



## Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics

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*Review Essay*  
Race Culture:  
Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics

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FRANK DIKÖTTER

EUGENICS WAS A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT of some of the most important cultural and social movements of the twentieth century, intimately linked to ideologies of “race,” nation, and sex, inextricably meshed with population control, social hygiene, state hospitals, and the welfare state. Until recently, however, the historiographical focus on the most extreme expressions of race improvement in Germany, Britain, and the United States tended to perpetuate a one-sided representation, which ignored the multifarious dimensions and extraordinary appeal of eugenics to individuals of very different social backgrounds, political convictions, and national affiliations. Far from being a politically conservative and scientifically spurious set of beliefs that remained confined to the Nazi era, eugenics belonged to the political vocabulary of virtually every significant modernizing force between the two world wars. It was part of such widely discussed issues as evolution, degeneration, civilization, and modernity, and touched on a wide variety of emerging fields like maternity, psychiatry, criminology, public health, and sex education. It was supported by scientific societies, pressure groups, and political institutions in such different countries as India, Brazil, and Sweden. Widely seen to be a morally acceptable and scientifically viable way of improving human heredity, its main tenets were embraced by social reformers, established intellectuals, and medical authorities from one end of the political spectrum to the other, including British conservatives and Spanish anarchists.<sup>1</sup> Even after World War II, liberal intellectuals such as Aldous Huxley and Hermann Müller expressed their revulsion at Nazi practices while restating their belief in a “humane” and “scientific” way of genetically improving the human race. In the People’s Republic of China today, eugenics has become official policy, but foreign critics sometimes forget the extent to which developed countries were in the thrall of similar ideas until a few decades ago.

Eugenics was not so much a clear set of scientific principles as a “modern” way of talking about social problems in biologizing terms: politicians with mutually

<sup>1</sup> The reference to Spain is from Richard Cleminson, “Eugenics by Name or Nature? The Spanish Anarchist Sex Reform of the 1930s,” *History of European Ideas* 18 (1994): 729–40; two recent articles provide useful overviews of the field, Robert Nye, “The Rise and Fall of the Eugenics Empire: Recent Perspectives on the Impact of Bio-Medical Thought in Modern Society,” *Historical Journal* 36 (1993): 687–700; P. J. Pauly, “The Eugenics Industry—Growth or Restructuring?” *Journal of the History of Biology* 26 (Spring 1993): 131–45.

incompatible beliefs and scientists with opposed interests could all selectively appropriate eugenics to portray society as an organic body that had to be guided by biological laws. Eugenics gave scientific authority to social fears and moral panics, lent respectability to racial doctrines, and provided legitimacy to sterilization acts and immigration laws. Powered by the prestige of science, it allowed modernizing elites to represent their prescriptive claims about social order as objective statements irrevocably grounded in the laws of nature. Eugenics promoted a biologizing vision of society in which the reproductive rights of individuals were subordinated to the rights of an abstract organic collectivity.

AN IMPORTANT RECENT CONTRIBUTION to the history of eugenics in Europe is the volume edited by Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, *Eugenics and the Welfare State*. It fills a major gap by focusing on the programs of eugenics and sterilization laws that were part of emerging welfare systems in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.<sup>2</sup> This solidly researched volume documents how individuals alleged to suffer from mental retardation or mental illness became the main targets of eugenic practices from the 1930s onward. Despite a legal insistence on voluntary sterilization, the operation was generally performed without consent because individuals judged to be mentally disturbed had no right to make a legally valid decision. In 1929, Denmark was the first Scandinavian country to pass a sterilization law, the result of official efforts to implement eugenic policies that had started after the accession to power of the first Labor government in 1924. Support for reform eugenics continued up to the 1950s: initially pushed by the minister of justice and later of social affairs, eugenic sterilization was presented as a fundamental aspect of a desirable social welfare state. Other countries in Scandinavia passed similar laws, pushed by government officials and medical doctors in charge of psychiatric hospitals and institutions for the mentally retarded. Sterilization acts were passed in Sweden in 1934 and 1941. Social Democrats were the most vigorous defenders of racial improvement, as it was thought that the systematic sterilization of the mentally retarded would yield substantial economic gains by cutting the cost of institutional care and poor relief. An efficient administration ensured that the laws were thoroughly implemented by the Swedish government: by 1960, well over 50,000 people had been sterilized, initially on medical grounds but later for social reasons.

No special organizations, research institutes, or specialized periodicals existed in Finland. In fact, there was hardly any public debate on eugenics until the 1930s, as most medical practitioners were in favor of sterilization and few members of the public had the desire or opportunity to dispute expert opinion. In the absence of any substantial objections, almost 2,000 people were sterilized between 1935 and 1955. In stark contrast to the commonly accepted observation that eugenics declined rapidly after World War II, the total number of operations performed increased dramatically to 56,000 by 1970: with the enactment of the new steriliza-

<sup>2</sup> Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, eds., *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing, Mich., 1996).

tion and castration acts in 1950, compulsory operations became possible with the authorization of only two doctors. Based on a broad consensus among the population, similar laws were passed without much opposition in Norway, too, although they were initially moderated in order to assuage the lingering moral doubts of the public. The Lutheran church had some reservations about the sterilization law, but it remained remarkably silent, interpreting a program of eugenics as a contribution to the prevention of suffering. As in neighboring countries, eugenics in Norway was seen to be an integral part of a comprehensive program for social reform in a developing welfare state.

In all Scandinavian countries, the only real threat to sterilization laws came from a minority of people who emphasized the protection of individual freedom and the right to free individual choice, although such liberal values would only become influential with the advent of a more open and affluent society in the 1970s. Repeating a theme common to most eugenics movements, the Swedish Population Commission in 1936 found liberal attitudes to be "an extremely individualistic view" that could only harm the collective rights of society. In general, the rejection of individual rights and an emphasis on the collectivity remains a hallmark of all eugenics movements, from Sweden in the 1930s to the People's Republic of China today, where since 1988 the most stringent eugenic regulations have been passed at the provincial level. Sterilization laws in Scandinavian countries with a Lutheran state church encountered relatively little public opposition; concern about the increase in crime and the number of mentally retarded people contributed to a general consensus across the political spectrum on the necessity of mild eugenic measures. The eugenics movement, moreover, was linked to a liberal movement for social reforms rather than a politically conservative agenda. Scandinavian countries were virtually the only ones in Europe to have introduced sterilization laws in the 1930s under democratic governments, and they were characterized by relatively egalitarian societies, strong Labor parties, and rapidly developing welfare states. Leading scientists lent their support to the introduction of eugenic legislation, although some geneticists disputed the efficacy of such measures. Despite their scientific reservations, for example, Otto Mohr in Norway and Gunnar Dahlberg in Sweden nonetheless accepted the existing laws and approved on social grounds the practice of curtailing the reproduction of people judged to be insane or retarded.

In all four Scandinavian countries, as in many other modernizing nations, the majority of sterilizations were performed on people defined as mentally retarded. The number of eugenic sterilizations only started to drop in the middle of the 1940s, although this did not necessarily lead to a decline in the number of people sterilized: doctors simply turned from eugenic arguments to medical and contraceptive ones in their efforts to secure official approval for sterilization. The alleged cost of institutional care and the proclaimed inability of the mentally retarded and the mentally ill to raise children were increasingly invoked to justify sterilization: dysgenic groups were not only a threat to the quality of the race, they were a heavy burden on society.

ALTHOUGH TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE defined as mentally retarded have been consistently abused, locked up, and sterilized, on occasion even castrated, historians have had relatively little to say about this marginalized social group. The last decade has seen a thriving literature specifically concerned with questions of gender and race, and this timely focus has opened up new and exciting perspectives in the history of eugenics, although people with learning disabilities still have to gain a clearer place in these studies. While it is true that the overwhelming majority of people alleged to be mentally retarded and forced to undergo sterilization were women, the notion of “gender”—an analytical concept far too often used as a synonym for “women”—may not quite capture the ways in which individuals from very different personal and social backgrounds were systematically banned from society by being labeled “morons,” “retardants,” or “cretins.” Women themselves, nevertheless, were keen participants in eugenics movements, the best-known cases being Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes. In Scandinavia, women’s organizations played an active and vocal role in the public support of sterilization laws. As the literature on eugenics in England, the United States, and Germany has grown to the point of saturation, a sustained focus on the intersection between eugenicist discourse and questions of disability might fruitfully contribute to this issue. An excellent example is the illuminating book by Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance*, on the systematic murder by the Nazis of as many as 200,000 mentally ill or physically disabled people, stigmatized as “life unworthy of life.” Based on a wealth of archival material, its focus on the lives of the victims as well as the perpetrators highlights some profoundly disturbing moral issues related to eugenic practices.<sup>3</sup>

People alleged to be mentally ill were also the main targets of eugenic practices in the United States. In *Keeping America Sane*, Ian Dowbiggin highlights the professional reasons behind the appeal eugenics had for psychiatrists in North America.<sup>4</sup> Not only did concepts of heredity explain the difficulties psychiatrists had in curing institutional patients, they also legitimized the involvement of psychiatrists in the community outside hospitals in a period of intense professional dissatisfaction with medical service in public asylums. As heredity, reproduction, public hygiene, and racial anthropology became widespread subjects of concern during the interwar period, biomedical theories that stressed the hereditary basis of deviance had great appeal for professional psychiatrists who felt mired in state institutions for the mentally handicapped. Under pressure from state officials and politicians to cut costs, conscious of their professional vulnerability, adjusting their beliefs to prevailing policies, they promoted sterilization laws and immigration restriction while offering expert opinion that represented eugenics as impeccable science. Through a detailed study of such pivotal figures as G. Adler Blumer,

<sup>3</sup> Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: “Euthanasia” in Germany c. 1900–1945* (Cambridge, 1994); on Germany, see also, among others, Burleigh, *Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, 1997); Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene, Nationalsozialismus, Euthanasie: Von der Verhütung zur Vernichtung “Lebensunwerten Lebens,” 1890–1945* (Göttingen, 1987); Manfred Berg and Geoffrey Cocks, eds., *Medicine and Modernity: Public Health and Medical Care in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany* (Washington, D.C., 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Robert Dowbiggin, *Keeping America Sane: Psychiatry and Eugenics in the United States and Canada, 1880–1940* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

Charles Kirk Clarke, Thomas Salmon, Clare Hincks, and William Partlow, Dowbiggin shows that, while eugenics was sporadically explored and opportunistically exploited in ambivalent if not inconsistent ways for reasons that had no necessary relationship to heredity, few psychiatrists were fully committed to eugenic goals. He concludes that there were “precious few heroes among psychiatrists,” yet, at the same time, there were “few certifiable villains.” Here as elsewhere, eugenics crossed the political spectrum, appealing to liberals and socialists rather than being confined to a few conservative cranks.<sup>5</sup>

Eugenics also thrived in relatively isolated and provincial parts of the United States. As Edward J. Larson demonstrates in *Sex, Race, and Science*, an important contribution that moves away from the main centers of research in eugenics, a small number of determined individuals influenced eugenic legislation in the Deep South.<sup>6</sup> Practicing physicians blamed the “insane” and the “feeble-minded” for a variety of social problems. Invoking the language of science, to which they themselves contributed precious little, medical authorities proposed marriage restrictions, sexual segregation, and compulsory sterilization to curb the reproduction of people with presumed dysgenic traits. Introduced during the first two decades of this century, eugenic statutes providing for the sexual segregation of individuals defined as “unfit” in state institutions were passed in all states of the region between 1918 and 1920. Moves in favor of sterilization continued unabated in several states up until World War II, followed by a movement of repudiation and withdrawal from eugenic practices.

Scientific theories did not develop in the Deep South, and genetic research lagged far behind other parts of the United States. There were no major institutions, research programs, or prominent scientists to keep pace with developments elsewhere: as few scientists worked in the Deep South, the growing body of evidence invoked by geneticists against eugenic remedies in the 1930s was only gradually recognized, and mental health hospitals in many states continued to practice sterilization. Defenders of eugenic reforms rested their case on scientific arguments, which few opponents had the intellectual means to combat. Religious values as well as individual rights initially served as a more effective protection against the most extreme aspects of race improvement, although resistance against sterilization bills weakened over time. As Larson thoughtfully notes in his conclusion, a commitment to personal rights, including civil rights for handicapped people and reproductive rights for women, provides the best protection against compulsory programs of eugenics.

Besides its invaluable focus on an area hitherto ignored in the history of eugenics, Larson’s study adds further evidence that regions making no major contribution to research were nonetheless eager to appropriate the language of science in order to propose and implement eugenic measures. On the basis of recent work, it appears that parts of the world on the periphery of scientific research, such as Finland, the American South, and China, harbored strident eugenicists who encountered relatively little resistance from medical experts, government officials, or the general public. Resistance to the implementation of sterilization laws and objections to eugenic reforms, it might

<sup>5</sup> Dowbiggin, *Keeping America Sane*, xi.

<sup>6</sup> Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, Md., 1995).

be noted here, sometimes came from those countries that most actively contributed to scientific work, Britain being the best example.

THE EXAMPLES OF FINLAND AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH show that a direct contribution toward scientific knowledge was not a necessary prerequisite for the spread of eugenic practices. Taking this observation a step further, it might be noted that research in eugenics was unevenly spread across the globe, and that there were probably more researchers active in Tokyo, Shanghai, or Bombay than in Finland or the Deep South. The methods used by sexologists in Tokyo interested in eugenic reforms were far more sophisticated than the crude debates offered by medical authorities in Alabama,<sup>7</sup> while Chinese publications on eugenics circulated more widely than the few pamphlets published in Finnish during the 1930s. Fresh evidence also shows that support and encouragement for eugenics did not always flow in one direction: in May 1920, the maharajah of Mysore gave a generous donation to the Eugenics Education Society in London to help it with its work.<sup>8</sup> Recent research in the history of eugenics not only invalidates dubious distinctions between a so-called “West” and the Rest but also highlights an increasing imbalance in history research itself, as historians risk the creation of a veritable cottage industry of works about eugenics in Europe and the United States while ignoring entire subcontinents such as India.

Eugenics outside Europe is sometimes dismissed as a derivative manifestation of a more authentic discourse, a misleading interpretation that can only impoverish our understanding of the complexities of cultural history. When the history of eugenics is explored in a variety of cultural, social, and political contexts, it resists any reductive explanation, an observation that is all the more true as the less familiar shores beyond Europe come under investigation. As *The Hour of Eugenics*, Nancy Leys Stepan’s important book now available in paperback demonstrates, Latin American eugenics was not a mere imitation of a European discourse but the result of an active process of cultural appropriation with its own peculiar dynamics.<sup>9</sup> Ethnically and culturally diverse, permeated with racial ideologies, deeply religious but influenced by secular forces, Latin American countries had their own eugenics activities and movements, shaped by indigenous concerns over a racially diverse and socially disparate society. As the intelligentsia in Latin America increasingly interpreted questions of health as a matter of heredity and race during the first decades of this century, legislative efforts to regulate human reproduction, medical initiatives to curb disease, and official attempts to control immigration were shaped by eugenic concerns. After World War I, eugenic ideas were systematically developed by specific societies and organizations, in particular in Brazil, seen as a racially diverse and economically underdeveloped country by a small European

<sup>7</sup> Sabine Frühstück, *Die Politik der Sexualwissenschaft: Zur Produktion und Popularisierung sexologischer Wissens in Japan 1908–1941* (Vienna, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Patrick McGinn, “‘Quality Not Quantity Tells’: The Eugenics Movement in India,” unpublished manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Leys Stepan, *“The Hour of Eugenics”: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991, paperback 1996).

intelligentsia who believed that eugenic policies were a key to national revival. In contrast to Brazil, Argentina was a more scientifically advanced society and a wealthier place in which non-European population groups had long been reduced by campaigns of extermination and conquest. Marked by a context of large-scale European immigration, debates on eugenics were more focused on which European "races" and social "classes" best represented the racial foundation of Argentine nationality. In Mexico, following a revolution in 1910 that started to transform the social and political landscape, eugenics was associated with a revolutionary representation of the population as a superior and "cosmic" race in which all different groups in the nation merged.

Despite such profound social, cultural, and political differences, however, all three countries were bound by cultural ties to France. Contrary to eugenicist discourse in England and Germany, no strong link was established between heredity and genetics in France. A neo-Lamarckian approach to heredity, in which nature and nurture were seen to be mutually interdependent factors while acquired characteristics could be transmitted from parents to their offspring, was not incompatible with eugenicist discourse. The work of Anne Carol, *Histoire de l'eugénisme en France*, shows how proponents of neo-Lamarckism claimed that undesirable traits such as alcoholism were acquired in one generation and passed on to the next: the belief in the inheritance of acquired features did not need to be based on a genealogical analysis to demonstrate that a trait followed Mendelian laws.<sup>10</sup> While most eugenicists in France did not support genetics, they still called for the elimination of dysgenic groups, although they generally preferred to encourage the propagation of the "fit" and the improvement of the health of the "unfit." Environmental determinism rather than biological determinism was used to advocate the sterilization of particular categories of people. Since neo-Lamarckian explanations did not draw a sharp boundary between nature and nurture, however, education also became paramount in eugenicist discourse: French medical experts campaigned for better public education in social hygiene and sexual health in the name of race improvement. While social order was seen to have a biological foundation, human intervention was thought to be capable of positively harnessing the laws of nature. France has often been characterized as the "home of neo-Lamarckian eugenics," an emphasis explained partly by the prominent concern over the declining birth rate and fears of underpopulation.

France may have harbored some of the most outspoken defenders of a neo-Lamarckian approach to eugenics, but the case of Latin America illustrates that soft approaches, which combined an emphasis on the environment with hereditarian explanations, were far more widespread than previously suspected. In all three countries examined by Stepan, neo-Lamarckian notions were more important than strictly Mendelian explanations, an emphasis that supported a preventive approach to eugenics in which the environment had to be cleansed of all deleterious factors damaging racial health. As there is now mounting evidence of

<sup>10</sup> Anne Carol, *Histoire de l'eugénisme en France: Les médecins et la procréation, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1995); many of these observations were first made in the classic work of William H. Schneider, *Quality and Quantity: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth Century France* (Cambridge, 1990).



the importance of neo-Lamarckism in such diverse countries as Russia,<sup>11</sup> Brazil, China, and France between the two world wars, a radical reassessment of its scientific and political meanings seems seriously overdue. A fresh historical appraisal of the available material that included countries outside Europe might reveal that the hard Mendelian eugenics familiar from studies of Britain and Germany was not a dominant approach in many developing parts of the world. The implications of neo-Lamarckism on non-Darwinian theories of evolution, which were dominant in a number of continents from the 1890s to the 1930s, also remain to be reconsidered, as the folk notion of "Social Darwinism" continues to be used in an uncritical way.<sup>12</sup>

COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO THE HISTORY OF EUGENICS have highlighted the extent to which common medical knowledge has been mobilized and transformed by very distinct local styles of expression, dependent on the political, economic, social, and cultural variables of particular institutions and social groups.<sup>13</sup> The importance of traditional ideas in the emergence of eugenics within specific cultures, however, is rarely studied in any detail, although a few authors observe how popular notions of heredity—encapsulated in sayings such as "like begets like"—strongly reinforced the emergence and acceptance of eugenic ideas. One of the most original and important contributions of Carol's book is her focus on pre-Galtonian medical discourse. Well before 1860, French doctors envisaged the regulation of reproduction in order to improve the human race. The hereditary transmission of deleterious features, the need for matrimonial legislation, the physical degeneration of the human race, and the medical administration of human reproduction are some of the ideas broached by medical authorities concerned by the progress of civilization and the physical qualities of the population. In 1803, Louis Robert even proposed a new science called "megalanthropology," which would enable the government to identify men of superior abilities, select women of outstanding breeding talents, and closely monitor the entire reproductive process from insemination to delivery in state institutions. Traditional ideas associated with reproductive health, from the quality of sperm to the choice of a mating partner, also reappeared in the guise of eugenic science after 1860. Carol sees a distinct line running through medical ideas in France from the late eighteenth century to the present day, specifically in an emphasis on soft approaches to inheritance, racial regeneration, and reproductive health. She demonstrates that eugenic discourse was to a significant extent shaped by older medical ideas. Recasting more traditional notions of reproductive health in the radically new language of racial science, eugenics in twentieth-century France can be seen to constitute more of a cultural reconfiguration structured by older modes of representation than a radical disjunction characterized by a merely notional relationship to the past.

<sup>11</sup> Besides Mark B. Adams, ed., *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (Oxford, 1990), see also Yuri Slezkine, "N. Ia. Marr and the National Origins of Soviet Ethnogenetics," *Slavic Review* 55 (1996): 826–62.

<sup>12</sup> Despite the publication of such a pioneering work as P. J. Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore, Md., 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Adams, *Wellborn Science*.

Unlike their counterparts in Germany and Britain, French eugenicists did not produce significant biological research or statistical studies. As in many other countries, however, race hygiene was part of the vocabulary of most political groups, from the far left to the extreme right, for many intellectuals shared a concern over the decline of modernity, a sense of nationalism, and an expectation that the government should reform society. An emphasis on the virtues of education accounts to a great extent for the relative absence of formal institutions, official organs, or professional organizations centered on the promotion of eugenic ideals in countries that adopted a neo-Lamarckian approach to questions of race improvement. Rather than emanating from a solid organizational foundation, eugenicist discourse was often supported by a variety of voices in the social field, attracting popular journalists, social reformers, medical writers, sex educators, university professors, or political ideologues, all attempting to promote medical knowledge and reproductive health for the sake of a more eugenic nation. Thus an exclusive focus on institutions or a narrow emphasis on legislative processes would fail to highlight the dispersed but prevalent nature of eugenicist discourse among medical circles, political elites, and professional groups in countries with a strong preference for preventive eugenics, from France to China. Shifting the focus away from leaders of the eugenics movement toward its more anonymous supporters, a greater emphasis on the reception of eugenics on more popular levels of culture, and a more sustained analysis of traditional hereditarian attitudes would help explain the widespread support for eugenics in many countries between the two world wars.

Even within countries dominated by hard Mendelian genetics and statistical science, a move away from the more conventional focus on medical institutions and intellectual elites toward an exploration of eugenicist discourse among different levels of culture can be immensely rewarding, as Richard Soloway's meticulously researched monograph, *Demography and Degeneration*, now finally available in paperback with a new preface, amply demonstrates.<sup>14</sup> The works of Soloway and of Carol are distinguished by their move away from a narrow focus on the small and esoteric personnel who contributed to eugenics institutions and journals. Looking beyond the institutional boundaries of formal organizations, they find that eugenicist discourse permeated the concerns of many ordinary men and women. As eugenics was popularized, it gave scientific credibility and respectability to attitudes, anxieties, and values that were prevalent primarily if not exclusively among the formally educated members of society. Soloway argues that social anxieties about the declining birth rate and its class differentials were behind the forms that eugenics took in Britain: presented as a statistical science of selective reproduction, eugenics was used to highlight the impending perils associated with a differential birth rate in which superior groups failed to reproduce at high enough rates to keep up with the inferior hordes that proliferated at the bottom of society. Generations of educated men and women in Britain discussed the meanings of birth-rate statistics and net reproduction ratios, which showed a precipitous decline in the fertility of their country. The demographic map revealed that the most uneducated

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain*, new preface (1990; Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995).

reproduced themselves in large numbers as the wealthiest, best-educated, and most skilled classes were reducing the size of their families. Public attention focused on the inverse correlations existing between fertility and social status, as “race quality” and “race suicide” became the keywords of an age of anxiety over the genetically unfit. Building, as elsewhere, on a deeply entrenched belief in the power of heredity, eugenics was further transformed into an organized movement by post-Malthusian ideas of population control and demographic change.

EUGENIST DISCOURSE MAY HAVE BEEN WIDESPREAD, but it also encountered resistance. In Britain, leading scientists such as J. B. S. Haldane, Julian Huxley, Lancelot Hogben, and Herbert Jennings turned against eugenics and denounced the race and class prejudice it cultivated. If the decline in eugenics within scientific circles often preceded Nazi atrocities, as the important contribution *The Retreat of Scientific Racism* by Elazar Barkan shows, the cruelty of German policies eventually led to a strong reaction, supported by a longstanding and influential anti-eugenics coalition among people of both secular and religious backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> In France, moreover, widespread reluctance to interfere in the private lives of families, opposition from religious and liberal groups, as well as the professional duty of family doctors to respect the confidentiality of their patients combined to marginalize eugenic proposals. The case of the Netherlands, highlighted in the book by Jan Noordman, *On the Quality of Offspring*, is particularly illuminating.<sup>16</sup> In his detailed survey of debates about race improvement, Noordman shows how eugenics remained a marginal movement, as widespread resistance emerged against the medical regulation of reproduction and state intervention in the family. A biologizing vision that reduced human life to a hereditary mechanism was also attacked, while a long tradition of charitable aid combined with Catholic objections to contraception in a strong movement of opposition to eugenics. Equally important was the traditional reticence of the government itself to intervene in the private life of its citizens, since the state in the Netherlands traditionally viewed the family as a sacrosanct entity that should not be interfered with or intruded on. Open democracies with a vibrant civil society, such as Britain and the Netherlands, were generally less inclined to adopt extreme eugenic proposals than authoritarian regimes in Germany and the People's Republic of China.<sup>17</sup>

While most historians note an erosion of faith in eugenics after World War II, some also point out how recent medical innovations in reproductive technologies, including human gene therapy, the Human Genome Project, and in vitro fertilization, could lead to a resurgence in eugenic ideas.<sup>18</sup> This certainly was the case in the

<sup>15</sup> Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the Two World Wars* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Jan Noordman, *Om de Kwaliteit van het Nageslacht: Eugenetika in Nederland, 1900–1950* [On the Quality of Offspring: Eugenics in the Netherlands, 1900–1950] (Nijmegen, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> See also Paul Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 1989), an important book highlighting the significant changes in broader social, political, and disciplinary fields from the Weimar Republic to the Nazi era.

<sup>18</sup> See the new preface in Daniel J. Kevles's classic book *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (1985; Cambridge, 1995).

1970s in the Soviet Union, when parts of the liberal intelligentsia started proposing a form of "socialist eugenics," portraying themselves as a genetically superior elite destined by DNA to rule over the dysgenic fray. The systematic invocation of human genetics in political theories justifying social inequality even caused a prominent geneticist to denounce the abuse of science in an official organ of the Central Committee.<sup>19</sup> Eugenic arguments also continue to surface regularly in the United States, as illustrated by a proposal in 1991 by state representative David Duke, a former grand wizard in the Ku Klux Klan. His proposal for a law offering mostly African-American female welfare recipients in Louisiana cash payments for the use of the contraceptive device Norplant strongly echoes earlier eugenic reforms. In some Scandinavian countries, sterilizations continued to be practiced on a widespread scale until 1970. Forced sterilizations for eugenic reasons were also performed decades after the end of World War II in parts of Switzerland.<sup>20</sup>

The recent revelation by a Swiss historian that the canton of Vaud passed a sterilization law for mentally handicapped patients in 1928 caused widespread consternation in the international media, in contrast to the relatively muted reception given to eugenic legislation passed in the People's Republic of China. In Gansu province alone, a 1988 law proscribes marriage for mentally retarded people until they have undergone sterilization surgery; according to the figures announced by Gansu provincial authorities, thousands of people have been sterilized since the law was implemented. Eugenic legislation, passed under the rubric of "maternal and infant health," was also accepted at the national level in 1995. More generally, eugenic discourse in the People's Republic permeates virtually every field related to human reproduction, from birth control to sex education. Directly indebted to the eugenic vision elaborated in many countries between the two world wars, medical and economic explanations are used to curb the reproduction of marginalized people described as "unfit," while abstractions like the "nation," "future generations," and the "gene pool" are raised above the rights and needs of individuals and their families. A greater focus on less developed areas of the world that have not received detailed attention, an emphasis on the highly prevalent yet dispersed nature of eugenic ideas in developed countries, and attention to the different inflections of eugenics in a variety of historical contexts would contribute to a more general appreciation of the history of eugenics, in which China would appear not so much a lonely exception as an integral part of more global trends that have deeply marked and continue to affect the twentieth century.

As the books reviewed here demonstrate in different but complementary ways, eugenic ideas have had very powerful effects on ordinary people throughout the modern world. Historically, scientific advances in genetic research have brought not only greater knowledge of human reproduction to mankind but also increased social prejudice against minority groups and sterilization programs against devalued individuals. While crude programs of eugenics sponsored by the state may have become less frequent today, the legacy of eugenics is still with us in contemporary

<sup>19</sup> N. Dubinin, "Nasledovanie Biologicheskoe i Sotsial'noe," *Kommunist* 11 (1980): 62-74.

<sup>20</sup> On Switzerland, see Philippe Ehrenström, "Stérilisation opératoire et maladie mentale: Une étude de cas," *Gesnerus* 48 (1991): 503-16; and Frank Preiswerk, "Auguste Forel (1848-1931): Un projet de régénération sociale, morale et raciale," *Annuaire: Revue d'histoire contemporaine* 2 (1991): 25-50.

debates about new medical techniques for isolating and manipulating genes. Gene therapy, embryo selection, and prenatal screening are important tools that are open to race and class bias, threatening commitments to social equality and reproductive rights. Information about human genetics can be used to stigmatize not only people alleged to suffer from genetic diseases but virtually anyone deemed economically costly or socially undesirable. During the heyday of eugenics, assumptions about race, gender, and class pervaded genetic research: with the revolution in human genetics today, social and political factors continue to exert formidable influences on scientific research, although eugenic laws are unlikely to reappear in countries that protect reproductive freedoms and civil rights. Even in democratic countries, however, marginalized people may be treated in a discriminatory way, as social prejudice and economic interest could have an impact on genetic information made available to families, employers, hospitals, insurance companies, or welfare systems. An exploration of the history of eugenics illuminates how uncannily similar present ideas can sometimes be to past practices; whether or not it may help us avoid past mistakes is open to debate.

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