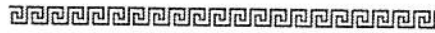


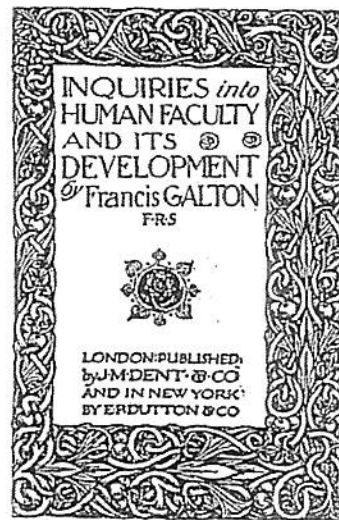
Who Are the Unfit?



By Elof Alex Carlson

FROM THE 1880s TO THE 1940s the use of the phrase “the unfit” was widespread in American culture. It evoked an image of physically and morally weak people associated with society failures—paupers, criminals, psychotics; the mentally retarded, vagrants, prostitutes, and beggars. From 1910 to 1940 the term coexisted with a variety of

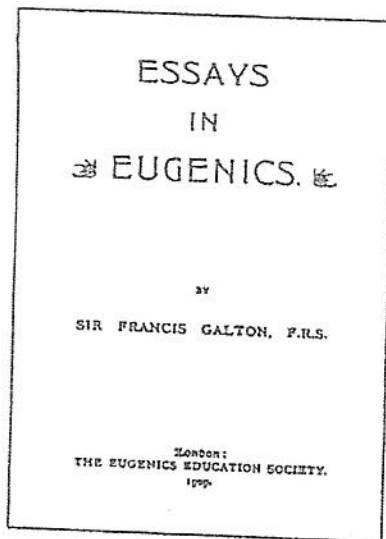
technical and semi-popular terms associated with the eugenics movement. The term “eugenics” was coined by Francis Galton in England in 1883 as a moral philosophy to improve humanity through selective breeding. Galton was mainly interested in breeding the best of humanity to constantly improve the quality of succeeding generations. He particularly favored



“That is, with questions bearing on what is termed in Greek, *eugenes*, namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities. This, and the allied words, *eugencia*, etc., are equally applicable to men, brutes, and plants. We greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had. The word *eugenics* would sufficiently express the idea; it is at least a neater word and a more generalised one than *viticulture*, which I once ventured to use.”

Galton's coining of the term “eugenics” (Courtesy of CSHL Archives).

Elof Alex Carlson, “Who Are the Unfit?” from *In The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, pp. 9–15. Copyright © 2001 Elof Alex Carlson. Permission to reprint granted by the author.



"EUGENICS: ITS DEFINITION, SCOPE AND AIMS.

Eugenics is the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage."

Galton's definition of eugenics (Courtesy of CSHL Archives).

intelligence, cultural talents, and physical strength and dexterity. His form of eugenics is now called positive eugenics.¹

POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE EUGENICS

Positive eugenics never found favor in the United States, but it did have a following in Great Britain, especially among the intellectual class. It hoped to bring about a change through moral suasion—the ablest, and the brightest would be educated and urged to have larger families than the average couple. Great Britain had a tradition of social classes based on wealth, property, education and royalty. The United States did not. The eugenics movement in the United States tried to preserve the basic goodness of its people by preventing those deemed unfit from breeding with each other or with essentially decent people. The reproductive isolation of such unfit people is called negative eugenics. This became very popular in the United States, Scandinavia, and Germany during the

first four decades of the 20th century. Negative eugenics was given enthusiastic state support in Germany when the Nazis were elected to run the country. One feature of that Nazi eugenic movement was the purging of racial impurity from the German stock, an activity particularly directed at German Jews, and later, all Jews as they were arrested in the conquered nations of an advancing German army during World War II. The Holocaust represented the systematic genocide of a people and its culture by annihilation, mostly carried out by a coded secret command sanctioned by Nazi ideology and its chief leaders, especially Hitler, Himmler, and Goering. The overwhelming number of those killed were Jews, although the Holocaust also included the mass murder of gypsies, homosexuals, and selected political enemies.

Ever since the revelations about the death camps in which millions of Jews were gassed, shot, cremated, or buried in mass graves, the word eugenics has connoted an evil doctrine created and fostered by bigots, racists, the selfish, the uncaring, and those who believe in their own superiority. This view is comforting because it portrays an identifiable cast of personalities that can make us watchful and prevent future holocausts.² Unfortunately, my research on the history of the idea of unfit people does not support such a simple image of society. Most governments and the people they represent are more complex and do not fall simply into liberal and conservative political thought, into bigots and humanitarians, into those with a negative view of human nature and those with a positive view. Instead, in our own times and in the past, the persons involved with the idea of unfit people and the social philosophies of eugenics that responded to them were much more diverse in their personalities and social outlooks.³

HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF UNFIT PEOPLE

Those who read this book will follow the history of the idea of unfit people. It was not an invention of the latter half of the 19th century. It is a story that goes back to antiquity, with many examples in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.⁴ Biological interpretations of the unfit began in 1710, with masturbation as the first alleged cause of physical and mental degeneracy in both the abuser and the abuser's descendants.

Degeneracy theory became more encompassing and included many occupational hazards such as tanning, hat-making, and food preparation, as well as social conditions such as poor housing, malnutrition, alcoholism, and deficient hygiene. Many of these observed associations turned out to be correct. Some, like masturbation, proved false.

Masturbation was nevertheless the reason vasectomy was tried as a treatment to stop the habit and as a preventive to the assumed degenerate progeny of the masturbator. The physician Harry Clay Sharp (see Chapter 12), who first performed vasectomies on young men in his prison clinic, successfully lobbied his state of Indiana to pass the world's first compulsory sterilization law in 1907. More than 30 states in the United States passed compulsory sterilization laws. Most students are astounded when they learn that the Supreme Court upheld such laws by an 8 to 1 vote in 1927 and that the court has never fully reversed itself on this issue.⁵ They are also astounded to learn that the chief lobbyist for compulsory sterilization laws, Harry Laughlin (see Chapters 13 and 14), whose office was in Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island in New York state was praised and awarded a gold medal in 1936 by the Nazis, who used his model eugenic law for their own eugenics program!

Those who contributed to degeneracy theory in the 19th century were often professional people—charity leaders, sociologists, physicians, and prison reformers. They were often advocates of public hygiene; they fought for slum prevention through changes in building codes; they became friends of the new labor movement, champions of public education, providers of public libraries, creators of visiting nurse associations, promoters of public bath houses, and founders of settlement houses. Many of them were what today would be called liberals in their political philosophy.

Throughout the 19th century, social philosophers who sought ways to address the failings of society relied on science for its theories, of the causes of human failure and for its technology to prevent or remedy the social pathology of the times. This was considered an advance over asking the local government, organized religion, or the families of the unfortunates to handle a problem of gargantuan proportions. In prior centuries, these three traditional approaches had often been relied on, but they failed to solve the

on-going problem of dealing with at least 10% of the population who could not support themselves or their families. It was hoped that science would be the savior of society.⁶

BIOLOGY VERSUS SOCIOLOGY

Much of the writing on the history of eugenics examines it from two perspectives—the biological validity or spuriousness of the assumptions about the physical and mental qualities of life and the political climate that favored or discouraged applications of eugenic thinking in society, especially that of the United States and Great Britain. Social history is more complex than that. It helps us considerably when we also study the intellectual traditions, the cultural differences, the social structure, the religions, and the networks of communication in different countries where the ideas of unfit people developed. A knowledge of Lamarck's ideas (see Chapter 8) regarding the way heredity can be modified by the environment and his long-lasting influence on French biological thought reveals why an American eugenics movement never found favor in France. American society encouraged social mobility through merit and hard work; British society placed limits on the opportunities of even its most talented individuals if they had the bad fortune of being born into the wrong class.

It is probably not a coincidence that Americans preferred negative eugenics (keeping the basic genetic stock from being corrupted) and the British favored positive eugenics (persuading the elite classes to have more children than the lower classes).

Of particular importance are long-lasting intellectual beliefs in shaping the policies and ideas of many of those who contributed to the idea of unfit peoples and the eugenic or environmental proposals to thin their ranks. These include the conflict between a belief in progress, represented in its extreme form as "the perfectibility of man," an idea shaped during the French Enlightenment, and the belief in degeneracy, an extension of Adam's fall from grace and often associated with a negative view of human nature plagued by original sin, moral error, or passions that cannot be effectively restrained.⁷ Equally important and of long-standing debate are assumptions about the innate and malleable aspects of human behavior. Today we see

the argument as one of biological determinists and environmentalists on such issues as human aggressions, intelligence test scores talents, and pathological behavior. Other important influences include our mostly erroneous, or at least controversial beliefs that we can read character through facial appearance or body shape and build or through ethnic and racial status; that the burden of support for those who need assistance should be familial or on the private sector or the public sector; that we have a duty to empathize with others and show a caring concern for the unfortunate or, quite the contrary, that we owe nothing to the downtrodden except tolerance and our good wishes that by their own efforts they may reverse their sad condition.

FOOTNOTES

1. A good collection of primary historical documents on the history of both negative and positive eugenics is found in *Eugenics: Then and Now*, edited by Carl Bajema (Halstead, 1976). Good histories of the negative eugenics movement include Kenneth Ludmerer's *Genetics and American Society* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Daniel Kevles' *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Knopf, 1985); and Philip Reilly's *The Surgical Solution* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). No historical work on positive eugenics has been written. Galton introduced the term eugenics in 1883 in *Inquiry into Human Faculty and Its Development* (MacMillan), pp. 24-25, but it was not until the first decade of the 20th century that societies with the word eugenics in their names appeared.
2. This is particularly so for such social movements as "Science for the People," which publishes its own alternative press journal. A comparable group exists in Great Britain. They tend to be environmentalists who reject alleged scholarly studies of personality differences among groups as racist, incipiently racist, or politically naive. They often see new technologies in human genetics and reproductive biology as potentially hazardous or as a means to revive failed eugenics programs of the past.
3. A good example of recent scholarship on this diverse response to eugenic issues is William Schneider's *Quality and Quantity: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1990), which por-

trays French eugenics as a coalition of many contradictory political and philosophic outlooks.

4. I do not imply from this biblical account of unfit peoples that there is a causal connection running from them to the Holocaust. That would be a simplistic interpretation of history. What I do claim is that for various reasons the idea of unfit people is an ancient one. Neither do I imply that there will always be people who may be called the unfit. There are many ideas that persisted for millennia and have now virtually disappeared, including beliefs in the legitimacy of slavery, witchcraft, or mental illness as an outcome of possession by demons.
5. Fortunately, most of the 30 states that passed such laws have repealed them, or they have been overturned by state courts. Those that still carry these as state laws rarely enforce them because of the negative publicity (and costs in lawsuits) they generate.
6. It still is perceived that way. We seek technological solutions for environmental pollution, infertility, induced cancers, new infectious diseases, famines, floods, conflagrations, beach erosion, and every possible misfortune that afflicts the individual or society.
7. Essentially it is a difference in personality. Those who believe in progress are optimists; those who believe in a corrupted human nature are pessimists. These basic personality outlooks surely influence the way one sees human goals and future outcomes.