

Brief History of European and American Eugenics Movements

A brief history of the European and American eugenics movements of the 1930s: Excerpts from "[A History of the American Eugenics Movement](#)," University of Illinois, Ph.D. Thesis, 1988 by Barry Mehler.

The Second International Congress of Eugenics

The American Eugenics Society was initially organized as the Eugenics Committee of the United States by the Executive Committee of the Second International Congress of Eugenics. The energy, momentum, and emotional tone of the Congress were instrumental in the creation of the Society, and the Society's original orientation and program reflected the concerns expressed by the international leaders at the conference. Two men epitomized this leadership. Georges Vacher de Lapouge (1854-1936) and Jon Alfred Mjoen (1860-1939). Mjoen introduced the resolution which called for the formation of the Eugenics Committee (later to become the AES) and Lapouge, more than any other speaker at the conference, articulated the concerns of the early AES founders. Thus, it is important to examine the Second International Congress of Eugenics and the role played by Lapouge and Mjoen in the creation of the AES.

The Second International Congress of Eugenics was hosted by the American Museum of Natural History in New York in the fall of 1921.¹ It was an impressive affair attended by over 300 delegates from around the world. Notables at the conference included future President Herbert Hoover; internationally renowned scientist Alexander Graham Bell (honorary President of the Congress); nationally known conservationist and future Governor of Pennsylvania, Gifford Pinchot; and Leonard Darwin, son of Charles Darwin.² Henry Fairfield Osborn, Director of the Museum and noted paleontologist was President of the Congress. Madison Grant, New York lawyer, and author of *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York 1916) was Treasurer.³ Harry Laughlin, Superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office, was in charge of exhibits, and Lothrop Stoddard, popular writer and author of the *Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy* (New York 1920), was in charge of publicity.

A truly international affair, the Congress included representatives from France, England, Italy, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Japan, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, India, Australia, New Zealand, San Salvador, Siam, and Uruguay. The Germans and the Russians were not invited. They were ostracized from many international conferences after the war and this ostracism extended to eugenics despite fairly cordial relations between the American, German, and Russian eugenicists.⁴ The existence of large and active eugenics organizations in so many countries belies the claim so often made that eugenics was essentially a movement of America and Protestant Europe.⁵

The conference testifies to the fact that the science of genetics was still intricately interwoven with eugenics and that the cutting edge of the science of genetics was also the cutting edge for the scientific justification of racism. Ludmerer's notion that leading geneticists abandoned the eugenics movement "after World War I, as the eugenics movement acquired more and more of a racist tone"⁶ is clearly false. One hundred eight papers were presented on topics ranging from plant and animal genetics to anthropology and political science. Intermixed with papers presented by the world's leading authorities on genetics were polemics against race mixing and the dangers of inferior races.

The English Eugenics Education Society had over 1000 members by 1914 with branches in Birmingham, Liverpool, Southampton, Manchester, Haslemore, and Belfast.⁷ The French Eugenics Society never had more than 100 members but according to William Schneider, historian of the French eugenics movement, "the prestige of the officers and active members" compensated for the lack of numbers. The small French Eugenics Society was able to influence government policy, publish eugenics tracts and periodicals, and gain international recognition. It also sent the largest foreign delegations to both the first and second international eugenics congresses.⁸ In Sweden, a proposal to set up a "Nobel Institute of race biology" at the Karolinska Institute failed by one vote. The decision was close enough to be laid before the 'Riksdag' and was reported to be receiving 'zealous support' in the Swedish press. Brazil boasted two eugenics organizations, the Eugenics Society of Sao Paulo with 140 members and the smaller Eugenics Society of Amazonia. Together they were intensely active holding conferences and publishing eugenics tracts.⁹

In Belgium, The Société Belge d'Eugénique was established in 1920 and was publishing a quarterly *Revue d'Eugénique* within a year.¹⁰ In Russia two branches of the Russian Eugenics Society were established in Petrograd and Moscow in 1919. The Russian Eugenics Society was led by N.I. Vavilov.¹¹ A Eugenics Bureau was established under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1922.¹² The Russian eugenicists published two journals, *The Russian Eugenics Journal* and *the Bulletin of the Bureau of Eugenics*. The Indian Eugenics Society was organized in Lahore in 1921. It had 120 members with a branch in Simla.¹³ Although Japan's eugenics movement was not institutionalized until 1924 with the establishment of the Japanese Eugenics Society, the movement dated back to 1881 with the introduction of Galton's ideas into Japan by Yukichi Fukuzawa.¹⁴

Perhaps the most effective foreign eugenics leader was Jon Alfred Mjoen. Mjoen played an important role in the organization of the American Eugenics Society. He introduced the resolution creating the committee which ultimately organized the AES and was also important advocate of immigration restriction and antimiscegenation legislation. Like Lapouge he was a favorite of Osborn, Grant, and Stoddard. In America he was generally considered a scientist of the highest merit and the Eugenics Society that he helped create

would in the twenties and thirties sponsor a number of lucrative American lecture tours for him.¹⁵

Like Lapouge, Mjoen was much more highly regarded in America than he was in his native Norway. Osborn introduced him as "the leader in the vigorous movement of race hygiene in Scandinavia." This, despite the fact that no Norwegian geneticists worked with Mjoen or contributed to his journal *Den Nordiske Rase*. Mjoen did find important supporters in Sweden and Denmark, however, including the internationally renowned geneticists Hermann Nilsson-Ehle and Wilhelm Johannsen.¹⁶

Mjoen was particularly concerned with the pernicious consequences of the race mixing. At the Conference he gave a lecture entitled "Harmonic and Disharmonic Racecrossings." The lecture dealt with the pernicious effects of crossing the Norwegians with Lapps. The Americans were fascinated to learn that Norwegian/Lapp mixes produced the same kinds of disharmonies found in American mulattoes. In America Mjoen's polemic against miscegenation seemed especially objective and scientific.¹⁷

Mjoen's interest in eugenics had been stimulated in Germany where, in 1897, he met and became acquainted with Alfred Ploetz, the father of German eugenics. Like Galton, Mjoen was a man of substantial means, and in 1906, he established the Vindere Biological Laboratory, a private research institution for the study of eugenics. He was especially interested in mental properties, and his studies in musical ability were quoted in Erwin Bauer's classic text, *Menschliche Erblchkeitslehre*.¹⁹

In 1908 Mjoen gave a talk before the Norwegian Medical Society at the University of Oslo in which he sketched the "Norwegian Program for Race Hygiene," later incorporated into the AES agenda. According to Mjoen, modern industrial life and social welfare legislation endangered the welfare of the race. Modern social policy aimed at improving conditions for the poor, neglected biological heredity. The natural "cleansing processes" had been upset by social intervention. "The present social services may increase the health of the individual, but as a rule it lowers that of the race - the nation." While Mjoen was not opposed to social welfare legislation, he believed that it must have a eugenic rather than a dysgenic thrust.²⁰

From 1915 on a group of Norwegian biologists led by Otto Mohr denounced Mjoen for his scientific incompetence. Nevertheless, Mjoen, an active member of the governing Liberal Party, found considerable support for his eugenic ideas among government officials. By 1915, the party platform included a call for the study of practical methods for treating folk-disease - "fokesykdommer." Mjoen was also able to convince the Parliament to create the Institute for Genetics at the University of Oslo in 1916. Ragnar Vogt, founder of Norwegian psychiatry, was placed in charge of it. Vogt's work was considered more scientific than Mjoen's and his outlook more conservative. Still, he opposed miscegenation as well as the franchise for "lower races."²¹

While some historians have claimed that the American and English eugenics movements imported "surprisingly little" from the European eugenics movement, the importance and

influence of eugenics leaders in Europe is clear from an examination of the *Eugenical News* and the *Minutes* of the Eugenics Committee. In this particular case, Mjoen was the actual instigator for the creation of what was to become one of America's most influential eugenic organizations. Furthermore, Mjoen's "Norwegian plan" formed the basis for the new societies program.²²

Mjoen was a major figure in the international eugenics movement and a key figure pushing for coordination among eugenics institutions. During the Executive Session of the Congress, Mjoen pressed for better coordination of the international eugenics movement by introducing a resolution from the Consultative Eugenics Committee of Norway for the establishment of

- ... central eugenics organizations in each country, with advisory powers to the government relating to the prophylactic work for public health, to control of the biologically important movements of the population, also to the spread of popular information regarding eugenics, namely; race hygiene, race biology, the value of races, and the advantages and dangers of race crossing ²³

The resolution stated that such organizations were needed to educate people regarding the need to prevent imbecile, abnormal, and weak-minded individuals from "procreating an ever-increasing number of criminals, imbeciles, and anti-social persons." Such organizations were also needed since "at present ... the governments in many countries have no power to protect themselves against infection from foreign defective germ plasm."

It was Mjoen's proposal which prompted Irving Fisher to present a motion to form an "American Ad Interim Committee" to prepare a report on a plan for securing widespread international cooperation. The motion was seconded from the floor and passed unanimously.²⁴

Osborn appointed Irving Fisher chairman of the Ad Interim Committee and himself, Charles Davenport, Madison Grant, C.C. Little (1888-1971), and Harry Olson, Chief Justice of the Chicago municipal court, as members. Thus was born the International Commission on Eugenics Ad Interim Committee of the United States of America later to be known simply as the American Eugenics Society.

Footnotes

1. The Congress was held between the 22nd and 28th of September.
2. For a full report on the Congress see *Eugenical News* 6 #11-12 pp. 65-67. The *Minutes of the Executive Session of the Second International Congress of Eugenics* are Part of the AES Papers, American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia, PA.

The First International Congress of Eugenics had been held in London from 24-30 July 1912. It was organized by the Eugenics Education Society of Great Britain (precursor of the English Eugenics Society) and directed by Leonard Darwin. The meetings were held at the University of London. Vice presidents of the Congress included Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty; Charles Davenport, director of the Eugenics Record Office and secretary of the American Breeders' Association; Dr. Charles W. Eliot, president-emeritus of Harvard University; Dr. David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University; and Gifford Pinchot.

The American Consultative Committee appointed at the First International Conference took responsibility for organizing the Second Conference. The Committee consisted of Davenport, A.G. Bell, W. Castle, C.R. Henderson, A. Meyer, F.A. Woods, A. Hrdlicka and V.L. Kellogg. Davenport was the guiding spirit. He helped persuade Bell, whose world-wide fame would help lend prestige to the conference, to be the honorary president and H.F. Osborn to be the president. The Congress was originally scheduled for 1915 but was postponed because of the War. Mark Haller, *Eugenics* (New Jersey 1963) p. 74. See Frederick Osborn, "History of American Eugenics Society," *Social Biology* 21 #2 (1974) pp. 115-126; Chase, *Legacy of Malthus* (New York 1980) p. 19. See also *Problems in Eugenics. Papers Communicated at the First International Eugenics Congress* (London 1912).

3. The *Passing of the Great Race* passed through four separate editions between 1916 and 1921. It went through numerous printings and was translated into German, French, and Norwegian. See Laughlin Papers "Notes on Madison Grant" in Laughlin/Grant file. Laughlin Papers, Northeast Missouri State University, Kirksville, MO.

4. Loren Graham, "Science and Values: The Eugenics Movement in Germany and Russia in the 1920s," *American Historical Review* 82 (1977) p. 1148.

5. See for example, Horace F. Judson, "Gene Genie" in *The New Republic* (August 1985) pp. 28-34. Judson writes, "eugenics... has been a movement in large part peculiar to England and the United States" (p. 30). There is no major work on the eugenics movement from an international perspective and over 90% of the scholarly work on eugenics has been done on America and England. Recently, however, Mark Adams edited, *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (Oxford: New York, 1990). Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

In the past few years a number of scholars have turned their attention to the German eugenics movement. See, for example, Paul Weindling, "Die Preussische Medizinalverwaltung und die 'Rassenhygiene'," *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* 30 (1984) pp. 675-687; and also by Weindling, "Weimar Eugenics: The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics in Social Context," *Annals of Science* 42 (1985) pp. 303-318. I would also highly recommend, Benno Müller-Hill, *Tödliche Wissenschaft: Die Aussonderung von Juden, Zigeunern und Geisteskranken 1933-1945*, (Hamburg 1985). See also, Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

6. Ludmerer, *Genetics and American Society* p. 121.
7. Donald Mackenzie, "Eugenics in Britain," *Social Studies of Science* 6 (1976) pp. 499-532; Haller, *Eugenics*, p. 20; Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* (Knopf 1985).
8. William Schneider, "Toward the Improvement of the Human Race: The History of Eugenics in France," *Journal of Modern History* 54 (June 1982) pp. 268-291. For example, Pinard, president of the Eugenics Society, was one of the most respected obstetricians in France during the first decades of the twentieth century. See *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* 10 pp. 522-23. In addition to being a member of the Académie of Sciences, Pinard was a deputy to the French National Assembly from 1918 to 1928. Lucien March, treasurer of the FES and member of the Executive Committee of the Second International Congress, was the chief statistician of the French government. See Schneider, pp. 277-278.
9. The *Eugenical News* contains many news items on developments in the international eugenics movement. See *Eugenical News* 6 #2 (February 1921) p. 13 and 6 #3 (March 1921) p. 18 for reports on the Swedish and Brazilian movements. For a history of eugenics in Latin America see, Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
10. *Eugenical News* 6 #6 (June 1921) p. 43.
11. Loren Graham, "Science and Values," p. 1146. Graham claims both organizations were created in 1921. But the *Eugenical News* carries a memorandum from N.I. Vavilov who was visiting the ERO. Vavilov claims the RES was established in 1919. *Eugenical News* 6 #11-12 (November-December 1921) pp. 72-73.
12. *Eugenical News* 7 #2 (February 1922) p. 13.
13. *Eugenical News* 7 #1 (January 1922) p. 2.
14. H. Tukuba, and Z. Suzuki, "The Reaction of Yukichi Fukuzawa to Eugenics," *Igakushi Kenkyu* (Historical Study of Medicine) #24 (1967) pp. 1225-9. See also Zenji Suzuki, "Genetics and the Eugenics Movement in Japan," *Japanese Studies in the History of Science* #14 (1975) pp. 157-164; *Eugenical News* 9 #7 (July 1924) p. 64.
15. Chase, *Legacy of Malthus*, p. 287; Nils Roll-Hansen, "Eugenics Before World War II: The Case of Norway," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 2 (1981) pp. 269-98. For a summary of one of Mjoen's lecture tours see *Eugenical News* 12 #1 (January 1927) p. 24.
16. This aura of scientific respectability also influenced the historical record. Frederick Osborn, in referring to the Third International Conference of Eugenics held in New York in 1932, cited papers by Mjoen, Raymond Pearl, Tage Kemp, H. J. Muller and Morris Steggerda as examples of scientific papers representing "the best knowledge available at

the time." Even at the time, Mjoen was more of a propagandist than a scientist. He hardly belongs in the company of Pearl, Kemp, and Muller who were primarily research scientists. F. Osborn, "History of the AES," *Social Biology* 21 #2 (1974) p. 118.

17. Henry Fairfield Osborn, "Address of Welcome," *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family* (Baltimore 1923) p. 1; Roll-Hansen "Eugenics Before World War II," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 2 (1981); Mjoen, "Harmonic and Disharmonic Race Crossings," *Eugenics in Race and State II*, pp. 41-61.

18. The independently wealthy man of leisure was a conspicuous type in the eugenics movement. Ploetz, Galton, Kellogg, Osborn, Grant, and Mjoen are among them. The eugenics movement seemed to attract especially those with inherited wealth who wished to channel their energy into some social cause.

19. Bauer, Fischer, Lens, *Menschliche Erblchkeitslehre* (Munchen 1927) p. 475. Translated into English by Eden and Cedar Paul as *Human Heredity* (New York: Macmillan, 1931). Bauer quotes from Mjoen's study, "Zur Erbanalyse der Musikalischen Begabung," which appeared in *Hereditas* 7 (1925).

20. Nils Roll-Hansen, "Eugenics Before World War II: The Case of Norway," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 2 (1981) pp. 275-77.

21. Ragnar Vogt, *Avrelighetslaere og Racehygiene* Kristiania, Cammermeyer (1914) p. 123, quoted from Nils Roll-Hansen, "Eugenics Before World War II," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 2 (1981) p. 278.

22. Horace F. Judson's review of Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* in *The New Republic* (5 August 1985) p. 30. See also the Preface to Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*.

23. Minutes of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, 9/27/21, p. 6. AES Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. (Bk. 1). The Executive Committee consisted of Henry Fairfield Osborn, President of the Congress; L. Darwin, Chairman of the International Eugenics Commission; Lucien March; Charles Davenport; Jon Alfred Mjoen; Raymond Pearl; C.C. Little, Sec-Gen of the Congress; Madison Grant, Treasurer; H.H. Laughlin, Chairman, Exhibits Committee; H.E. Crampton, Executive Committee; H.J. Banker, Sec. Section 2; Helen Dean King, Sec. Section 1; Clark Wissler, Sec. Section 3; Irving Fisher; Judge Harry Olson, General Committee; Dr. George Bech, delegate, Government of Denmark; Phya Medra, delegate of the Government of Siam; Dr. Santa Naccarati, delegate from the Italian Society of Genetics and Eugenics; Dr. F. Ramos, delegate from Cuba and Dr. Arturo Scroggie, delegate from Chile.

24. Minutes of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, 9/27/21, p. 7. AES Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

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