

American Eugenicists on Trial: A Review Essay*

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Edwin Black has described himself as “an investigative reporter who thinks like a criminal and acts like a cop.”¹ In *War Against the Weak*, he sets out to solve “the crime of eugenics” (p. xxiii). Aided by 50 volunteer researchers, he compiled a mass of evidence: 50,000 documents by his count. His indictment is specifically aimed at the American variant of the crime, a eugenics movement that was “created in the publications and academic research rooms of the Carnegie Institution, verified by the research grants of the Rockefeller Foundation, validated by leading scholars from the best Ivy League universities, and financed by the special efforts of the Harriman railroad fortune” (p. xviii). This racist and elitist offshoot of “corporate philanthropy gone wild” he finds especially odious: it successfully promoted the compulsory sterilization of the “unfit” within the United States by parading prejudice as science, and it presented its policies and programs as blueprints for international action, blueprints that Hitler and other Nazis found very useful. For Black, a child of Holocaust survivors whose “life is dominated by the injustices heaped upon the Jews,”² the Nazi connection elevates this research to the level of a mission. In one of his previous books, *IBM and the Holocaust: The Strategic Alliance Between Nazi Germany and America’s Most Pow-*

*Review of Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003. xxviii + 550 p.

¹This self-description comes from an interview Black gave to *City Pulse*, a Lansing, Michigan weekly newspaper, on 10 December 2003 (Vol. 3, Issue 17). He was asked: “Why did it take so long to uncover the relationship between Rockefeller/Carnegie and Nazi Germany?” He responded, “To a large degree, it takes the mindset of an investigative reporter who thinks like a criminal and acts like a cop. The historian will ask for permission, while people like me start when we’re told ‘no.’” There is a link to this interview at the *War Against the Weak* Web site «www.waragainstheweak.com».

²This self-description comes from an interview Black gave to the *Dallas Morning News* on 7 December 2003. There is a link to this interview at «www.waragainstheweak.com».

erful Corporation, he argued that Hitler's "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" greatly depended on importing a particular US technology: IBM's punch-card machine. In this book he contends that Nazi racist ideology was itself an American import: "the Nazi principle of Nordic superiority was not hatched in the Third Reich but on Long Island decades earlier—and then actively transplanted to Germany" (p. xviii).

Black's method of presenting evidence is very much in line with that of a prosecutor on a mission. He enters an indictment of American eugenics within the first two pages of his Introduction. He outlines the particulars of its domestic crime on the first page: "hundreds of thousands of Americans,"³ selected "because of their ancestry, national origin, race or religion," were "forcibly sterilized, wrongly committed to mental institutions where they died in great numbers, prohibited from marrying, and sometimes even unmarried by state bureaucrats"—all in an attempt to "create a superior Nordic race." He moves boldly to the international aspects of the crime on the second page: "America's eugenic movement spread to Germany.... National Socialism transduced America's quest for a 'superior Nordic race' into Hitler's drive for an 'Aryan master race.'"

In Part One ("From peapod to persecution") Black elaborates his evidence of the domestic crime: how Francis Galton's ideas were coarsened by Charles Davenport; how Davenport solicited funds from the wealthy to establish his Station for Experimental Evolution in 1904 and then six years later the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island; how Harry Laughlin and field investigators from the ERO began identifying individual "defectives" and their families; how individual physicians, without legal sanction, began castrating and sterilizing the "feebleminded" and criminals; how eugenicists lobbied state legislators to pass compulsory sterilization laws; and how the eugenic beliefs of a variety of individuals—from the birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger, to the ophthalmologist Lucien Howe, to Virginia's registrar of vital statistics Walter Plecker—led them to favor cruel public policies such as sterilizing defectives (Sanger), prohibiting the blind from marrying (Howe), and outlawing interracial marriages (Plecker).

In Part Two ("Eugenicide") Black offers his evidence of the international crime: how Laughlin used eugenic arguments to help the US Congress pass the racist Quota Act of 1921 curtailing immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and then sought out European eugenicists during his ten-country tour as "special immigration agent" of the United States;

³This indeterminate number is difficult to document. Approximately 70,000 Americans were sterilized from the time Indiana first passed the compulsory sterilization law in 1907 until the last such sterilizations took place during the 1960s. I know of no way of estimating the numbers of Americans who might have been wrongfully committed to mental institutions or denied the right to marry.

how eugenics in Britain was changed from Galton's moderate movement emphasizing research and persuasion to a harsh "American-like" movement stressing the need for coercive negative eugenics; how Davenport used the international eugenics conferences of 1912, 1921, and 1932 to assume the dominant role in the international movement; how early eugenic visions of a "lethal chamber" for the unfit and instances of eugenic "euthanasia," such as Dr. Harry Haiselden's denial of treatment to a severely deformed newborn in 1915, foreshadowed Nazi gas chambers; how extensive contact between American eugenicists and German racial hygienists made American ideas and practices so well-known in Germany by the 1920s that Hitler incorporated many of them into *Mein Kampf*; how the Rockefeller Foundation's funding of German medical and eugenic research, even after Hitler assumed power, allowed German eugenicists such as Dr. Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer to contribute to Nazi race science; and how events taking place in Buchenwald and Auschwitz during World War II, such as Josef Mengele's experiments on twins, can be tied to that funding. The thread Black uses to weave this disparate evidence into a coherent case against American eugenics is the Davenport and Laughlin connection. He contends that, as the prime movers of the American movement, their influence can be seen in nearly every outcropping of negative eugenics, both domestically and internationally.

Black's prosecutorial approach succeeds in a number of significant ways. Personalizing the eugenics movement allows him to impose a clear narrative on more than 400 pages of text that covers a wide range of time, locations, and topics. Searching for evidence of guilt or innocence also allows him to deal swiftly with the mountain of documents he has assembled. His approach definitively proves some important points, such as the profound racism that lay behind the veneer of Davenport's and Laughlin's eugenic rhetoric. Although their stated goal was the improvement of humankind, Black uncovers in their letters, memorandums, and administrative documents evidence of clear racial bias. For example, the Eugenics Record Office undertook a study of a Native American community in Virginia, which resulted in the 1926 volume titled *Mongrel Virginians*. The book's argument that the Native Americans in question constituted a mixed race of whites, Indians, and Negroes of doubtful quality (the White-Indian-Negro, or "Win tribe") became "scientific" evidence for Plecker to use in his attempt to expand Virginia's anti-miscegenation law to include Native Americans (p. 179). Often it is when Black focuses on particular cases that his training as an investigative reporter is put to most effective use. In his chapter on the passage of compulsory sterilization laws ("The United States of Sterilization"), which examines the infamous 1927 *Buck v. Bell* Supreme Court case, he reveals the indignity that 17-year-old Carrie Buck suffered when forced to submit to sterilization. Represented by counsel with close ties to those who

sought to sterilize her, and assessed by Laughlin as having a mental age half her chronological age though he never met her, Carrie Buck embodies the grave injustices perpetrated by eugenicists and becomes a powerful witness for the prosecution in Black's trial of the American movement. Those chapters in which the victims of the eugenics movement make personal appearances are clearly Black's most effective ones.

At other times, though, the prosecutorial approach can be disconcerting for readers who prefer their historian-narrator to make at least a bow toward objectivity. Black's brief biographical sketches, for example, always have a transparent evaluative character that clearly places the individual into the "good" or "evil" camp. Davenport is described as "a sad man" who throughout his career "remained a bitter and disconsolate person boxing shadows for personal recognition" and struggling "to prove his own worthiness to his father and to God" (p. 32). Individuals who make only brief appearances in Black's story, such as Edward Alsworth Ross, a major American sociologist (author of "Western civilization and the birth-rate," excerpted in the Archives section of *PDR* 29, no. 4), are given labels such as "raceologist" (p. 209) so that readers will know how to evaluate them. Fine distinctions give way to convenient conflation. When Black identifies the victims of American eugenicists, he blends races and individuals with infirmities: "immigrants from across Europe, Blacks, Jews, Mexicans, Native Americans, epileptics, alcoholics, petty criminals, the mentally ill and anyone else who did not resemble the blond and blue-eyed Nordic ideal the eugenics movement glorified" (p. xvi). This conflation is useful when linking the American movement to later Nazi atrocities, although it ignores the existence of nonracist eugenicists—as well as blond and blue-eyed epileptics and alcoholics. Black assigns to the American eugenics movement an ultimate goal of producing a world populated exclusively by Nordics. This, too, makes connecting the movement to Hitler's "final solution" effortless, but it raises troubling questions about other parts of Black's story. Could Davenport realistically have hoped to have established an international movement (Chapter 12) that would be attractive to Italians, Hungarians, and Romanians, to say nothing of Brazilians, with so parochial a goal as populating the world with Nordics? This sort of question is never raised.

Black's approach, in the end, at times lessens his work's value as history. Focused on finding evidence that connects the American eugenics movement with Nazi atrocities, he emphasizes the significance of these connections and presents them as starkly as possible. When recounting Mengele's horrific experiments with twins at Auschwitz, he links them to the laboratory of Verschuer, Mengele's superior, whom he has tied to the American eugenics movement through several grants from the Rockefeller Foundation. But such an account leaves readers in an unenviable position when trying to assess the culpability of American eugenicists. Are we to

believe that, absent an American eugenics movement, there would have been no Mengele? Some of Black's most dramatic assertions—for example, that the Nazi principle of Nordic superiority was “hatched...on Long Island” and then “actively transplanted to Germany”—might lead readers in that direction. But Black never examines competing streams of influence. For instance, he ignores the origins of the idea of an Aryan master race, an idea certainly not hatched on Long Island or by eugenicists. Black never mentions Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's influential four-volume *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55), in which various races contribute different threads to the cloth of civilization: the black and yellow races being cotton and wool, the white race being silk, and “the Aryans” being still-finer threads of silver and gold. He never mentions that the German composer Richard Wagner was complaining by the mid-nineteenth century of the Jews' negative impact on German culture and was railing against the Jewish “race” well before that century ended. Nor do we hear of Wagner's son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose anti-Semitic and Aryan-supremacist *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) Hitler contends in *Mein Kampf* should have been read more carefully by leaders of European governments.⁴ By not examining the obvious additional sources of Hitler's desire for an “Aryan master race” and of his “final solution,” Black weakens his thesis that their origins can be found in American eugenics movement.

A similar complaint can be made about the historical value of Black's treatment of the American eugenics movement itself. Black endows it with great efficacy, contending that it robbed “hundreds of thousands” of Americans of their fecundity or even their lives. The portrait of a potent domestic movement makes more credible the claim that international eugenicists might plausibly hope to recast the racial makeup of the world's population. But while there is no doubt that American eugenicists played an influential role in the passage of compulsory sterilization laws in 27 states, the importance of their contributions to the passage of immigration restriction laws and of state anti-miscegenation laws is still an open question. More importantly, American eugenicists were not left unchallenged. The number of their critics—biologists, geneticists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, as well as politicians and pundits—increased with each passing decade, a process aided by the many former eugenicists who became active critics of the movement. Eugenics, scientific racism, and hereditarian thought in general—the very mix that Black discusses in this volume—all were on the losing side of a battle of ideas that took place during the 1910s and 1920s.⁵ The winners of this war were those, like the anthropologist Franz

⁴Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971[1925–27]), p. 269.

⁵See Part II, “The sovereignty of culture,” in Carl N. Degler's *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) for a comprehensive treatment of this battle.

Boas, who argued that group differences in behavior or performance were better explained by history or culture than by biology or race, who espoused the essential equality of all peoples as opposed to a hierarchy of races, and who argued for a policy of equal opportunity rather than one of discrimination. By 1930 eugenics, which always had difficulty eliciting great popular support, was in full retreat in the biological sciences, the social sciences, and the public arena. Al Smith, son of an Irish-American mother and an Italian-German father, advocate of workers and immigrants, and a Roman Catholic, was the Democratic Party's unsuccessful candidate for president in 1928; four years later Franklin Delano Roosevelt, with much the same constituency, began his first term as president. Black does not treat this early-twentieth-century trial of eugenics, making not a single reference, for instance, to the many academic or popular works of Boas. Black's readers, therefore, never receive a realistic assessment of the strength or influence of the American eugenics movement, especially during its waning period.

Black successfully depicts eugenicists as pseudo-scientists, and this success produces a disjuncture between his hortatory Part Three ("Newgenics") and the two historical parts that precede it. When the full extent of Nazi atrocities became known after World War II, public expression of eugenic doctrine became unacceptable. Black contends that the American movement responded to this challenge by transforming itself into mainstream genetics. Frederick Osborn, the central character in Edmund Ramsden's excellent account of "Social demography and eugenics in the interwar United States" (*PDR* 29, no. 4), makes a postwar appearance in Black's account, offering a written confession of the movement's past crimes: "Before 1930, eugenics had a racial and social class bias.... The ruling race and the ruling class seemed, to the members of the ruling race and class, to be evidently superior to the non-ruling races and classes" (p. 418). Osborn, by then president of the American Eugenics Society, craftily sought to preserve the old eugenic goal of developing "a superior race" with a new method: "genetic counseling and human genetics," according to Black (p. 424). Black makes a passing reference to "population-control" groups (specifically, the Population Council and the Population Reference Bureau) that "sprang from eugenics" (p. 426), but argues that the old eugenics movement largely transformed itself into mainstream genetics.

Here is where the disjuncture arises. Black outlines a set of "newgenics" problems that we face as a result of that transformation. Modern geneticists have the scientific capability to divide individuals into groups that actually possess positive or negative genetic attributes, be they with respect to health or capabilities, and discrimination has followed. But having successfully defined eugenics as a pseudo-science that simply masks race and class prejudice with a genetic veneer, Black has ill prepared the reader to deal with discrimination that has a true scientific basis. He introduces a familiar theme of class bias into "newgenics" by envisioning a world where the wealthy

will be able to “purchase” a higher genetic quality than the poor. Yet, since these class divisions have a real genetic dimension, this “newgenics” story has quite a different hue than the old eugenics tale. What is wrong in this future world is not that the rich think that they are a master race, but that they actually are. Even the new golden rule with which Black concludes the book—that “nothing should be done anywhere by anyone to exclude, infringe, repress or harm an individual based on his or her genetic makeup” (p. 444)—does not succeed in tying together “newgenics” and eugenics. His powerful story of eugenics has certainly prepared us to accept this rule when the “genetic” discrimination is based on a groundless prejudice. This rule is not so obviously true, however, when the “genetic” discrimination is based on a real concern for the quality of an individual life. Is it really immoral to call for the counseling of two individuals who carry the genetic mutation that will lead to 25 percent of their offspring having Tay-Sachs disease, an incurable condition that usually causes death by age five, so that they consider parenthood with special care?

For a variety of reasons *War Against the Weak* is problematic as history, and demographers need good histories of eugenics, especially ones that dispassionately examine the ideas that generated eugenic concerns. These ideas are intimately related to the rise of the demography itself. That Charles Darwin was inspired to develop his theory of natural selection by reading Malthus’s *Essay of Population* is well known. In *The Origin of the Species* Darwin contended that the redundant fertility central to Malthus’s theory applied “with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms” and produced a struggle for existence that triggers natural selection (London: John Murray, 1859: 32). When Darwin used evolutionary theory in *The Descent of Man* to assess the recent mortality decline of developed societies, he deduced dysgenic consequences (London: John Murray, 1871: 168):

With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination.... There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man.

Although he argued against any intentional neglect of the “weak and helpless,” he noted that they were “not marrying so freely as the sound” and expressed a hope that “this check might be indefinitely increased” (p. 169).

Darwin’s theory rose to prominence during a period when more and better demographic statistics were being collected and when substantial mortality decline was the most salient trend they documented. As a result

much late-nineteenth-century population analysis had distinct eugenic undertones. Demographers traditionally have distinguished between issues of population quantity and population quality. However, quantitative population trends usually, perhaps always, involve some kind of selectivity. Enthralled by Darwin's new explanation of the human condition, students of population naturally searched quantitative demographic changes for any ancillary qualitative shifts in the proportions of the genetically favored and disfavored. No doubt their vision was often clouded by racism and class chauvinism, but their search was motivated by an authentic concern.

There are several good histories of eugenics that focus on the role played by Darwinian ideas and theories. Mark H. Haller's *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963) remains a relevant scholarly examination of the ideas that lay behind the rise of the American movement, and Carl N. Degler's *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) gives an insightful account of how those ideas fared during the first half of the twentieth century. Elof Axel Carlson's *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001) ranges as broadly as Black's *War Against the Weak*, examining the idea of the "unfit" as it existed before and after Darwin, and giving accounts of the rise of the American eugenics movement, Nazi race science, and the dilemmas posed by recent genetic advances. Carlson, though, focuses on clarifying the theories and ideas behind eugenics and tracing their many sources.

Demographers also need to read good histories of eugenics that emphasize the essential political nature of these social movements. Eugenics movements constantly sought support and made alliances to advance their agendas. Ramsden's account documents the many ties, from shared sources of institutional support to a substantial overlap in personnel, existing in the interwar period between the American eugenics movement and the fledgling discipline of demography, itself a small policy-oriented entity with some characteristics of a social movement. American demographers need to know this early history of their discipline. Daniel J. Kevles's *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985) is a comparative examination of the British and American movements. This balanced account succeeds in uncovering why the American movement achieved partial legislative success while the British movement failed. Kevles presents a multi-dimensional account of eugenics, seeing it as not simply as a movement based on race and class prejudice but also one attempting to deal with changing assessments of reproduction, sex, and gender roles. This approach makes his work especially relevant for demographers.

Although *War Against the Weak* is problematic as history, then, students of population nevertheless can read it with profit. The fervor behind Black's stinging indictment of eugenics will lead many to question whether the policy

advice they offer today might be viewed, at some future time, as morally reprehensible. Will recommending pronatalist policies for low-fertility European populations be viewed as simply one more exercise in ethnic or racial prejudice? Because stimulating immigration is a more economical way of increasing population size than stimulating fertility, does recommending a pronatalist policy imply a desire to influence the character as well as the number of a country's new additions? What of contemporary examinations of immigration policies? If in the future everyone agrees that individuals have a fundamental human right to reside where they please, will past advocacy of any national policy that restricted immigration be viewed as inherently unethical?

In fact, an older generation of demographers does not need to imagine such scenarios. Those who participated in the post-World War II effort to lower third world rates of population growth have already been subjected to such a retrospective trial. Their neo-Malthusian assumptions emphasized the great harm associated with high rates of population growth. Lowering the fertility of poor peasant women, even if "incentives" and "disincentives" were needed, seemed to them the proper policy recommendation. Contemporary advocates of women's reproductive rights, living in a world of declining fertility and making no neo-Malthusian assumptions, have assessed such recommendations to have been unethical infringements on the reproductive rights of poor women. And radical feminists, questioning the sincerity of demographers' neo-Malthusian rationales, have even argued that the recommendations were simply the old eugenics in new garb, an attempt to produce a future world with fewer black, brown, and yellow people. In truth, a recommendation for lowering the "quantity" of third world inhabitants was selective, and hence open to the reinterpretation that it was actually a call for a "qualitative" compositional change.

The lesson that younger demographers might well take from Black's book and from such ethical reassessments of past population-control efforts is simply to avoid making potentially controversial policy recommendations, especially any calling for a change in population quantity or quality. But this approach would not be good for the discipline. While there is no way to inoculate a generation of demographers against the possibility of being so thoroughly infected by the prejudices of the day as to do real moral harm, the solution is not disengagement. For the discipline to remain vital, each generation has to grapple with the population policy issues confronting it. Perhaps, though, there is a lesson to be learned from such ethical "retrials" of past policy decisions as Edwin Black has conducted. Policy-oriented disciplines need to avoid living in too small a world. They need to strive for a diverse membership that remains open to questioning basic assumptions of the field. They need to have multiple constituencies, both as sources of support and as audiences for their findings. In short, ideological conformity is to be avoided, not sought.