocial Bloodlines” Letter to the Editor *New York Times*, June 9, 1913, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Vaughan, “Eugenics from the Point of View of a Physician,” 58; Howell, “Eugenics as Viewed by a Physiologist,” 81. Charles Guiteau assassinated President James Garfield in 1881 and Leon Czolgozs, an anarchist, assassinated President William McKinley in 1901.

<sup>127</sup> Charles B. Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911): 15-17.

race, creed, or color. In reality, the literacy and intelligence requirements kept out entire ethnic groups who were fit in all other ways. However, many felt that screening for fitness failed to slow adequately the number of inferior races entering the country. As the numbers of immigrants increased, interest groups harboring racist sentiments turned to eugenics researchers to provide biological arguments to support immigration restriction.<sup>128</sup>

Eugenicists exchanged scientifically-based support of the nativist agenda for nativist political support of eugenic reform programs. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 was designed consciously to halt the immigration of supposedly "dysgenic" groups from southern Europe and Asia, whose numbers had mushroomed during the period from 1900 to 1920. The method was simply to scale the number of immigrants from each country in proportion to their percentage of the U.S. population in the 1890 census – when northern and western Europeans were the dominant immigrants. The new law reduced the quota of southern and eastern Europeans from 45 percent to 15 percent. Coupled with the continued eugenic screening the immigration quotas ensured that small numbers of only the fittest specimens made up the new immigrant population. The 1924 Act ended the greatest era of immigration in U.S. history.<sup>129</sup>

As immigration raised concerns about external threats, the peril of "race suicide" gave Americans something to fear at from within their borders. Advocates of race

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<sup>128</sup> N.A. "Eugenic Tests for Aliens," 8; N.A. "Says Sane Aliens Stream in Steadily," *New York Times*, June 5, 1924, 14; Charles B. Davenport, "The Feely Inhibited, Nomadism or the Wandering Impulse, with Special References to Heredity," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 1 (February 15, 1915): 120.

<sup>129</sup> Henry Fairfield Osborn, *The Approach to the Immigration Problem Through Science* (New York: National Industrial Conference Board, 1924), 7-9; Harry Laughlin, "Testimony of Harry Laughlin" *The Eugenic Aspects of Deportation: Hearing before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives, Seventieth Congress, first session, February 21, 1928, including testimony taken April 28, 1926* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1928), 12-14.

suicide theory claimed that proposed immigration restriction was merely the first step; the nation now faced the problem of “saving the white race from submergence in the darker races whose swift increase in population threatens white supremacy in America.”<sup>130</sup>

Many feared that race suicide would lead to the decline of civilization as births fall among the higher classes and rise among the least intelligent. For eugenicists, the population question was not one of numbers, but of quality.<sup>131</sup>

Professional economists Francis A. Walker, Frank Fetter, and Edward Ross were among the first to assert the validity of race-based population control on scientific grounds as part of a larger campaign against race suicide. They explained that industrial capitalism made society increasingly dysgenic through its tendency to select for the unfit. Fellow economist, Simon Patten emphasized the dysgenic effects of the higher living standard created by capitalism, arguing, “Every improvement which simplifies labor increases the amount of deficiencies...that the survival of the ignorant brings upon society.”<sup>132</sup> Francis A. Walker proved especially influential in asserting that race suicide began with the lowered fertility of the “superior” “native” stock and was perpetuated by immigration, which checked the fertility of the native population, allowing it to be effectively displaced by inferior, foreign-born stock. The native element “failed to maintain its previous rate of increase because the foreigners came in such swarms...he was unwilling to engage in economic competition and unwilling to bring sons and

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<sup>130</sup> N.A. “White Supremacy Menaced, Harvard Experts Warning,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1923, XX5.

<sup>131</sup> Warren S. Thompson, “Race Suicide in the United States,” *The Scientific Monthly* 5 (July 1917): 22.

<sup>132</sup> Simon Patten quoted in Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197.



daughters into the world to engage in competition.”<sup>133</sup> Robert D. Ward of the Immigration Restriction League characterized race degeneration thus: “The main point is that the native children are murdered by never being allowed to come into existence, as surely as if put to death in some older invasion of the Huns or Vandals.”<sup>134</sup>

While others had argued theories of race suicide, coinage of the term is most often attributed to economist-turned-sociologist Edward Ross who argued, “The higher race quietly and unobtrusively [sic] eliminates itself rather than endure individually the bitter competition it has failed to ward off by collective action.”<sup>135</sup> Ross’s coinage gained great popularity among sociologists, economists, eugenicists. Progressive president Theodore Roosevelt, who called race suicide the “greatest problem of civilization,” also grabbed it.<sup>136</sup> Ross also coined the term “social control” to describe the various ways in which society makes individuals conform to social ends. The term became popular with eugenicists to emphasize personal restriction for the good of society. Ross argued that society had become dysgenic, competition and natural selection no longer functioned, and the only solution was for the state to regulate human reproduction.<sup>137</sup>

Race suicide rhetoric asserted that degeneration was a result of the excessive cacogenic qualities of non-white races. They complained about the “yellow peril” posed by the increasing number of Asians in the West and the “black menace” posed by

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<sup>133</sup>Walker, “Restriction of Immigration,” 828. Walker uses native to refer to earlier European immigrants of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity.

<sup>134</sup>Robert D Ward, “The Crisis in Our Immigration Policy,” *The Institution Quarterly*, IV, Public Charity Service of Illinois, (Spring 1912): 22.

<sup>135</sup> Ross, “The Causes of Race Superiority,” 88.

<sup>136</sup>Roosevelt quoted in Theodore Roosevelt, “A Letter from President Roosevelt on Race Suicide,” *American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 35 (May 1907): 550. Race suicide arguments are also made in Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race or, The Racial Basis of European History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921) and David Starr Jordan, *The Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of Races through the Survival of the Unfit* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1903).

<sup>137</sup> Edward Ross, *Social Control: A Survey of the Foundations of Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 25.

southern Blacks migrating to northern cities. High correlations between the size of non-white populations and the rate of crime, prostitution, and drug use reinforced by the eugenic assertion that the undesirable traits were the result of heredity, not socio-economic circumstance, led people to conclude that the majority of non-whites were inferior and incapable of civilization. Radical eugenicists proposed two methods for defending the white race from the threat of inferior races: deportation and sterilization. Some also expressed concern about the potential for corruption of the national character by the propagation of American Indians who exhibited proclivities towards drunkenness and violence against whites. However, they felt that in the near future the problem would cease to exist as the Indian populations were relegated to reservations and forced into reformatory schools.<sup>138</sup>

Miscegenation also presented a problem for those concerned about the threat of race suicide. The intermarriage between whites and members of the less fit Negro, *mestizo*, Indian, or Mongolian races endangered the purity and position of the white race. In 1913, during an investigation of state marriage laws, Charles Davenport discovered that twenty-nine of forty-nine states had a legal statute forbidding mixed race marriages and violation was punishable by fines or incarceration. Interestingly, the miscegenation statutes did not target the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The statutes were aimed primarily at two groups, blacks and Asians. All twenty-nine states forbade intermarriage of whites and persons with African heritage greater than one-eighth, six

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<sup>138</sup> Robert Ward, "Race betterment and Our Immigration Laws," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, 543; John H. Kellogg, "Needed – A New Human Race," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, 437; Sidney Gulick, "Race Betterment and America's Oriental Problem," 547-8; Kelly Miller, "Eugenics and the Negro Race," *The Scientific Monthly*, 5 (July 1917): 57; United States Congress, House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, "Testimony of Harry H. Laughlin," in *The Eugenic Aspects of Deportation*: 15; N.A. "Degeneracy Among Savages," *Newark Daily Advocate* (November 8, 1900): 7.

states outlawed marriages between whites and Asians, whom the laws called “Mongolians,” and four states included *mestizos* or Indians in their marriage restriction statutes. The former slave states in the South mandated the harshest regulations and punishments against those engaging in race mixing between whites and blacks, while Western states added “Mongolians” to the excluded races. The states lacking miscegenation restrictions were primarily the New England states and the states of the Great Lakes region of the Upper Midwest; the Michigan marriage law asserted that mixed-race marriages were valid in the state.<sup>139</sup>

In spite of the popularity of miscegenation restriction among state legislatures, eugenicists never supported the effort. In fact, many of them argued against marriage restriction based on skin color and presumed racial differences. Advocates of marriage restriction argued that barring “inferior” races from intermarrying with the white population was eugenic because it prevented those races from tainting the white population with their defective traits of crime, violence, and worthlessness. Eugenicists countered by saying that all races share undesirable traits and association of one race with a particular trait results from the restriction of marriages to include only members of that racial group allowing the undesired trait to become dominant. However, through particular mating and racial hybridization that combine superior qualities of both races the dysgenic traits may be eliminated.<sup>140</sup>

Eugenicists argued that each race possessed qualities that in some way made it superior to other races while inferior in other aspects. Whites exhibited traits of higher educability and sex-restraint, while blacks presented greater disease immunity, and

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<sup>139</sup> Charles Davenport, “State Laws Limiting Marriage Selection Examined in Light of Eugenics,” *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin*, 9 (June 1913): 40-45.

<sup>140</sup> Davenport, “State Laws,” 30-31.

Asians carried traits that made them vigorous and adept in social discipline. In light of this, race betterment depended upon the cultivation of the best qualities of each race, leading to the elevation of society through hybridization.<sup>141</sup> If the negative attributes of an individual's race were not carried recessively then that individual "made a better social unit and a better mate for the Caucasian to breed with than a feeble-minded, criminalistic, pure-bred Caucasian."<sup>142</sup>

According to Charles Ellwood and W. H. Carruth, public opinion and social and economic barriers to racial interbreeding prevented any concrete scientific knowledge regarding the effects of hybridization. Sidney Gulick made a similar assertion, believing that prejudice stood in the way of race betterment. He encouraged the idea that miscegenation should not be directed by race, but rather by the ability of the individual for social assimilation. The permanent betterment of any section of the human race could not go forward without the rest; the good of each should be transmitted to the rest.<sup>143</sup> Davenport effectively summarized the eugenic aim in his report on marriage laws: "In legislating, forget skin color and concentrate attention upon matters of real importance to organized society. Prevent those without sex-control, educability, or resistance to serious disease from reproducing."<sup>144</sup>

While race suicide arguments for the exclusion of non-whites gained a degree of popularity and support, its advocacy came primarily from nativists, sociologists, and economists who manipulated eugenic arguments and exaggerated the magnitude of

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<sup>141</sup> Davenport, "State Laws," 34-35; Gulick, "Oriental Problem," 548; Miller "Eugenics of the Negro Race," 58.

<sup>142</sup> Davenport, "State Laws," 35-36.

<sup>143</sup> Ellwood, "Eugenics View by Sociologist," 228; Carruth, "Selections From an Address on Eugenics," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 290-91; Gulick, "Oriental Problem," 550.

<sup>144</sup> Davenport, "State Laws," 36.

reproductive differentiation between whites and non-whites to justify anti-immigrant policies. The primary goal of their racially based arguments of inferiority was to exclude non-white populations as viable labor sources so that white workers could secure jobs and higher wages. A small, radical minority of people associated with the eugenics movement supported scientific racism and complete exclusion of inferior races. However, the main body of the movement maintained that no scientific evidence existed to support the claim that any nation was racially superior. Furthermore, all nations contained elements of many races, but individuals of varying qualities are found in every race and every nation. The eugenic aim was to deny admission of eugenically unfit stock, prevent the propagation of individuals with undesirable traits, through either sterilization or segregation, and to encourage those with sound genetic inheritance to produce more fit offspring. The ultimate achievement of a successful eugenic program would be to ensure the occurrence of fecundity in the most eugenically desirable marriages, perpetuate fit families, and elevate the status of society over generations.<sup>145</sup>

Eradication of defective germ plasm was not the only aim of the eugenics agenda. They also ardently advocated the regeneration of the human race by perpetuating the heredity of the fit. Charles Davenport believed that the goal of any legitimate eugenic measure was to “secure in our population as large a proportion as possible of persons whose traits are of the greatest value to our social order.”<sup>146</sup> While eugenics rested on heredity for the acquisition of those traits, few believed that humans were inactive

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<sup>145</sup> Miller, “Eugenics and the Negro Race,” 59; Frederick Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940): 295-96; Kellogg, “Needed – A New Human Race,” 449; W.H. Carruth, “Selections From an Address on Eugenics,” 273, Carruth notes “to guard against snobbery ‘undesirable’ has no social connotation, but means solely, the parents least likely to produce sound and fit children”.

<sup>146</sup> Charles B. Davenport “The Eugenics Program and Progress in its Achievement,” in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*, 1.

victims of nature and divine law; rather, mankind had emancipated itself from blind obedience to divinely appointed limitations and harnessed the forces of nature. Man, in theory, had it completely in his power to determine what kind of people would make up the earth's population.<sup>147</sup>

Understanding the power of heredity provided eugenicists with the evidence and tools they needed to launch an aggressive campaign to boost the dwindling numbers of the fit and conserve desirable germ plasm. Positive eugenics proposed pre-marital counseling and health certificates to ensure that both parties were fit and compatible, high reproduction among those individuals with the means to support large families, and incentives for families with large numbers of fit children. Eugenicists hoped to restore the status of motherhood, thereby curbing the trend of declining birthrates among the fit classes.<sup>148</sup>

Eugenicists noted a direct correlation between the wider availability of educational and occupational opportunities at the turn of the century and the declining reproduction rate. Increasingly, women of the fittest classes chose to limit the size of their family or put off starting families altogether so that they could go to college and pursue careers. Eugenicist contended that women of the twentieth century, through education and work outside the home, found ways to achieve gratification without becoming mothers. To correct this trend, society must re-instill in its young women the sense of duty and pride that resulted from motherhood. Many hoped that education could

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<sup>147</sup> Robert H. Wolcott, "Eugenics as Viewed by the Zoologist," in *Eugenics: Twelve University* 16; Howell, "Eugenics as Viewed by the Physiologist," 102; Raymond Pearl, "Some Eugenic Aspects of the Problem of Population," in *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family*, 214.

<sup>148</sup> Davenport, "Eugenics Programme," 5-7; Mr. and Mrs. John Martin, "The Woman Movement and the Baby Crop," *New York Times*, August 29, 1915, SM1; Louis Dublin, "Education of Women and Race Betterment," in *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family*, 376-78.

be used to achieve this end by impressing upon women the threat posed by the unfit and the personal and societal benefits of large, genetically fit families.<sup>149</sup>

Society was first educated on the importance of selecting good mates. This was essential to create productive marriages and prevent propagation of dysgenic traits. Eugenicists insisted upon physical and mental examinations of all parties wishing to be married. They also recommended that potential couples provide each other with health certificates attesting to their eugenic fitness. These regulations were intended to increase the chances of marriage between people of good stock. Good stock did not always mean wealthy. Rather, good stock meant that the family line was free of undesirable unit characters. As long as a person's ancestors were all sober, sane, and honest one had a goodly inheritance. In spite of animosity between religion and science over the issue of evolution, a number of church leaders supported the eugenic emphasis on marriage selection by refusing to marry couples without eugenic health certificates. They believed eugenic restrictions aided in the development of a moral society and created more stable families for children.<sup>150</sup>

Creating eugenic partnerships was a small step towards the regeneration of desirable heredity. It was necessary that eugenic marriages be fecund and equal or exceeding the fecundity of the cacogenic classes. Eugenics sought to change the

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<sup>149</sup>Ellwood, "Eugenics from the View Point of the Sociologist," 216; Dublin, "Education of Women," 379; N.A. "To Raise New Race is Woman's Problem," *New York Times*, March 19, 1911, 12.

<sup>150</sup> Vaughan, "Eugenics from the Point of View of a Physician," 58, 60-62; see also Harvey E. Jordan, "Eugenics: Its Data, Scope, and Promise as Seen by the Anatomist," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*; Robert Wolcott, "Eugenics as Viewed by Zoologists," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*; William Howell, "Eugenics as Viewed by the Physiologist," in *Eugenics: Twelve University Lectures*; N.A. "Wed for Ability, Not for Nobility," *The Syracuse Herald*, October 1, 1912, 10; N.A. "Wants to be Eugenic Bride," *New York Times*, November 3, 1913, 1; "Gets Eugenic Certificate," *New York Times*, October 22, 1913, 1; N.A. "Must be Normal and Well to Wed," *New York Times*, March 25, 1912, 12; New York Board of Jewish Ministers, *Jewish Eugenics and Other Essays*, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1916), 7-, 15, 22-25; N.A. "Pastors for Eugenics," *New York Times*, June 6, 1913, 10.

distribution of births in a way that would improve the heredity potential of human beings, making it possible to develop higher intelligence and greater vitality. Supporters believed that small families would lead to the extinction of valuable family strains. They praised the Mormons for exhibiting the ideal reproductive capacity of the fit classes. Based on this model, they encouraged young couples to have a minimum of six children if their financial circumstances allowed them to support so many. Fit families with less financial capacity were encouraged to produce as many children as they could afford.<sup>151</sup>

Some eugenicists advocated the use of incentives to encourage reproduction amongst fit couples. Fitter Family and Better Baby competitions became a staple of state and county fairs. The competitions served two purposes. Informational booths educated the public about the benefits of eugenic fitness, and the competitions awarded prizes to individuals and families displaying exemplary hereditary qualities. Other proposals included government stipends for large families, enabling those who wanted more children but lacked the means to fulfill their duty to society, and encouraging those who were unsure about family size, to have more children.<sup>152</sup>

The ultimate goal was the direction of society away from uncontrolled reproduction toward the conscious and rational control of births. Rational reproduction would prevent death rates so high that civilization was destroyed and prevent violent population movements against the resources of an area. Positive eugenics assured the progress of civilization by allowing for the reproduction of only the fittest classes, an aim

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<sup>151</sup> Ellwood, "Viewed by Sociologist," 214; Frederick Osborn *Preface to Eugenics*, 101; R.H. Johnson, "Lauds Mormon Marriages." *New York Times*. November 12, 1921, 12; N.A. "Want More Babies in Best Families." *New York Times*, September 25, 1921, 9.

<sup>152</sup> Howell, "Eugenics as Viewed by Physiologist," 105, N.A. "Want More Babies in Best Families," 9; Frederick Osborn, *Preface*, 191-93.



similar to that of negative eugenics. However, positive eugenics appealed to many people and gained support more easily than did restrictive negative eugenics.<sup>153</sup>

From a sociological standpoint, eugenics was recommended for three reasons. First, it calls attention to the importance of heredity in human social life. It also demanded attention to the fact that the character of the mass is derived from the character of the individual, making individual character the ultimate problem in society. Finally, it threw emphasis on the importance of marriage and family as the fundamental institutions of human society. Reproductive control that encouraged propagation was less alarming to many than the reproductive policies of negative eugenics, and perceived as less oppositional to traditional ideas of family.<sup>154</sup>

Positive eugenics was also less panic-inducing than the social decay and “race suicide” rhetoric that abounded in restriction arguments. While they were concerned about the rise of degeneracy and the possibility that the unfit might overtake them, people found comfort in the policies that encouraged marriage and fecundity of the fit. These efforts gave them a sense of control and a feeling that they were contributing in the effort to reclaim society. Women were especially drawn to these endeavors, in part because society told them it was their duty. However, women also found that they could exercise a measure of control in their own lives through the emphasis on choosing compatible mates and on the role of the mother in directing the course of society. It also allowed them greater autonomy as reform workers and it furthered their argument that patriarchal, male dominance of women made them bad mothers, which was dangerous for society.

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<sup>153</sup> Frederick Osborn, *Preface*, 193.

<sup>154</sup> Ellwood, “Viewed by Sociologist,” 212-15; Leonard Darwin, “The Aims and Methods of Eugenic Societies,” in *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family*, 5; Roswell H. Johnson, “Marriage Selection,” in *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, 532.

Women saw eugenic reform work and advocacy of rational reproduction as a step toward securing other basic freedoms, such as the right to vote and to control their own bodies.<sup>155</sup>

Measures to restrict the unfit required extensive legislation and were slow to produce changes. Conversely, increasing propagation among the unfit required little outside of education and good decision-making. Therefore, until effective negative eugenics legislation was achieved, the eugenic family was civilization's last vanguard against the rising tide of degeneracy. Eugenicists argued that man was no longer a victim of forces beyond his control. Science had given him the knowledge and the tools to shape the world as he thought it should be. By exercising control over their reproductive potential, fit Americans could redistribute births and eliminate the threat to society posed by defective germ-plasm.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> N.A. "Wed for Ability," 10; N.A. "Wants to be Eugenics Bride," 1; Caleb W. Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood; a Search for Principles* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1911), 89-93; Edward Marshall, "Man Largely to Blame for Woman's Shortcomings," *New York Times*, May 5, 1912, SM4; John Martin, "Woman and the Fading of Maternal Instinct," *New York Times*, September 15, 1915, SM9.

<sup>156</sup> Wolcott, "Viewed by the Zoologist," 17-19; Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood*, 54; Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control and Race Betterment," in *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel* edited by Esther Katz (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 274; Darwin, "Aims and Methods," 9-11.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

For many Americans, the problems either brought on or exacerbated by the rise of industrial society far outweighed the benefits provided by living in the new setting. Society became increasingly fluid and diverse, bringing into close proximity groups who previously had little contact with one another. Existing forms of social control proved outdated and ineffective for handling the perceived dangers posed by the rapidly growing urban underclass. Fearing that crime, vice, and moral degeneracy resulting from this lack of social control would lead to the destruction of society the middle and upper classes sought to ameliorate social problems in a way that would also re-assert their dominance over the problematic class that vastly outnumbered them.

Attempts at environmental reform were expensive and often failed to produce widespread visible improvements. Frustrated with the meager successes of these reform movements, many reformers turned away from the social gospel and charitable reforms and looked for something that both explained the abundance of social problems and provided rapid, permanent results. In response, reform theories shifted away from consideration of environmental or socio-economic factors, focusing instead on the scientific community's emphasis on the roles of biology and heredity in the creation of social problems.

Eugenics was an ideal avenue of reform for several reasons. Emphasis on the inheritance of defective traits explained the preponderance of crime and degeneracy in spite of attempts at environmental reform. It also redirected the burden of responsibility for urban conditions onto the underclass, rather than the corrupt employers, slumlords, and city bosses who environmental reformers blamed for the plight of the poor. The

eugenics program facilitated the need for social control by categorizing many of those engaged in behaviors deemed socially unacceptable among the unfit.

Most importantly, eugenics promised rapid and permanent eradication of society's problems through the elimination of defective hereditary traits. In light of the apparent problems of disease, poverty, and overcrowding, some of the more moderate eugenic reforms seem quite practical. Discouraging the poor from having children they cannot support makes sense, as does discouraging reproduction of those with hereditary defects and diseases. When recommendations about the benefits of voluntary reproductive control went unheeded, the eugenics movement advocated state control of those likely to produce children unable to care for themselves at first temporarily through incarceration and later permanently through sterilization. Some felt that the cost of sterilization was negligible when compared to the money already spent in the operation of poor houses, asylums, and penitentiaries. It was also a small price to pay for the promised elevation in the quality and security of society over time.

In spite of its apparent practicality, the eugenic reform effort had a variety of shortcomings. Their faith in science and heredity to explain and reduce social problems blinded them to the all other contributing factors. Their faith in the science was also problematic, however not because scientific research was manipulated to reinforce political agendas as Kenneth Ludmerer and Mark Haller contended.<sup>157</sup> Rather, the lack of available evidence combined little understanding of existing evidence regarding genetics in humans led to overzealous speculation for the potential of scientific reform. Genetics was a brand new field of scientific exploration during the Gilded Age and while the field advanced understandings of heredity, the field was too limited to explain fully

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<sup>157</sup>Ludmerer, *Genetic and American Society*, 89; Haller, *Eugenics*, 120-22.

the transmission of character traits. The fact that they were unable to conduct research on human subjects complicated matters, forcing eugenicists to rely on incomplete data compiled from family histories and to assume that human heredity worked in exactly the same ways as the heredity of plants or animals.

The problems of research were exacerbated by the fact that as the membership of the movement increased it involved greater numbers of supporters from fields outside of science. Those outside the scientific fields cared little for complex genetic theories and latched on to the simple “fact” that all traits were inherited and therefore undesirable ones could be eliminated through reproductive control. This was not blatant academic fraud, as Edwin Black accused.<sup>158</sup> Supporters both within and outside of scientific fields were not making claims based on fraudulent research or findings, genetics research at the time seemed to prove that traits were inherited and that specific traits could be increased while others were decreased through reproductive control. Based on this understanding they advocated programs that seemed likely to benefit society. Their information was not wrong or fabricated it was incomplete.

Eugenicists also drastically over-simplified the situation they faced. They equated perceived increases in crime and overall degeneracy with a presumed rise in the number of “unfit” propagating their kind. Believing that degenerates bred degenerates, they failed to see that a social system that turned the parents into criminals or prostitutes was likely to turn the children into criminals or prostitutes. Low wages and large families often locked the underclass into destitution, making prostitution and criminal behavior a means of survival. Emphasis on heredity ignored the fact that a living wage and other

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<sup>158</sup>Black, *War Against the Weak*, 5

environmental changes might reduce the number of criminals and paupers in the city streets.

While a number of radicals and extremists used eugenic rhetoric to evidence their prejudicial claims, not all eugenic reforms were, as Edwin Black asserted, inherently racist or biased towards the complete elimination of the lower classes.<sup>159</sup> The main body of the eugenics movement maintained that potential for sound as well as defective heredity existed within all classes and races. However, because they formed the notion of social adequacy around middle and upper class constructs of financial security and respectable behavior, most of the individuals targeted as “unfit” came from racial minority groups and the lower class.

According to the framework eugenicists had for understanding social mobility and achievement, inability to escape poverty and become socially adequate were the result of the individual’s innate qualities, not of the discriminatory practices and inhibitory social environment. This framework also allowed them to continue marginalizing groups that society had historically excluded. As society changed, old methods of marginalization for blacks, immigrants, and the poor ceased to be effective, while new classes of degenerates and criminals appeared. Eugenics provided a method for control that addressed both the old and new threats to the social order. The apparent racism of the movement resulted from the incorporation of society’s existing “others” into the ranks of the unfit and was therefore a reflection of preceding social constructs.

Reasons for supporting eugenics varied greatly from group to group and person to person, but a common thread exists within their arguments; every person was looking for an explanation for the dramatically different and often unstable social order thrust upon

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<sup>159</sup>Ibid., 5, 22, 300

them by the urban-industrial society. They sought understanding, stability, and continuity in a rapidly changing world. To achieve this they designated the “unfit” as the source of their anxieties and then sought to eradicate the marginalized group. This genocidal mentality arose out of continuing fear of a catastrophe due to the presence of a large, fluid degenerate class, and perpetuated by manipulations of scientific rhetoric to increase paranoia about “race suicide,” urban decay, and the inevitable collapse of western society.

Faced with the challenges of urban-industrial society, overcrowding, poverty, crime and disease, and the slow, expensive process of environmental reform Americans sought a better solution. Scientific explanations for social problems and the promise of expedient, permanent amelioration through eugenic reproduction eased the apprehensions of white society. Eugenics placed the power for directing human progress in the hands of men eliminating a group of undesirables, already out numbering and threatening to overpower the respectable classes, and with it the feeling of helplessness many felt as society changed rapidly and at times chaotically. The power was also placed in the hands of the new, professional middle class who, unlike the upper class elite, were not accustomed to wielding social control. Reluctance to lose their new position and power drove the inclination to eliminate threats to their security and superiority. Ultimately, eugenic reforms were the attempts of frightened people, using the tools and knowledge they possessed, to re-assert order in their fragmented society in a way that seemed both practical and economical.

The most detrimental shortcomings of the movement were not its ambiguous language that allowed it to be used in discriminatory ways, its racist undertones, or its



perceived preference for selecting the fit from the social elite. Rather, the movement's greatest failing was the ease with which power was usurped in the name of science, race betterment, and societal good. It seems that we are not, as Jacques Derrida believed, haunted by the "other." The things that haunt a society are the reminders of immoral and unethical actions that persecute and marginalize the majority so that the power and security of the minority remains intact. The individual became expendable in the drive for social betterment and therefore personal restriction became a viable means of directing social progress. Eugenics sacrificed the rights of the individual at the altar of national advancement with few improvements to show for it.

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## VITA

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Scope and Method of Study: This study examines writings of eugenics advocates to establish their motivations. Chapter one introduces the topic and discusses the historiography. Chapter two discusses factors that gave rise to eugenic thought. Chapters three, four, and five discuss the eugenicists' position regarding feeble-mindedness, industrial cities, immigration, race, and the family.

Findings and Conclusions: Eugenics grew out of concerns for social deterioration in the new Urban-Industrial environment during the late-nineteenth century. Apprehensions created a crisis mentality and many Americans attempted gain stability by designating an "Other" whom eugenicists declared unfit to function in society and implemented a variety of programs aimed at reducing offspring with undesirable traits. Eugenics promised both a permanent solution to society's problems and a means of social control by giving unacceptable behaviors biological explanations. The desire to secure social order led eugenicists to enact measure of personal restriction that were at times unethical and resulted in few improvements.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: James L. Huston

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