

Darwin Day in America

*How Our Politics and Culture Have Been
Dehumanized in the Name of Science*

John G. West



Wilmington, Delaware

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Breeding Our Way out of Poverty

According to her teachers, Deborah Kallikak could “run an electric sewing machine, cook, and do practically everything about the house.”¹ Although it might take her half an hour to memorize four lines, once she learned something, she retained it. She was “cheerful,” “affectionate,” and learned “a new occupation quickly.” She also exhibited an independent spirit. “Active and restless,” she was “inclined to be quarrelsome.” At the same time, she was “fairly good-tempered.”

“The description . . . is one that millions of parents might give of their own teenage daughters,” notes a recent writer.² But in the eyes of psychologist Henry Goddard there was nothing normal about Deborah. In fact, there was something horribly wrong.

Goddard was convinced that this free-spirited young girl who was kind to animals, loved music, and “was bold towards strangers,” was nothing less than a menace to the future of American civilization.

Goddard, who holds the dubious honor of introducing the term “moron” into the English language,³ was obsessed with how “feeble-minded” Americans were degrading their country’s racial stock. Deborah was his case in point, and in 1912 he presented his indictment of the dangers she and her family posed to America’s survival in his provocative book *The Kallikak Family: A Study in Feeble-Mindedness*. According to J. David Smith, “Goddard’s book . . . was received with acclaim by the public and by much of the scientific community,” and “it went through several editions.”⁴ Interest was even expressed in turning it into a Broadway play.

Goddard invoked the Kallikak family to show that the underclass was produced more by bad heredity than bad environment. Born to an unmarried woman on welfare, Deborah Kallikak came from what Goddard believed was a long line of biological defectives. In an effort to prove that her feeble-mindedness was hereditary, Goddard and fellow researchers at the Training School for Backward and Feeble-minded Children in New Jersey zealously tracked down Deborah's relatives and researched her ancestors in search of other defectives.

According to Goddard, a field investigation of the area surrounding the "ancestral home" of Deborah's family "showed that the family had always been notorious for the number of defectives and delinquents it had produced." Indeed, the more Kallikak family members the investigators located, the more deficient the family's bloodline appeared to be.

"The surprise and horror of it all was that no matter where we traced them, whether in the prosperous rural district, in the city slums . . . or in the more remote mountain regions, or whether it was a question of the second or the sixth generation, an appalling amount of defectiveness was everywhere found."⁵ Goddard eventually traced the family line all the way back to one Martin Kallikak Sr., a Revolutionary War soldier whose affair with a tavern girl produced an illegitimate son. Of the 480 descendants to come from this son, Goddard claimed to have "conclusive proof" that 143 "were or are feeble-minded, while only forty-six have been found normal. The rest are unknown or doubtful."⁶

Goddard believed that members of the Kallikak family were especially dangerous to America's racial stock because on the surface many of them did not appear to be particularly deficient. "A large proportion of those who are considered feeble-minded in this study are persons who would not be recognized as such by the untrained observer," acknowledged Goddard, whose observations were nothing if not trained.⁷

Deborah was in this category. Goddard complained about "the unwillingness of . . . [Deborah's] teachers to admit even to themselves that she is really feeble-minded,"⁸ but he noted that this refusal to face reality was common with teachers. Faced with a "high-grade" feeble-minded girl like Deborah who is "rather good-looking, bright in appearance, with many attractive ways, the teacher clings to the hope, indeed insists, that such a girl will come out all right. Our work with Deborah convinces us that such hopes are delusions."⁹

Published during the same year presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson was campaigning for an evolutionary understanding of the Constitution, Goddard's book urged the nation to apply biological science to its social-welfare policies as well. Calling the family history of the Kallikaks a "ghastly story," Goddard went on to declare that "there are Kallikak

families all about us. They are multiplying at twice the rate of the general population, and not until we recognize this fact . . . will we begin to solve these social problems."¹⁰

In Goddard's view, heredity rather than charity was the key to eliminating the underclass and its associated social ills. By 1912, his message was striking a chord with American policymakers, social scientists, and cultural leaders. New books advocating eugenics were being published, a Broadway play on the subject was in preparation, and professional societies were taking up the topic in earnest.

In Washington, D.C., Dr. Woods Hutchinson of the New York Polyclinic preached eugenics at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association. Hutchinson proposed that all American schoolchildren be given a eugenics inspection by their third year in school. "As soon as the 2 to 3 per cent of all children who are hereditarily defective are determined they should be given such a training as will fit them for the part they are likely to play in life. Then they should either be segregated in open-air farm colonies or sterilized."¹¹ A few days later, Dr. L. F. Barker of Johns Hopkins University lectured the International Hygiene Congress about the importance of "providing for the birth of children endowed with good brains" and "denying, as far as possible, the privilege of parenthood to the manifestly unfit."¹²

Eugenics also made inroads in the churches, with the Episcopal hierarchy in Chicago announcing in 1912 that henceforth "no persons will be married at the [city's] cathedral unless they present a certificate of health from a reputable physician to the effect that they are normal physically and mentally and have neither an incurable nor a communicable disease."¹³ As Christine Rosen has documented ably in her book *Preaching Eugenics*, many liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews became enthusiastic boosters of eugenics.¹⁴

The eugenics agenda was promoted by a growing number of national organizations, including the American Breeders Association (established 1903), the Eugenics Record Office (established 1910), the Race Betterment Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan (established 1911), and the American Eugenics Society (established 1923).¹⁵ The American Breeders Association (later renamed the American Genetic Association) was organized at the instigation of President Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson and Assistant Secretary of Agriculture W. Hays.¹⁶ Besides publishing an influential periodical eventually titled the *Journal of Heredity*, the association helped create the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. The goal of the ERO was to collect comprehensive eugenics information on "a large portion of the families of America," records which would be stored permanently in the group's fireproof vaults and

could be consulted by those who wanted to ensure that their prospective mates were eugenically fit.¹⁷ Secretary Wilson praised those “assembling the genetic data of thousands of families” for “making records of the very souls of our people, of the very life essence of our racial blood.”¹⁸

The American eugenics movement was so well established by 1912 that it was drawing favorable notices in Europe. In fact, in July of that year American eugenists played a starring role in the first International Eugenics Congress held in London.¹⁹ At that event, Professor G. Ruggeri from Italy publicly recognized the American contribution to eugenics, declaring that “thanks to recent researches in the United States, it was now certain that the races of man acted in exactly the same way as the races of animals.”²⁰

Social-welfare agencies in America struggled to come to grips with the new movement. Traditionally, American charities had focused on ending poverty both by instilling in their clients good moral character and by counteracting the influences of a bad environment.²¹ Premised on the idea that people in poverty had the capacity for self-improvement, these efforts operated on the assumption that no one was beyond the possibility of help. However, the eugenists’ creed raised a substantial challenge to such an optimistic position, and at the 1912 meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC), the nation’s social-welfare establishment grappled with what the new biological view would mean for social programs. A trio of prominent eugenists called on the social-service establishment to fundamentally revise the nation’s approach to helping the underclass.

Bleeker Van Wagenen of the American Breeders Association opened the discussion by outlining “The Eugenic Problem,” describing the increasing burden on American society caused by hundreds of thousands of defectives, including the blind, the deaf, the feeble-minded, the insane, paupers, criminals, and juvenile delinquents. “It is impossible to measure the industrial and social handicap caused by these individuals,” said Van Wagenen, “but just as the great leaders of successful human endeavor exert an influence altogether incommensurate with their number, so, doubtless, these classes constitute a correspondingly heavy drag upon society.”²² Professor Robert Yerkes of Harvard University next described the “Scientific Basis and . . . Program” of eugenics, advocating, among other things, the establishment of “a federal department of public welfare” within which would be located a bureau of eugenics.²³ Finally, Charles Davenport of the Eugenics Record Office discussed the relationship between “Eugenics and Charity.”

Previously a professor of zoology at the University of Chicago, Davenport was one of the most well-known American propagandists for eu-

genics. Historian Edward Larson calls him “the universally acknowledged spokesperson for the American eugenics movement.”²⁴ Speaking to the NCCC, Davenport attacked traditional charitable efforts as useless in solving the problem of poverty, and promoted eugenics as the replacement.

“People are unequal less because of unequal external conditions and opportunities than because of unequal innate equipment,” he asserted. “In fact it is futile to hope to supply innate deficiency by means of improved environment. Even better schools, more churches, better living conditions, better food, sunlight, air and hours of work will not make strong those without the elements for mental and physical development. The only way to secure innate capacity is by breeding it.”²⁵

It was a hard sell, and not everyone in the audience was convinced. A blind music teacher from Cleveland was incensed by how the speakers lumped together the blind with criminals and the mentally deficient. “As an intelligent woman but handicapped by blindness I do not in the least object to the classification which has associated us with criminals and [the] feeble-minded,” she announced sarcastically.²⁶ She added that “in my fearful struggle for human life against such a terrible handicap, and in my experience as a teacher I have more than once wished that we had that fearlessness of conscience which would permit us by a painless anesthetic to send every little blind baby back to eternity.” She then rebuked the speakers for thinking that handicapped people were necessarily a drag on society. “I would remind you that 60 per cent of the blind people sent out from the schools are self-supporting.” She also said that the eugenists should revisit the question of who in society really was most unfit: “When I observe the idle, selfish, shallow sons and daughters of the rich spending their days in worthless pursuits, making no contribution of life and service to society, no answer to the great cry of humanity, I ask myself the questions—who, in the sight of God, are the unfit?”

Some religious social-welfare workers raised even more fundamental objections to the materialistic determinism preached by the eugenists. The claim that the poor were captives of their heredity was something many religious charity workers were loath to admit. They preached empowerment and the ability to overcome one’s circumstances, not enslavement either to biology or to the social conditions in which one grew up.²⁷ Social-gospel proponent Jacob Riis, author of *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), had little patience for eugenic propaganda. Attending a conference on “race betterment,” Riis was disgusted with the eugenists’ obsession with heredity. “The word has rung in my ears until I am sick of it. Heredity, heredity! There is just one heredity in all the world that is ours—we are children of God, and there is nothing in the whole big world that we cannot do in his service with it.”²⁸ Washington Gladden, another leader of the social-gospel

movement, declared in one of his sermons: “Heredity is no excuse . . . Your heredity is from God. He is your Father. Deeper than all other strains of ancestral tendency is this fact that your nature comes from God . . . Environment is no excuse for you . . . God is the great first fact in all our environment, no matter where you may be. There is no place of temptation in which he is not nearer to you than any human influence can be.”²⁹

Despite its detractors, the American eugenics movement continued to gain both strength and influence among America’s elites, inspired by its boosters’ almost boundless faith in science and by their almost overpowering fear that without eugenics society was on the road to racial ruin. The mixture of blind optimism and unrelenting fear supplied the recipe for a potent ideological blend.

Sinning Against Natural Selection

The eugenics movement drew direct inspiration from Darwinian biology. Yet today the Darwinian roots of eugenics tend to be downplayed both by the popular media and by some scholars. When Darwin’s theory is mentioned at all, a sharp distinction is often drawn between Darwin’s own views and the “Social Darwinism” of the eugenists, who supposedly extended Darwin’s theory into realms unanticipated by him. In the recent book *War Against the Weak* (2003), for example, Edwin Black argued that “Darwin was writing about a ‘natural world’ distinct from man”; others were to blame for “distilling the ideas of Malthus, Spencer and Darwin into a new concept, bearing a name never used by Darwin himself: social Darwinism.”³⁰ Black seemed unaware that Darwin wrote extensively about the application of natural selection to human beings in *The Descent of Man*. But at least Black acknowledged the influence of Darwinism. Sometimes the connection between Darwinian biology and eugenics is evaded altogether.

On the “Understanding Evolution” website funded by the National Science Foundation, users will find a cartoon showing Charles Darwin yelling “Get out of my house!” to a proponent of eugenics.³¹ The intended point is clear: Darwin opposed eugenics. A similar claim was made by a much-heralded museum exhibit on Charles Darwin sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 2005.³² Incredibly, one educator writing recently about eugenics not only failed to mention Darwinian biology, he traced the eugenists’ beliefs instead back to the Bible. In his view, eugenics embodied “the biblical concept that ‘like breeds like,’ to which eugenics researchers provided a scientific gloss.”³³

Yet it was society’s violation of the law of natural selection, not biblical doctrine, that provided the operating premise for the eugenists’ ide-

ology. The eugenisists' underlying fear was the same as the one Charles Darwin had articulated so clearly in *The Descent of Man*: By saving the weak through medicine and charity, and by allowing defective classes to reproduce, civilized societies were counteracting the law of natural selection to the detriment of the human race.³⁴

Time and again American eugenisists lamented their country's sins against natural selection. According to former governor of Illinois Frank Lowden, "in a state of nature" defective individuals "would long ago have disappeared from the face of the earth. Starvation, disease, and exposure, if they had been left to their own resources, would have eliminated them long ago. Man's interference with natural laws alone save them from perishing."³⁵ Harvard biologist Edward East agreed:

Nature eliminates the unfit and preserves the fit . . . Her fool-killing devices were highly efficient in the olden days before civilisation came to thwart her. It is man, not Nature, who has caused all the trouble. He has put his whole soul to saving the unfit, and has timidly failed to do the other half of his duty by preventing them from perpetuating their traits.³⁶

Edwin Conklin, professor of biology at Princeton University, added that while nature may still kill off the worst defectives, "nevertheless a good many defectives survive in modern society and are capable of reproduction who would have perished in more primitive society before reaching maturity."³⁷ Such defectives survive "in the most highly civilized States" because they "are preserved by charity, and . . . are allowed to reproduce . . . [T]hus natural selection, the great law of evolution and progress, is set at naught." For this reason some eugenisists criticized efforts to reduce infant mortality by improving sanitation, hygiene, and prenatal care. According to these critics, such efforts merely postponed the deaths of many defective babies, and those defective babies who did survive into adulthood would drag the race down by perpetuating "another strain of weak heredity, which natural selection would have cut off ruthlessly in the interests of race betterment."³⁸ Hence, "from a strict biological viewpoint" efforts to reduce infant mortality by improving environmental influences were "often detrimental to the future of the race." Professor H. E. Jordan of the University of Virginia made the same point more generally: "What sanitary science and hygiene seek to accomplish by attention to external conditions alone largely defeats its own ends by counteracting the working of the principle of selection."³⁹

Harvard's Edward East argued that "eugenic tenets are strict corollaries" of "the theory of organic evolution," which helps explain why leading eugenisists were among the most prominent public defenders of the theory

of evolution.⁴⁰ In the anti-evolution controversies of the 1920s, for example, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) appointed a special committee to publicly defend evolutionary theory. Its membership consisted of three scholars who were also leaders of the eugenics movement: Charles Davenport, Henry Fairfield Osborn, and Edwin Conklin.⁴¹

Despite their law-of-the-jungle rhetoric, American eugenicists did not advocate going back to the days when “war . . . poverty, disease, and capital punishment did a fairly thorough if not a very beautiful piece of work before we began to civilize them away.”⁴² Instead, they argued that “some substitute has to be found for natural selection.” That substitute was the directed selection of eugenics. “Natural selection’s death rate of the jungle helped to purify the primitive race by destroying the weak and permitting only the strong to live and reproduce. Eugenicists hope to arrive at the same result by the selective birth rate.”⁴³ Man had to take control of his own evolution by encouraging the “best” to breed more and the “worst” to breed less. According to the eugenicists, human beings were essentially no different from horses, dogs, or blackberries, and so the techniques perfected to breed animals and plants could easily be applied to men and women with just as much success. “Man is an organism—an animal,” declared Charles Davenport, “and the laws of improvement of corn and of race horses hold true for him also.”⁴⁴ “All life is conditioned by the same fundamental laws of nature,” agreed H. E. Jordan. “It would seem, then, that the same methods that man now employs in producing a high quality breed of dogs, or birds, or cattle, or horses, he must apply to himself.”⁴⁵ “If the human race is to be permanently improved in its inherited characteristics,” wrote Princeton biologist Edwin Conklin, “there is no doubt that it must be accomplished in the same way in which man has made improvements in the various races of domesticated animals and cultivated plants.”⁴⁶ And since breeders of animals and plants are experts in heredity, the public should let them determine how humans should breed. According to inventor (and eugenicist) Alexander Graham Bell, “All recognize the fact that the laws of heredity which apply to animals also apply to man; and that therefore the breeder of animals is fitted to guide public opinion on questions relating to human heredity.” Bell said that this represented “an opportunity for the members of the American Genetic Association . . . Most of the disputed questions of human heredity can be settled by them, and their verdict will be acquiesced in by the general public.”⁴⁷

The eugenicists were thoroughgoing biological reductionists. In their view, social problems like poverty and unemployment were rooted in man’s biology rather than his environment or free choices. One eugenicist described going into a prosperous town in Iowa and visiting families whose

houses were “truly the dirtiest, most ill-smelling places I have ever seen.”⁴⁸ “Now honestly, my uplifting environmental friend,” asked the eugenicist, “what can you do for such people? They had plenty of money and ample opportunity. They went to picture shows, and their children attended, or rather were forced to attend, school . . . But their poverty was pure biological poverty, inborn, ineradicable. Their real poverty was poor heredity.” If such biological defectives moved into the cities they would “fall naturally into the slums.”⁴⁹ Similarly, another eugenicist proclaimed that “we know that some by no means small proportion of the unemployed were really destined to be unemployable from the first, as for instance by reason of hereditary disease. It were better for them and for us that they had never been born.”⁵⁰ Those who objected to this view of man as a biologically determined machine were told to stop standing in the way of scientific progress. “Science seeks to explain phenomena in terms of mechanism, and no other interpretation now brings entire satisfaction,” argued Charles Davenport. “If human behavior can be brought under a mechanical law instead of being conceived of as controlled by demons or by a ‘free’ will . . . why should we regret it?”⁵¹

Many eugenicists acknowledged that environment played some role in social problems, but they insisted that heredity was more decisive. “An understanding of the facts of biology leads us to expect that heredity should be nearly all-powerful and the force of environment slight,” proclaimed one essayist in the *Journal of Heredity*.⁵² “The number of social problems whose solution lies with genetics rather than with ordinary sociology is far greater than anyone except the eugenicist realizes,” claimed another article.⁵³

Because of the primacy of heredity, some eugenicists even questioned the utility of universal education. Many students may be biologically unfit for education, they claimed. “The expensive ‘special classes’ of the public schools are filled with children a large part of whom are morons,” reported the *Journal of Heredity*, which complained that “an attempt is made to educate” such students “when an examination of their ancestry would show that it is humanly impossible to educate them, in the way that their playmates are educated.”⁵⁴

Not all eugenicists were quite so strident, and some endorsed the importance of “euthenics”—trying to improve human beings by improving social conditions. But even the more moderate eugenicists maintained that eugenics was required to make such social efforts fruitful. According to Paul Popenoe and Roswell Johnson, “Eugenics is, in fact, a prerequisite of euthenics, for it is only the capable and altruistic man who can contribute to social progress; and such a man can only be produced through eugenics.”⁵⁵ Accordingly, eugenicists like Charles Davenport encouraged philan-

thropists to shift money from traditional charities to eugenics programs. "Vastly more effective than ten million dollars to 'charity' would be ten million dollars to eugenics," declared Davenport. "He who by such a gift, should redeem mankind from vice, imbecility and suffering would be the world's wisest philanthropist."⁵⁶

If the fear of being swamped by biological defectives was a powerful motivator for eugenists, the hope of achieving biological perfection was equally inspiring. The eugenists' naïve faith in modern science spawned a virulent utopianism. Dressed up in quasi-religious terminology, the eugenics faith promised to create heaven on earth through the magic of human breeding. The utopian vision had been a key part of the eugenics crusade from its inception. Francis Galton had promoted the goal of "gradually raising the present miserably low standard of the human race to one in which the Utopias in the dreamland of philanthropists may become practical possibilities."⁵⁷

American eugenists were no less optimistic about what could be accomplished. "The Garden of Eden is not in the past, it is in the future," promised Albert Wiggam.⁵⁸ A "rigidly applied eugenics" eventually will produce an "ideal state of human society!" seconded H. E. Jordan, adding that "thoroly [sic] healthy bodies could develop the highest ranges of mental capacity. There would be little suffering, weakness, sickness, crime, or vice."⁵⁹ These benefits of eugenics "may seem utopian . . . But by all the signs of the times, this day is coming . . . And it behooves us as intelligent, moral men and women to do our share . . . to hasten the time of this life more abundant in this kingdom of heaven on the earth."⁶⁰ Maynard Metcalf similarly expressed "entire confidence that we shall in time almost banish physical, mental and moral invalidism, which today are most prominent characteristics of the human species."⁶¹ Indeed, eugenics could rid human beings of original sin, allowing society to reengineer human nature and "build a race that is physically sound, intellectually keen and strong and whose natural impulses are wholesome! Not a race of men who are decent because they are restrained from following their natural bent, but a race whose natural quality is wholesome, who need not so much to restrain as to develop themselves."⁶² Metcalf urged people to make eugenics their religion. "The people who make eugenics part of their religion and are loyal to its truth will have found . . . the fountain of youth," he declared. Eugenists seemed certain that once man took control of his own evolution, he could do an even better job than nature. "It has taken Mother Nature long, long ages to turn fierce greedy hairy ape-like beasts into such people as we are," wrote feminist eugenist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. "It will take us but two or three close-linked generations to make human beings far more superior to us than we are to the apes."⁶³

Some eugenists qualified their utopian rhetoric, but such reservations often seemed halfhearted at best. Wiggam conceded that “the Eden of eugenics can never be attained,” but he also urged people to pursue it as their goal, so that “the passion for it, the going toward it, the belief in it, the training and education of men for it, [will] constitute that ‘new religion’ of a better humanity which Galton said would ‘sweep the world.’”⁶⁴ At the same time Conklin doubted man’s ability to create “a race of supermen,” he insisted that “there is no doubt that something may be gained by eliminating the worst human kinds from the possibility of reproduction, even though no great improvement in the human race can be expected as a result of such a feeble measure.”⁶⁵

Herbert Walter acknowledged that giving society the power to decide who can bear children might be abused—in theory. “One needs only to recall the days of the Spanish Inquisition or of the Salem witchcraft persecution to realize what fearful blunders human judgment is capable of.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Walter was sanguine that in an age of modern science nothing similar would recur. “It is unlikely that the world will ever see another great religious inquisition, or that in applying to man the newly found laws of heredity there will ever be undertaken an equally deplorable eugenic inquisition.”

The attitude of James Wilson, U.S. secretary of agriculture under Theodore Roosevelt, was probably typical of many eugenists. Although he admitted that the promise of eugenics “at first seems like an Utopian vision,” he went on to assure people that its goals might be attainable after all. “Like world peace . . . it may come, and may we not all ask . . . Why should it not come? Must science stop in its beneficence with the plant and the animal? Is not man, after all, the architect of his own racial destiny?”⁶⁷

Confident that modern biology had revealed to them how to breed a better race, eugenists set about putting their scientific ideas into action. A few months before the first International Eugenics Congress in 1912, a British eugenist aptly summarized the practical outlook of many eugenists around the world, including those in America. She observed that research had generated “fairly authoritative opinions about certain defects and the method of their transmission. The present necessity . . . is to convert these opinions into social action and legislation.”⁶⁸ American supporters of eugenics were already well on their way to achieving that goal.

Restrictions on Marriage and Immigration

Marriage laws represented the first wave of eugenics legislation in America. While states had long regulated who could marry, eugenists advocated

strengthening legal standards to prevent the “feeble-minded” and others with hereditary defects from marrying, lest they spread their defective germ plasm to the next generation. Connecticut enacted the first eugenic marriage law in 1896.⁶⁹ Several other states adopted similar laws soon after the turn of the century, “so that by 1914 more than half of the states had imposed new restrictions on the marriage of persons afflicted with mental defects,” writes Edward Larson.⁷⁰ Some of these new laws were difficult to enforce, but others enlisted medical professionals as gatekeepers. In Wisconsin, for example, couples could only marry if they obtained a health certificate from a doctor verifying that they were free from physical and mental defects and communicable diseases.⁷¹

Liberal clergy enthusiastically embraced proposals for health certificates, not only supporting legislation but sometimes imposing their own health requirements on couples seeking a church wedding.⁷² Because the new marriage restrictions typically sought to prevent the spread of venereal disease as well as hereditary defects, some eugenists frowned on them, believing that eugenics should not be confused with the effort to prevent communicable diseases.⁷³ But even if the marriage laws were not purely eugenic, eugenics was unquestionably one of their primary objectives.

Immigration policies were also targeted by some eugenists who believed that biological defectives from foreign countries contributed disproportionately to America’s social-welfare problems. Eugenists were by no means the only advocates of immigration restrictions, of course, but their invocation of science provided a powerful new rationale for the restrictions. Writing in 1913, eugenicist Herbert Walter urged Americans to select new immigrants in the same way that they might select a new horse. Just as the “wise breeder” looks into the “pedigree of his prospective stock” when “selecting horses for a stock-farm,” wrote Walter, “it is to be hoped that the time will come when we, as a nation,” will demand “knowledge of the germplasm” of “the foreign applicants who knock at our portals.”⁷⁴ Walter proposed sending “trained inspectors” to the home countries of prospective immigrants so that they could “look up the ancestry of prospective applicants and . . . stamp desirable ones with approval.” After all, “the United States Department of Agriculture already has field agents scouring every land for desirable animals and plants to introduce into this country, as well as stringent laws to prevent the importation of dangerous weeds, parasites, and organisms of various kinds. Is the inspection and supervision of human blood less important?”

The eugenists’ anti-immigration arguments attracted the attention of members of Congress, and in 1920 the U.S. House of Representatives held hearings on the “Biological Aspects of Immigration” featuring testimony

by Harry H. Laughlin of the Eugenics Record Office. “Our failure to sort immigrants on the basis of natural worth is a very serious national menace,” Laughlin testified at the hearings before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization.⁷⁵ “By setting up an eugenical standard for admission demanding a high natural excellence of all immigrants regardless of nationality and past opportunities, we can enhance and improve the national stamina and ability of future Americans.” Laughlin was subsequently appointed “expert eugenics agent” of the House Committee on Immigration, and in that capacity he carried out research and advised Congress as it developed the new immigration law adopted in 1924.⁷⁶ That law, which sharply curtailed the number of immigrants allowed from southern and eastern Europe, was hailed by some eugenists and criticized by others.

Those eugenists who supported the law saw it as an important “step forward” in applying—albeit crudely—the principles of selection to immigration, while those who opposed the law pointed out that the act effectively excluded specific racial groups rather than selecting the most eugenically fit immigrants from among all groups.⁷⁷ The *New York Times* sided with the critics, arguing that “in every race the great mass is, eugenically speaking, so much deadweight or worse.”⁷⁸ Thus, the United States should implement an immigration law that would select only the top 10 percent “of all applicants, quite independent of geography.” In short, according to the *Times*, the new immigration law was not nearly eugenic enough.

Marriage laws and immigration restrictions, however, were only part of the eugenists’ agenda to eradicate chronic poverty and associated social ills. Even more far-reaching was the effort to identify biological defectives throughout America so that they could be incarcerated and sterilized.

The Eugenic Solution to Welfare

This is the law of Mendel.
 And often he makes it plain,
 Defectives will breed defectives
 And the insane breed insane.
 Oh, why do we allow these people,
 To breed back to the monkey’s nest,
 To increase our country’s burdens
 When we should only breed the best?

—Joseph DeJarnette, Virginia physician⁷⁹

Carrie Buck seemed destined for a life of heartache.⁸⁰ Born to parents who were regarded as unfit, she was placed in a foster home at age four. By the time she was ten, her parents had divorced and her mother was labelled mentally defective and incarcerated in the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and the Feeble-minded. One can only imagine how Carrie felt about the social stigma of her family background. However, she made the best of her circumstances. She performed well in school—at least for the five grades she had the opportunity to attend—and she attended church and sang in two church choirs.

Then came the terrible summer of 1923, which would change the rest of her life. At age seventeen, she was raped by the nephew of her foster parents. A pregnancy resulted. Instead of holding their nephew accountable, Carrie's foster parents blamed her. Apparently wishing to cover up the scandal, they had Carrie committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded. Shortly before being institutionalized, Carrie gave birth to her daughter Vivian, who was put in a foster home. In September 1924, the board of the Virginia Colony decided that Carrie Buck should be sterilized under Virginia's newly enacted sterilization law, and Carrie suddenly found herself entangled in a court case with national implications.

By the early part of the twentieth century, forced sterilization had become the preeminent policy objective of the eugenics movement. Marriage laws were widely regarded as ineffective, and immigration restrictions did nothing to stop procreation by defectives already in the United States. Permanent segregation of defectives from the general population was theoretically possible, but it was also prohibitively expensive. Sterilization, by contrast, was seen as cheap, safe, and permanent. Some eugenicists even argued that after sterilization many feeble-minded persons could be released from their institutions and live productive lives. Albert Priddy, superintendent of the state institution in which Carrie Buck was confined, stated that after the operation Buck "could go out, get a good home under supervision, earn good wages, and probably marry some man of her own level and do as many whom I have sterilized for disease have done—be good wives—be producers, and lead happy and useful lives in their spheres."⁸¹ Priddy was apparently blind to the irony of his comments: On the one hand, he demonized feeble-minded persons like Carrie Buck as menaces to society, while on the other he admitted that they had the ability to "earn good wages," "be good wives," and "lead happy and useful lives." Given such contradictory claims, discerning persons might have wondered whether the feeble-minded really were such a threat to the nation after all.

Lawmakers, however, eagerly embraced the new cure offered in the name of science, and by 1917, sixteen states had enacted sterilization stat-

utes.⁸² But then the movement stalled. In some states sterilization laws were invalidated by the courts on procedural grounds, while in others the “laws were in such dispute as to have been de facto suspended in their operation,” notes historian Daniel Kevles.⁸³ Despite the extensive propaganda efforts undertaken by eugenists, opposition to forced sterilization remained potent in many areas of the country. New eugenics legislation was vetoed by the governor of Idaho in 1919, the governor of Pennsylvania in 1921, and the governor of Maine in 1923.⁸⁴

Something had to be done to circumvent hostile court decisions and regain momentum, so in the early 1920s Harry Laughlin of the Eugenics Record Office drafted a new model statute, one he thought could survive a court challenge.⁸⁵ The Virginia law adopted in 1924 closely followed Laughlin’s model. Eugenists wanted the courts to pass judgment on the law’s constitutionality before actually implementing it. They thought they had found the perfect defendant in Carrie Buck.

Under the new law, Virginia’s welfare authorities were not allowed to order Buck’s sterilization on their own. On paper, at least, the statute provided for due process, and so a lawyer, Irving Whitehead, was duly appointed to defend Buck. Whether Whitehead actually defended Carrie’s interests is doubtful. He had served as a board member of the Virginia Colony and had even helped hire Priddy as superintendent. He was also a longtime friend of Aubrey Strode, the former state legislator who drafted Virginia’s sterilization law. Historian Paul Lombardo suggests that Whitehead acted in collusion with the advocates of the sterilization law and that he intended to lose the case.⁸⁶ Whether or not that is true, Whitehead certainly put on an incompetent defense in rebutting the evidence presented by the state.

Leaving nothing to chance, Priddy and his fellow eugenists did their best to construct an airtight case against Buck. She was depicted as promiscuous, even though she had been raped. She was portrayed as feeble-minded, even though she had earned a good record in school. A number of scientific and medical authorities provided expert testimony on behalf of the state. Without even meeting Buck, Harry Laughlin sent the court a deposition damning her as hereditarily defective. For his deposition, Laughlin drew on “facts” supplied by Superintendent Priddy, including a claim that Carrie and her ancestors “belong to the shiftless, ignorant, and worthless class of antisocial whites of the South.”⁸⁷ Based on Priddy’s report, Laughlin stated that Carrie fit the “typical picture of a low-grade moron,” and concluded that “the chances of Carrie Buck being a feeble-minded person through environmental and non-hereditary causes, are exceptionally remote.”⁸⁸ Laughlin also made clear that sterilization was the appropriate remedy for such hereditary defectiveness. “Modern eu-

genical sterilization is a force for the mitigation of race degeneracy which, if properly used, is safe and effective. I have come to this conclusion after a thorough study of the legal, biological and eugenical aspects [of the problem].”⁸⁹

Other medical experts reinforced Laughlin’s claims. Arthur Estabrook of the Eugenics Record Office performed an infant IQ test on Carrie Buck’s daughter Vivian and determined that she was below normal in intelligence.⁹⁰ Estabrook also testified to the court that germ plasm, not individuals, was the important unit of analysis in the new age of eugenical science. “We look upon individuals now as merely offshoots of the stock—the germ plasm is what goes through.”⁹¹ Superintendent Priddy, meanwhile, praised sterilization as “a blessing” not only for “society” but for “the individuals on whom the operation is performed.”⁹² When asked whether his patients objected to the operation, Priddy insisted, “They clamor for it.”

Buck’s lawyer Whitehead made little effort to challenge any of these claims during the trial, leaving the testimony of the state’s scientific experts was left uncontradicted. In the view of the state’s experts, Carrie Buck was a link in three generations of hereditary defectives (her mother Emma also allegedly had been feeble-minded). Eugenical science therefore dictated that Carrie Buck be sterilized, removing her defective germ plasm from the population.

By the time *Buck v. Bell* reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the evidentiary record was so skewed against Carrie Buck that it might have been difficult for the justices to rule in her favor even had they been sympathetic to her plight. But most of them probably were not sympathetic. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote the opinion in the case, certainly was not. A religious skeptic and a thoroughgoing Darwinist, Holmes believed that society’s only hope for achieving “wholesale social regeneration” lay in “taking in hand life and trying to build a race,” by which he meant “restricting propagation by the undesirables and putting to death infants that didn’t pass the examination.”⁹³

In *Buck v. Bell*, Holmes not only upheld the sterilization of Carrie Buck, he lauded the wisdom of Virginia’s compulsory-sterilization statute. In the next to last paragraph of the decision, he opined that “it is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring from crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.”⁹⁴ He ended the paragraph with a declaration that remains one of the most chilling statements ever penned by a Supreme Court justice: “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” Holmes spoke for a nearly unanimous court. Only Justice Pierce Butler, a politically conservative Roman Catholic, dissented.

Writing a friend a few weeks after completing his opinion in *Buck v. Bell*, Holmes observed with satisfaction that after writing the decision, “I felt that I was getting near to the first principle of real reform.”⁹⁵ If reviving the sterilization movement was Holmes’s objective, he certainly achieved it. Historian Edward Larson recounts that after *Buck v. Bell* “the flow of new [sterilization] legislation turned into a flood.”⁹⁶ According to Daniel Kevles, from the 1920s to the end of the 1930s, the national sterilization rate jumped fivefold, from 2–4 per hundred thousand to 20 per hundred thousand.⁹⁷

Eugenists in the 1920s marketed sterilization as the cure to what they depicted as a looming welfare crisis. In a 1926 speech at Vassar College promoting sterilization, Margaret Sanger spoke in near-apocalyptic terms about the ruinous costs to taxpayers of welfare spending to care for defectives. “In 1923 over nine billions of dollars were spent on state and federal charities for the care and maintenance and perpetuation of these undesirables,” she complained. “Year by year their numbers are mounting. Year by year their cost is increasing. Huge sums—yes, vast fortunes—are expended on these, while the normal parents and their children are compelled to shift for themselves and compete with each other.” She added that “the American public is taxed, heavily taxed, to maintain an increasing race of morons, which threatens the very foundations of our civilization.”⁹⁸ In her bestselling book *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922), Sanger likewise tried to alert Americans to alarming expenditures on social-welfare programs for the mentally defective, urging readers that “our eyes should be opened to the terrific cost to the community of this dead weight of human waste.”⁹⁹

Eugenists’ tendency to depict the underclass almost exclusively as a threat represented a sharp break with the humanitarian principles espoused by traditional philanthropy. Heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian idealism, traditional welfare workers viewed those at the bottom of the social ladder as fellow human beings worthy of sympathy, mercy, care, and exhortation. Eugenists, by contrast, branded them as enemies of civilization that needed to be eradicated. Despite occasional claims that sterilization would be good for presumed defectives as well as for society, the eugenists’ rhetoric clearly dehumanized the poor and tended to depict them as subhuman.

According to Charles Davenport, such persons represented “animalistic strains” from earlier stages of evolution and carried along with them “a torrent of defective and degenerate protoplasm.”¹⁰⁰ Harvard biologist Edward East dubbed them “the parasitic fraction of the population,” saying they were “like a cancerous growth . . . on the healthy issues of society.”¹⁰¹ Margaret Sanger said they were a “menace . . . to the race” and compared them to “weeds.”¹⁰² Plant breeder Luther Burbank reportedly made the

same comparison. Speaking about the inmates of “insane asylums and similar institutions where we nourish the unfit and criminal instead of exterminating them,” he declared: “Nature eliminates the weeds, but we turn them into parasites and allow them to reproduce.”¹⁰³ Tart-tongued doctor Lena Sadler from Illinois piled on the lurid metaphors, vilifying defectives as a “viper of degeneracy,” a “monster [that] will grow to such hideous proportions that it will strike us down,” and “an army of the unfit [that] will increase to such numbers that they will overwhelm the posterity of superior humans and eventually wipe out . . . civilization.”¹⁰⁴

Eugenists also criticized traditional welfare programs for ignoring biological reality and relying instead on sentimental ideals of human equality. Margaret Sanger warned of the “dangers inherent in the very idea of humanitarianism and altruism, dangers which have today produced their full harvest of human waste, of inequality and inefficiency.”¹⁰⁵ Lena Sadler prophesied that “civilization is doomed if we continue to drift down the stream of a few more generations on the defenseless raft of mistaken brotherly love and blinded sentimentalism.”¹⁰⁶ Edward East attacked as unscientific the idea that “man is created in the image of God,”¹⁰⁷ and further suggested that the claim that all human beings have equal worth is ludicrous. “One of our prominent social workers is quoted as saying that every child is worth \$5,000 to society,” wrote East. “Stuff and nonsense! Some of them are not worth 5,000 Soviet roubles—they are liabilities, not assets; others are worth golden millions. If prosperity is to be promoted, the assets should be increased and the liabilities reduced.”¹⁰⁸ Sadler also questioned the moral validity of treating all children as if they are worth helping. In her view, society could only afford such largesse by demanding from defectives something in return: “If my profession continues to try to save every weak child that is born into the world; if we continue to serve the unfit baby in our welfare stations, dispensaries and clinics, and if this coddled, protected weakling grows to adolescence and shows” itself “manifestly defective” and “likely to produce only unfit individuals,” then society must tell the child, “we will do our full duty by you, but there must be no more like you.”¹⁰⁹

The extreme rhetoric of sterilization proponents worked. Many states began to employ sterilization as an important tool to eradicate poverty and reduce welfare spending. In Virginia, state authorities raided welfare families in rural mountain communities and took the women to be sterilized at a state facility. A former county official later recalled that “everybody who was drawing welfare then was scared they were going to have it done on them . . . They were hiding all through these mountains, and the sheriff and his men had to go up after them.”¹¹⁰ In Delaware, the state legislature enacted a sterilization law at the urging of the State Board of Charities,

which later declared that the law was “producing remarkable results” and was “one of the most important laws on our statute books.”¹¹¹ In Vermont, there were regular eugenic surveys to identify defectives among the poor and trace their bad heredity. The surveys eventually led to the adoption of a sterilization statute in the state.¹¹² The Abenaki Indians were especially ravaged by the Vermont eugenics program. “Many members of Abenaki families who were investigated by the Eugenics Survey were also incarcerated in institutions and subsequently sterilized,”¹¹³ reports historian Nancy Gallagher. Similar efforts to identify and sterilize defectives were undertaken in Indiana by its Committee on Mental Defectives.¹¹⁴

During the Great Depression, some eugenicists even championed sterilization as a solution to the unemployment problem, which they blamed in part on unlimited procreation by defectives. In 1932, a doctor from the “Essex County Mental Hygiene Clinic” in New Jersey told delegates at the Third International Congress of Eugenics that the “present picture of millions of unemployed” provided evidence for the idea that “our population has already attained a greater number than is necessary for efficient functioning of the race as a whole.” He further suggested that “a major portion of this vast army of unemployed are social inadequates, and in many cases mental defectives, who might have been spared the misery they are now facing if they had never been born.” Indeed, “it would certainly be understandable” if such people “prefer[red] not to have been born, if they could have known what was in store for them on this earth where the struggle for existence and the urge toward the survival of the fittest makes it necessary for all those who would survive to possess a native endowment of at least average intelligence.”¹¹⁵

By 1940, almost thirty-six thousand men and women had been sterilized in public institutions across the United States.¹¹⁶ Nearly half of the operations occurred in California, which performed more than 14,500 sterilizations. Next in line was Virginia, which sterilized nearly four thousand people. Seven other states (Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, and Wisconsin) performed more than one thousand sterilizations each. All told, government-sponsored sterilizations took place in thirty states, and 46 percent of the operations were performed on those classified as “feebleminded.”

How many of these allegedly “feeble-minded” persons really were mentally handicapped is hard to know. The eugenicists were certain they all were. At the beginning of the 1930s, Harry Laughlin claimed that “no one has yet suggested . . . a single instance” in which a state had “made an eugenical error; that is, that it . . . [had] prevented reproduction by an individual whose offspring would, by any token of biology or statistics, probably have been a credit to the state.”¹¹⁷ Before the decade was over,

Laughlin could no longer maintain such a fiction. In one particularly notorious case in the mid-1930s, the mother of heiress Ann Cooper Hewitt allegedly had her daughter sterilized in an attempt to steal her inheritance, which would revert to the mother if the daughter had no children.¹¹⁸ According to a subsequent lawsuit, Mrs. Hewitt “subjected her daughter to a battery of intelligence tests when she was ill with appendicitis.”¹¹⁹ Despite the questionable circumstances surrounding the tests, “a [p]sychiatrist in the California State Department of Public Health declared that Ann had a mental age of eleven, making her a high-grade moron. With this determination in hand . . . Mrs. Hewitt had Ann sterilized.”¹²⁰

In the decades following the heyday of eugenics, scholars and journalists exposed just how shaky and subjective the diagnosis of “feeble-mindedness” could be. Consider the plight of the “Kallikak” family made infamous by psychologist Henry Goddard. Goddard hid the real identities of the Kallikaks, making it impossible for other scholars to try to verify his account. But through meticulous scholarly detective work, J. David Smith was finally able to identify the family in the 1980s. He conclusively showed that Goddard’s assessment was more a product of prejudice than unbiased scientific investigation. The Kallikaks were not hereditarily unfit at all. They had their share of social misfits, but they also had their “strengths and successes. The tragedy of the disfavored Kallikaks is that their story was distorted so as to fit an expectation. They were perceived in a way that allowed only their weaknesses and failures to emerge.”¹²¹ What was true of the Kallikaks in general was true of Deborah Kallikak in particular. She may have had certain learning disabilities in the area of language, but she was nonetheless highly capable in other areas and able to successfully and responsibly perform a variety of complex tasks.¹²² “Visitors and new employees often expressed disbelief when told that she was mentally retarded.”¹²³ One person even mistook her for the teacher of the kindergarten class at the institution. Despite her evident abilities, Deborah was institutionalized until her death in the late 1970s.¹²⁴

Ironically, the person who had done the most to stigmatize Deborah as a menace to the nation may have come to regret his role in the affair. By the end of the 1920s, Henry Goddard had moderated some of his earlier views. He had come to believe that education could help the “feeble-minded” and that they “do not generally need to be segregated in institutions.”¹²⁵ It was a stunning reversal, but it provided scant comfort to the victims of his earlier work.

Carrie Buck was another example of the slipshod way in which people were labelled “feeble-minded” and selected for sterilization. By the time of her death in the early 1980s, she was no longer considered mentally unfit. She was said to be “an avid reader,” and she wrote perfectly coherent let-

ters.¹²⁶ She married, joined the Methodist Church, and returned to singing in the church choir. Her first marriage lasted nearly a quarter of a century, ending with her husband's death in 1956. Her second marriage lasted until her own death in 1983. In an interview with reporters in 1980, she revealed that she was never informed by state authorities about the purpose of her operation. "All they told me was that I had to get an operation . . . I never knew what it was for. Later on, a couple of the other girls told me what it was. They said they had it done on them."¹²⁷ She regretted not being able to have children, but she wasn't bitter. "I tried helping everybody all my life, and I tried to be good to everybody. It just don't do no good to hold grudges."¹²⁸

"She spent most of her adult life helping others," wrote J. David Smith.¹²⁹ "She was a trusted caregiver to elderly people and one of her employers told me that Carrie could not have been mentally retarded. Her competence was obvious, she said, in the quality of care she gave to those who depended on her. 'There was nothing wrong with that woman's mind,' said the employer."

Carrie Buck's sister Doris was also sterilized by the state, although she did not discover that fact until she was in her late sixties. She had been told her operation was an appendectomy.¹³⁰ She and her husband had spent years trying to have children without success, and she was heartbroken when she finally learned the true reason she could not bear children. "I broke down and cried. My husband and me wanted children desperately. We were crazy about them. I never knew what they'd done to me."¹³¹ Like her sister Carrie, Doris Buck was no longer considered mentally defective in the later years of her life.

There were other Carrie and Doris Bucks around the country. After the death of their father from pneumonia, Fred Aslin and six of his siblings were taken from their mother and confined to the Lapeer State School, an institution for mental defectives. Aslin was branded a "feeble-minded moron," and eventually he, four brothers, and a sister were sterilized.¹³² "They termed us feeble-minded idiots, and wrote that our children would be like us or even worse," he recalls today.¹³³ "My bandleader came to me and said, 'They want you to sign papers to get sterilized. You might as well go along with it. They say if you don't sign, they'll get your mother to sign.' I said, 'No, I don't want it! I don't want anyone cutting on me!'"¹³⁴ But he was sterilized anyway at age eighteen. This alleged moron was a model student at the school who earned praise from his teachers. "Fred is the best reader in the group," wrote one teacher.¹³⁵ "Fred is decidedly the leader of his group," wrote another.¹³⁶ The state continued to confine Aslin after his operation, and he had to hire a lawyer in order to get released.¹³⁷ He later won a Purple Heart for military service in Korea and went on to marry a

widow and adopt and raise her two children as his own.¹³⁸ Needless to say, he is not regarded as a “moron” today. Neither is his brother Ted, another victim of sterilization. Ted also married and adopted a son. Michigan later licensed him “to be a foster parent to roughly 100 children over the course of a decade.”¹³⁹

Carrie and Doris Buck were poor whites, but the Aslins were Native Americans, which has led some to suggest that race played a role in their being targeted by state welfare authorities.¹⁴⁰ There is probably more to that charge than idle speculation. Although feeble-mindedness was supposedly diagnosed without regard to color, the campaign clearly had racist overtones. So did the eugenics movement as a whole, which regularly drew on the teachings of Darwinian biology to stir up fears about “race suicide.”

Eugenics, Darwinism, and Race Purity

Eugenists believed that natural selection had produced races of human beings with unequal capacities. “The more we study this process of selection, the more we realize why one race differs from another in temperament and mentality as well as in physique,” wrote Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington in his book *The Character of Races* (1924).¹⁴¹ Biologist Charles Davenport claimed that racial differences arose as evolutionary adaptations: “Each race of man that has long persisted in a distinct environment has gained, by preservation of useful mutations, certain adaptations to that environment. The useful phaenotypical adaptations have enabled their possessors to survive and the genotype that produced them continues the characters of the race.”¹⁴² For example, “the high intelligence and the ambition of the European races” could be regarded “as an adaptation to the competition and crowding arising in a life largely devoted to barter and commerce.” Similarly, “the fear of darkness, in the negro race,” could be explained as an adaptation to “a country where lions and other predaceous animals prowl at night.” As the latter example suggests, not all evolutionary adaptations remained beneficial in civilized society, according to eugenists. As a result, some races were better equipped by evolution to deal with the challenges of modern life than others. “We have abundant evidence today of an innate difference in capacity of learning, of forming judgments, of profiting by experience in different strains of humans,” wrote Davenport. “In fact it seems probable that in the same country we have, living side by side, persons of advanced mentality, persons who have inherited the mentality of their ancestors of the early Stone Age, and persons of intermediate evolutionary stages.”¹⁴³

Bluntly put, the evolutionary process had led to the development of superior and inferior races. Americans were able to cite Charles Darwin himself in support of this idea—and did. Although Darwin opposed slavery and according to some scholars “personally opposed programs premised on the permanent inferiority of nonwhites,”¹⁴⁴ he did maintain in *The Descent of Man* that human intellectual development was the product of natural selection and that there were significant differences in the mental faculties of “men of distinct races.”¹⁴⁵ In the same book, Darwin disparaged blacks and observed that the break in evolutionary history between apes and humans fell “between the negro or Australian and the gorilla,” indicating that he considered blacks the most ape-like humans.¹⁴⁶ Darwin also predicted that “at some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.”¹⁴⁷

The racist cast of Darwin’s thought is difficult to deny, but that has not stopped some scholars from doing their best to downplay it. The evidence for Darwin’s racism “rests largely on guilt by association and scattered quotations,” concludes historian Robert Bannister.¹⁴⁸ Darwin’s “ideas may have been ‘pervasive,’ but neither his doctrine of natural selection nor his personal philosophy was inherently racist,” echoes another scholar.¹⁴⁹

Of course, I am not claiming that Darwin’s theory created racism, nor even that racism was its inevitable result. Defenders of Darwin are correct to emphasize that racism preceded Darwin’s work, and that certain critics of Darwinism have been just as racially bigoted as Darwinists. There are even scattered examples of people trying to use Darwin’s theory to undercut racism.¹⁵⁰ These ambiguities are important to point out, but they do nothing to erase Darwin’s own racist statements. Nor do they refute the overwhelming evidence that American eugenists regularly drew on Darwin’s theory as a powerful scientific justification for racism and as a rationale for racist public policies.

The Darwinian justification for racial inequality was so culturally pervasive a century ago that it was embraced even by scholars who were skeptical of the period’s more dogmatic assertions of white supremacy. University of Oklahoma sociologist Jerome Dowd professed to be sympathetic to the plight of American blacks and criticized claims of Nordic supremacy.¹⁵¹ But in *The Negro in American Life* (1926) he nevertheless concluded that racial equality could not be accepted except in a very “limited sense” because such an idea ran counter to the clear findings of evolutionary biology. Even if “we have reason to believe that all races of men have the same mental faculties, and that in general ability to learn they differ in no important degree,” the fact remains that “due to many centuries of natural selection, the races of men have not now equal capacity to adapt

themselves to the same environmental conditions, nor to attain to the same accomplishments."¹⁵² Thus, to argue for "racial equality" as a general principle would be tantamount to rejecting modern biology: "Racial equality means that, whereas differences in hereditary value exist among all varieties of plants and animals, the races of men form an exception to the rule . . . It means that the biological principle of natural selection does not apply to human beings . . . It means that sexual selection is inoperative among men . . . It means that the science of eugenics is 'bunk.'"

Dowd concluded that to embrace such an incredible view would be "a complacent philosophy, which no man of the first order of ability has ever believed in."¹⁵³

Unquestionably the most blatant example of racism in the eugenics movement was its strident opposition to racial interbreeding. Because eugenicists maintained that "fundamentally . . . racial differences are gene differences,"¹⁵⁴ they were especially concerned about the consequences of allowing interbreeding between "superior" and "inferior" races. In *The Passing of the Great Race* (1921), Madison Grant denounced the American ideal of the "melting pot" and insisted that the inevitable result of race-crossing was the degeneration of the superior race. "The result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient, generalized and lower type. The cross between a white man and an Indian is an Indian; the cross between a white man and a Negro is a Negro; the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu."¹⁵⁵

Grant ended his book with a dire warning that "the altruistic ideals which have controlled our social development during the past century and the maudlin sentimentalism that has made America 'an asylum for the oppressed,' are sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss."¹⁵⁶ In his view, America's only hope was to study the history of evolution and then apply what was learned to guide the future development of the human race. "We may be certain that the progress of evolution is in full operation to-day under those laws of nature which control it and that the only sure guide to the future lies in the study of the operation of these laws in the past."¹⁵⁷

Eugenicists applied their concerns about "race-crossing" with special virulence to blacks, who they thought represented a more primitive stage of human evolution, or at the very least, the product of evolution gone awry. Claiming that "wherever the negro has been placed he has . . . failed miserably and utterly by the white man's standards," biologist Edward East said that such a record lent credence to the conclusion of British eugenicist Karl Pearson that "the negro lies nearer to the common stem" of man's evolutionary tree "than the European."¹⁵⁸ Charles Davenport explained that the reason "a smaller proportion" of blacks than whites exhibited "self con-

trol," a "special regard for property rights," and an "appreciation of cause and effect" was that "the Negro from Africa . . . had not evolved in the direction of these traits."¹⁵⁹ Davenport further implied that blacks brought to America on slave ships had been fitted by nature for slavery. "Scores of thousands of black men from the interior of Africa . . . had been kidnapped by the more enterprising natives that lived along the coast. These negroes represented some of the mentally feeblest races of the globe, with an in-born docility and fidelity which made them good slaves."¹⁶⁰

To substantiate their claims of Negro mental inferiority, Davenport, East, and others cited the results of Army intelligence tests of recruits during World War I.¹⁶¹ After those tests were discredited, Davenport trumpeted new research in Jamaica purporting to show that "in tests involving some organization, foresight and planning . . . the negroes seem to be inferior to the whites."¹⁶²

This supposed biological inferiority of blacks supplied the scientific rationale for preventing intermarriage between blacks and whites. Unlike Madison Grant, who seemed to condemn any type of race-mixing out of hand, biologists Davenport and East conceded that race-crossing was not necessarily harmful.¹⁶³ After all, the whole idea of eugenics was to breed better strains of human beings, and the experience of plant and animal breeders showed that hybridization could produce superior strains. But Davenport and East argued that trying to hybridize widely separated stocks could produce seriously defective offspring, and they implied that this was what would happen if whites and blacks interbred. According to East, it was foolhardy to allow "racial crossing even between widely separate races of equivalent capacity simply because the operation of the heredity mechanism holds out only a negligible prospect of good results against a high probability of bad results."¹⁶⁴ How much more so, then, should interbreeding be discouraged between races of markedly unequal capacities such as white and blacks.¹⁶⁵ "The negro race as a whole is possessed of undesirable transmissible qualities both physical and mental, which seem to justify not only a line but a wide gulf to be fixed permanently between it and the white race."¹⁶⁶

East believed that the greatest danger confronting white society from race-crossing came from "the mulatto," not "the pure black."¹⁶⁷ Drawing again on research from Jamaica, Davenport contended that mulattoes were spoiled by their white blood:

While the full blooded negro is, for the most part, easily satisfied with his lot and is loyal and devoted, the mulatto is dissatisfied and often rebellious. This difference is probably due to a disharmony introduced by the cross. The mulatto shows an ambition and push, combined often with an intellec-

tual inadequacy, which makes him dissatisfied with his lot and a nuisance to others.¹⁶⁸

In Davenport's view, white germ plasm made blacks just intelligent enough to be dissatisfied, but not intelligent enough to be able to better themselves. Hence, society should err on the side of caution when race-mixing was concerned:

In general, we have enough evidence of disharmony in human hybrids to urge that it is on the whole bad when wide crosses are involved. Valuable new combinations might possibly arise through hybridization; but society has not yet worked out a plan by which such better combinations may be encouraged to reproduce, while the worse combinations should remain sterile. Until it does race crossing is not to be encouraged.¹⁶⁹

Davenport and East helped supply a scientific justification for more restrictive anti-miscegenation laws that targeted mixed-race persons. In 1924, Virginia enacted "An Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" that redefined white persons as those who have "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian," excepting persons "who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian and have no other non-Caucasic blood."¹⁷⁰ The law made it unlawful for a white person to marry anyone not meeting the new, stricter definition of "pure white." A prime backer of the law was W. A. Plecker, Virginia's registrar of vital statistics and a fervent eugenicist. Plecker was not above using intimidation to stop marriages between whites and anyone with even a trace of Negro blood, or to ensure that no children with any African ancestry (no matter what their actual color) attended schools reserved for whites.¹⁷¹

A member of the American Eugenics Society, Plecker corresponded with Charles Davenport, and he delivered a paper about Virginia's efforts to keep the white race pure at the Third International Congress of Eugenics in New York.¹⁷² He began his presentation with the presumption "that no one in this audience will dispute the wisdom and desirability of preserving the different races of man in their purity . . . [T]he preservation of racial purity is one of the fundamental objects of eugenic endeavor."¹⁷³

Although Davenport favored anti-miscegenation laws, he saw them as only a small part of the solution to the problem posed by American blacks.¹⁷⁴ Such restrictions, after all, only curtailed the damage blacks inflicted on the germ plasm of the white race. But what about the drag on society caused by defective blacks who bred among themselves? In notes for a talk titled "A Biologist's View of the Negro Problem," Davenport argued that the most effective solution to the South's racial problems would

be to focus on the feeble-minded rather than directly on race.¹⁷⁵ According to Davenport, blacks supplied a disproportionate number of the South's feeble-minded. So if Southern states segregated and/or sterilized all their feeble-minded, they would eliminate the most burdensome blacks in the process.

Blacks were not the only biologically inferior race according to eugenisists. Asians, Native Americans, and whites from southern and eastern Europe were also denigrated by eugenisist reformers. Underlying their contempt for other races was their adulation of the "Nordic races." Madison Grant wrote that the Nordics were "above all" a race "of rulers, organizers and aristocrats."¹⁷⁶ Although scientists like Edward East distanced themselves from the rhetoric of Grant, Grant was far from a pariah in the American scientific community. He served as chairman of the New York Zoological Society, as a board member of the prestigious American Museum of Natural History, and as councilor of the American Geographical Society.¹⁷⁷ His book *The Passing of the Great Race* went through multiple editions, each with a congratulatory preface by zoologist Henry Fairfield Osborn of Columbia University. Nor were appeals to white supremacy limited to Grant. Several years before the publication of Grant's book, the *American Breeders Magazine* informed readers that the "aryo-germans which all through history have proved to be carriers of culture and civilization can assure themselves of the continuance of their dominance in world's [sic] affairs, and of the permanence and even brilliant expansion of the splendid civilization they have created, by scientifically directing their evolution."¹⁷⁸ During debates over forced sterilization in Louisiana, meanwhile, one of the main proponents of a proposed sterilization law declared: "If something of this sort is not done soon, our nordic civilization is gone."¹⁷⁹

Given the views of African inferiority and Nordic supremacy held by some American eugenisists, it is not difficult to see why they were blind to the horrors that unfolded in Germany during the 1930s. Indeed, when Germany adopted sterilization legislation in the 1930s, a number of American eugenisists praised the measure, while German eugenisists acknowledged their debt to previous American sterilization laws.¹⁸⁰ Hitler told one of his colleagues that he had "studied with great interest the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock."¹⁸¹ And in 1936, the German consul in Los Angeles, Dr. G. Gyssling, issued a letter expressing his government's thanks "to all those American organizations and men who have worked in the line of Human Betterment" (meaning eugenics). Observing that when Germany "passed its National Hygiene Legislation, it was well aware of the work which had been done already in this field in the United States," Gyssling highlighted

the research and writing of California eugenicists E. S. Gosney and Paul Popenoe, reporting that their work “proved to be a valuable contribution to the considerations which led to the legislation in question.”¹⁸²

Popenoe earlier had praised the Nazi government for basing its sterilization legislation on science rather than ideology. “The policy of the present German government is . . . to gather about it the recognized leaders of the eugenics movement, and to depend largely on their counsel in framing a policy which will direct the destinies of the German people,” he wrote in 1934. Conceding that “mistakes will be inevitable,” Popenoe insisted that “the Nazis seem, as this scientific leadership becomes more and more prominent in their councils, to be avoiding the misplaced emphasis of their earlier pronouncements on questions of race, and to be proceeding toward a policy that will accord with the best thought of eugenists in all civilized countries.”¹⁸³ Popenoe also reported with satisfaction that “Hitler . . . has long been a convinced advocate of race betterment through eugenic measures,” and pointed out that in “*Mein Kampf* . . . he bases his hopes of national regeneration solidly on the application of biological principles to human society.”¹⁸⁴

Some American eugenicists were envious of the Nazi sterilization program; it was much more comprehensive than patchwork American efforts. “The Germans are beating us at our own game,” complained Virginia doctor Joseph DeJarnette in the mid 1930s.¹⁸⁵ Superintendent of the Western State Hospital in Virginia,¹⁸⁶ DeJarnette wanted to implement more aggressive eugenic restrictions in the United States. He was not alone. Harry Laughlin in 1930 was already expressing the hope that state governments would take eugenics to the next level. Sterilization of “extreme cases” was praiseworthy, to be sure, but “in the future the several states may well look toward the establishment of a still higher biological standard for the legalization of parenthood.”¹⁸⁷

Laughlin hoped in vain. Instead of becoming more aggressive, the American eugenics crusade gradually dissipated over the next two decades as opposition mounted among religious traditionalists, doctors, and scientists.

The Decline of Eugenics

Although endorsed by many among the intellectual elite, eugenics never escaped public controversy. When the Nebraska legislature passed a forced-sterilization law in 1914, for example, Governor John Morehead vetoed the bill, charging that “it seems more in keeping with the pagan age than with the teachings of Christianity. Man is more than an animal.”¹⁸⁸