

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

American, German, English, and Scandinavian eugenics all contained unique elements. The English eugenics movement was molded by Francis Galton and Karl Pearson; in America it was Charles Davenport; in Norway Jon Alfred Mjoen was inspired by the German race hygiene movement founded by Alfred Ploetz. These important first generation advocates of eugenics did not always share common political and social views, and they interpreted eugenics in their own idiosyncratic ways. Likewise, later generations of eugenic leaders came from widely diverse political perspectives, and in each case local conditions molded the national eugenics movements in different countries, but a core of values remained constant.

At the heart of eugenics was the belief that the human species could be perfected by science - science raised to an ethic. With the aid of science tests could be devised to identify the weak minded, the physically unfit, the morally corrupt. With the aid of science society could be improved though the improvement of the stock itself. The germ plasm of the nation could be purified and uplifted. It all came down to inhibiting the reproduction of inferior grades of

humanity and encouraging reproduction among the "better stocks."<sup>1</sup>

There were many views on how to control the direction of human evolution. The focus of this study has been on the development of such views in America between 1921 and 1940. The evolution and growth of American eugenics in these years was complex. Although there were dramatic occurrences - the great successes between 1924 and 1927, the many defeats later, the resignation of staunch supporters, the rise of new leaders - there was no dramatic change at any time during this period from an "old" eugenics to a "new" eugenics.

Naturally the movement changed over time, but in the end the goal was still to identify the inferior individuals and encourage the breeding of the better stocks. In the end the American Eugenics Society still favored sterilization, anti-miscegenation legislation, and strict immigration control. In the end its leaders still maintained the inferiority of Negroes, Indians, and Mexicans. They admitted that there was no way of knowing to what extent this inferiority was rooted in the genome, although they suspected it was considerable. In the end, the ideology remained remarkably intact.

This thesis highlights the continuity in both policy and ideology of the American Eugenics Society. The outlines

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<sup>1</sup> This has not been established for Latin America.

of the ideological orientation of the AES were first presented by the keynote speakers at the Second International Congress of Eugenics. Those speakers - British, American, French, and Scandinavian - articulated a vision of a eugenic society which they hoped would emerge out of what they perceived to be the rapidly declining and troubled societies of the West. They recommended sweeping eugenic reforms to encourage the increase of the better stocks. They warned of the dangers of the dysgenic trend which prevailed world-wide and of the need to reverse that trend.

Eugenicists advocacy of immigration restriction, anti-miscegenation, and eugenic sterilization remained remarkably constant even as the rationale for these positions was adjusted to suit changed social conditions and more sophisticated genetics. Thus, the belief in "inferiority" of identifiable sub-populations remained constant even if sophisticated readers of the genetics literature realized that the "genetic" component of "inferiority" could not be positively identified. Where the genetic arguments began to falter, sociological arguments could be brought in to bolster the case. The demographic trend was clear. The unemployed had larger families than the employed, the working class had larger families than the professional classes, and in general there was a reverse correlation between social status and family size. Furthermore, the historic advance of Northern European peoples had come to an

end. For the future, the demographic evidence pointed to a diminishing white population. The conviction that this pattern represented a dysgenic trend was never doubted.

Policy with regard to immigration and sterilization remained constant even if some particulars might have changed. After 1924 one would expect interest in southern and eastern Europeans to decline. The eugenicists had won that battle. Furthermore, the eastern European immigrants were rapidly assimilating into American society with none of the dire consequences envisioned by Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn. The eugenicists naturally turned their attention to the newly perceived threats from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean.

There was very little change in basic ideology in the society's leadership in these years. From Henry Fairfield Osborn to Frederick Osborn and from Madison Grant to Warren Thompson the ideology and philosophy remained stable. Henry Fairfield Osborn and Madison Grant were antisemites and overt racists. Frederick Osborn and Warren Thompson did not see themselves as racists, but how shall we judge their horror at the declining birth rate of Northern Europeans? How shall we judge their concern over the increasing population of Mexicans, Native Americans, and Blacks? In these matters Henry Fairfield Osborn, Madison Grant, Frederick Osborn, and Warren Thompson agreed.

In 1935 there was a significant change in the organization of the Society with the dissolution of the advisory council, but this organizational change had little immediate impact on the society's ideology. What emerged by 1940 as the "new eugenics" was an evolution of earlier positions. In many ways these positions were simply restatements of earlier positions in more contemporary language.

For example, a key element in the society's "new eugenics" was the belief that the focus of a democratic eugenic program ought to be on the majority of the population falling within the normal ranges of ability, not on the ten percent of the population that was degenerate in one way or other. There was really nothing new about this.<sup>2</sup> Eugenics advocates had been seesawing back and forth between an emphasis on positive and negative eugenics since its earliest inception. Furthermore, the advocates of eugenics at the Second International Congress of Eugenics clearly hoped that eugenics would permeate every aspect of social organization. Thus, they too, believed that eugenics had to focus on the majority of the society to be effective.

The idea of a "democratic eugenics" actually developed out of this broad focus. In democratic societies eugenics program had to be part of the fabric of the society and

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<sup>2</sup> Galton stressed the extremes, but the AES leadership clearly recognized the importance of reaching the whole population.

permeate its social welfare programs in such way as to naturally encourage a eugenic distribution of births. "Except in cases of hereditary defectives, no eugenic agency" would attempt to "define the 'fit' or the 'unfit,' nor would any arbitrary power determine who should have children."<sup>3</sup>

The leaders at the Second International Congress of Eugenics had articulated the essentials of this ideology when they expressed the hope that eugenics would eventually become an internalized ideal by which young people would, naturally and without coercion, take eugenics into account in selecting mates. While the speakers at the Congress in 1921 emphasized the need for immediate action to "stem the tide of racial degeneracy," they did not think that emergency efforts were all that was needed. They were consciously trying to spur society to action but their long range vision for a eugenic future were much the same in 1921 as in 1940.

Following their lead, the AES programs called for a eugenic approach to legislation, education, research, propaganda, and theology. The leaders of the AES did not simply call for specific legislation, they hoped eugenics would influence all legislative proceedings. The leaders of

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Osborn, "Social Implications of the Eugenic Program," Child Study (January 1939) p. 96. It is worth noting that this exception included several million individuals.

the AES believed that tax law might be just as important as sterilization in the effort to affect society. In the twenties the society was fighting important battles which called for immediate action, but by the 30s other items on the agenda were ready for more focused action.

Another focus of the mid-thirties was the "discovery" that the West was facing the dual problem of declining birth rates and a dysgenic trend in births. This too, was clearly present in the earlier period. In fact, the statements of the early twenties and mid-thirties share so much in common that it is hard to understand why this was considered a "new" aspect of eugenics by leader of the AES in the thirties. Even the cry that these problems were new and unprecedented paralleled earlier statements.<sup>4</sup>

American eugenicists viewed Europe as being a few years ahead of America both in the emergence of demographic trends and in the development of policies to deal with these problems. America might have been a leader in establishing eugenic sterilization, but European ideologists were important in framing American perspectives. American eugenics leaders looked to Europe for ideological leadership and imported a good deal of European ideology. Madison Grant's writings were very popular in the United States, but

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<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the thirties may have believed that earlier predictions of doom were not based on sound evidence. By 1935 Frederick Osborn could point to demographic studies which confirmed their fears.

his ideas were distinctly European. His work synthesized the European race ideology of De Gobineau, Chamberlain, and Hans Günther, just as the earlier work of William Z. Ripley was a synthesis of European ideas on race.

In the late 1930s Americans began to distinguish between two European models for eugenic policies. The first was that of the totalitarian states of Italy and Germany. The second was the "democratic" model of Sweden. At the heart of the new model which Sweden presented was the idea that in a democratic society the dysgenic trend could be reversed naturally as social welfare programs and wide spread free access to birth control became available. Hidden within this model were social policies aimed at increasing the economic burden on elements of the community considered dysgenic. This model was not new but the demographic evidence of its success was quite important.

The main thrust of the Swedish eugenics program was to encourage larger families through state subsidies for housing, free school lunch programs, and a nationwide system of nurseries and maternal care. The American leaders believed even more could be done with nationally subsidized recreation and health care, salary scales based on size of family, and a tax system which would favor the large family over the small.

It was natural to find eugenics reflecting the national values of the society in which it developed. In each

country there was a wide array of opinion on eugenic matters and those leaders who were closest to the main stream of political power would naturally rise to leadership positions. While American eugenicists clearly had praise for the Nazi sterilization law, they believed that the eugenics program developing in Germany was unsuited to America. Sweden, on the other hand, was a democratic state. The model of eugenics it presented was attractive because it allowed American eugenicists to ride with the social-political tide rather than against it. That, in fact, is exactly what eugenicists in Germany did in the 30s. They adapted themselves to their political reality. In this sense Kenneth Ludmerer is right in saying that American eugenicists "propounded a new eugenics creed which was both scientifically and philosophically attuned to a changed America."<sup>5</sup>

This, however, did not mean that American eugenics advocates abandoned their positions on immigration, miscegenation, and sterilization. They still believed that a tenth of the population required negative eugenics measures, including coercive sterilization. In fact, the American eugenicists of the mid-thirties stressed the need for much wider use of sterilization. They wanted sterilization to be freely available to the entire population. Sterilization was described as a privilege and

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Ludmerer, Genetics and American Society (Baltimore 1972) p. 174.

a right which should not be denied to those at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder simply because they could not afford it. It was also mandated for those "dangerous" elements of society that needed to be prevented from procreating.

Society leaders advocated integrating eugenics with current social and political concerns. During the anti-foreign hysteria of the post-war period (1919-1924) eugenicists led the immigration restriction movement. In a later period of social welfare experimentation, eugenicists pondered ways of integrating eugenics into the social welfare state. After the revelations of the Holocaust, eugenics leaders withdrew from the public arena. The time was not right for aggressive propaganda or legislative campaigns. It is not surprising that a movement with such broad support should continue to exercise influence over American social development from the 1940s to the present.

Eugenics was a movement of international dimensions in the twenties and thirties and in America it was advocated by some of our leading scholars, scientists, politicians, and clergymen. We should not be surprised at its continued vigor. A movement of this diversity and strength is quite likely to resurface as social conditions allow.