

Genetic Politics: Eugenics in Democratic Contexts

SSNet Seminar, November 17, 2008

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Mark Largent, "'The Greatest Curse of the Race': Eugenic Sterilization in Oregon, 1909-1983," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 103.2 (2002).

Alexandra Stern, "Eugenics and Historical Memory in America," *History Compass* 3 (2005).
Centennial symposium in 2009: "Eugenics and Disability: History and Legacy in Washington."

How was eugenics implemented in the US?

What roles did various experts and publics play in advocating sterilization and immigration laws, family planning education, other policies? How did science serve and/or challenge the "tyranny of the majority" (individual rights vs. collective good)? Was there public controversy?

Case study (Largent): compulsory sterilization of institutionalized populations. Biological causation of social problems, the "science of surgery," and the "legislative solution" were supported by medical authorities (Dr. Owens-Adair), university scientists, social activists (progressives, women), politicians and judges (checks & balances), and the popular press. But the first law was repealed by voters in a 1913 referendum spearheaded by the OR Anti-Sterilization League. Why so many sterilizations in US West? What kinds of "defectives" were targeted? What diverse motives?

Case study: 1924 Immigration Restriction Act championed by politicians (WA Rep. Albert Johnson) and the "expert eugenical agent" (Harry Laughlin) who testified to Congress about psychological testing and applied human genetics. What did they think about their social responsibilities? Science for sale? Or they assumed a consensus of values (like policymaker quoted in Kelly): "No one in 2043 should look back and say, how could researchers do what they did?"

Case study: eugenic education as voluntary means of selective breeding vs. state-sponsored. Scientists and physicians popularized eugenics (e.g. *The Science of Eugenics and Sex Life: The Regeneration of the Human Race*), as in the PUS model mediating between producers and users of knowledge. But also the public itself shaped the eugenics movement (e.g. Pernick's *Black Stork* on how "mass culture" such as fiction films reflected various meanings of heredity, disability, morality). Fits Jasanoff's model of "co-production" of knowledge and social order?

Why was eugenics so popular? (Largent)

1. Content and authority of science itself (Am. Breeders' Assn.; Eugenics Record Office).
2. Social values and prejudices naturalized by scientific language and authority.
3. Politics and economics of expert social planning and efficiency (Progressive era).

As we discussed regarding scientific uncertainty in manufactured controversies and science-based public policy, the values of the time may have been more influential than the scientific evidence (e.g. academic biologists contributed little eugenics research, and new genetics knowledge did not discredit eugenics). Lessons about whether and how the sciences should be "democratized"?

Why is it important how historical memory of eugenics is shaped and utilized? (Stern)

The first histories of eugenics in 1960s-70s asked why biological determinism used to be popular. Exemplary case study of the impact of social interests on science – or pseudo/biased science? But since the revival of geneticization (HGP, *Bell Curve*), is it the historian's job to find and explain continuities? Is there agreement about how to define and delimit eugenics? As disability scholars Kerr and Shakespeare (*Genetic Politics: From Eugenics to Genome*) claim, "professionals in the genetics field and their allies have used the term 'eugenics' in order to identify 'bad science' or 'human rights abuses' and to distance themselves and their work from the abuses of the past." I.e. eugenics wrongly attributed innate inferiority and the state unjustly sterilized them. But what about disability: still seen as a natural deficit, not social construct? Government apologies for sterilization programs: from whom? To whom? Which values & goals? "Collective healing"?