

Breeding a Better Nation:
Everyday Eugenics and the Uneven Protection of Reproductive Freedom

Bobbie J. Roshone
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Dr. Torsten Homberger
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When Dr. Owens-Adair insisted that “sterilization, thus far, is the only method by which the river of life may be purified,” she was speaking from within a worldview that mistook poverty and trauma for hereditary defect.¹ Few cases illustrate this moral distortion more clearly than that of Bertha, labeled “mentally dull” and confined to the Good Shepherd Home for eleven years. Allowed to leave for only a few weeks, she became pregnant with twins—children who later died—and the father was her own uncle.² Yet rather than recognizing Bertha as a young woman trapped in poverty, denied education, stripped of agency, and exposed to family abuse, institutional authorities deemed her a “degenerate” and kept her on as a good worker. Her exploitation was reframed as evidence of innate inferiority.

Bertha’s story was not an outlier; it was the pattern. The women eugenicists labeled as “feeble-minded” were overwhelmingly poor—girls placed in institutions not because of congenital disability but because they occupied the most vulnerable edges of society. Their pregnancies often stemmed from coercion, abandonment, or incest, conditions produced by poverty and lack of protection. Yet in the rhetoric of the era, these social wounds were recast as proof that such women carried defective bloodlines. Eugenics enthusiasts convinced themselves that the hardships borne by the poor—limited schooling, few social supports, unstable homes—were inheritable traits that could be “bred out” through sterilization.

By collapsing poverty with heredity, the movement shifted public belief away from structural causes and toward biological blame. Families, overwhelmed by scandal or financial

¹ Bethenia Owens-Adair, *Human Sterilization: Its Social and Legislative Aspects* (Portland, OR: Metropolitan Press, 1922), <https://dn790003.ca.archive.org/0/items/humansterilizati00owen/humansterilizati00owen.pdf>. 19

² Owens-Adair, 18.

strain, institutionalized daughters far more readily than sons. The state, claiming to safeguard the public welfare, stepped in to control women's reproductive lives under the guise of preventing future degeneracy. In this way, cases like Bertha's became the foundation of a popularized eugenic narrative: that the suffering of the vulnerable signaled defective genetics rather than systemic failure, and that sterilization—not protection, education, or economic support—offered the only solution.

This essay argues that American eugenics became a culturally normalized and politically enforceable system of gendered governance through the mutually reinforcing authority of medical-legal experts such as Bethenia Owens-Adair and political leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, whose rhetoric transformed reproduction from a private right into a civic duty; while the movement claimed to safeguard the nation as a whole, its mechanisms of confinement, surveillance, and sterilization fell most violently on poor and working-class women, whose poverty, sexual vulnerability, and trauma were recoded as biological threat.

How did sterilization become politically defensible rather than morally unthinkable? When did private reproduction become a matter of public obligation? And why did a movement that claimed to safeguard the entire nation ultimately concentrate its power most decisively on women's bodies? These questions lie at the center of the American eugenics movement and are illuminated through the writings of Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair and Theodore Roosevelt alongside institutional records, popular media, and public spectacle. Owens-Adair framed sterilization as a legitimate extension of state authority, redefining reproductive autonomy as a threat to the general welfare. Roosevelt, in turn, transformed reproduction into a civic duty, casting voluntary childlessness as a betrayal of national survival. Though their authority differed—medical-legal expertise on one hand and presidential prestige on the other—their

rhetoric worked in tandem to convert personal life into a site of political governance. When absorbed into public culture through newspapers, fairs, and social reform organizations, this ideology reshaped how Americans understood poverty, disability, and family life. Yet as institutional case files reveal, the burdens of this transformation were not borne equally. The mechanisms created to defend the “race” targeted most intensely those who were already socially vulnerable, especially poor women whose sexuality, fertility, and trauma were rendered legible to the state.

The primary sources examined here—ranging from institutional case files to political correspondence, popular newspapers, fairground contests, and medical treatises—demonstrate that American eugenics was not a marginal scientific aberration but a fully integrated social and political movement that reshaped public morality, law, and citizenship. Together, these sources reveal a coordinated cultural project in which heredity was used to redefine poverty, disability, and social deviation as biological threats to the nation itself. While the movement claimed to affect the “race” as a whole, its practical mechanisms of control—confinement, sterilization, and moral regulation—fell disproportionately and most violently on women, particularly poor and working-class women.

Modern historiography on eugenics begins with its intellectual progenitor, Francis Galton, whose late-nineteenth-century theories of heredity reframed social inequality as a biological phenomenon. Early works such as Nicholas Gillham’s *Sir Francis Galton and the Birth of Eugenics* portray Galton as a product of Victorian scientific optimism, while Chris Renwick situates him within broader traditions of political economy and social governance. Together, these studies establish the foundational shift from moral to biological explanations of social difference.

Subsequent scholarship moved from intellectual origins to institutional analysis. Daniel Kevles's *In the Name of Eugenics* demonstrated how eugenics gained authority by wedding scientific legitimacy to moral urgency, transforming heredity into a civic concern. Susan McKinnon and Aliya Hoff later showed how institutions such as the Eugenics Record Office and the Galton Society professionalized eugenics within American science and anthropology, embedding it in bureaucratic practice rather than fringe pseudoscience.

Comparative and transnational historians further expanded the field. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine reframed eugenics as a global project of population management linked to imperialism, welfare policy, and public health. Studies of Britain, Scandinavia, and Nazi Germany by Macnicol, Broberg and Roll-Hansen, and Weindling demonstrated that eugenics thrived across political systems, not only under fascism.

More recent scholarship has shifted decisively toward gender, disability, and biopolitics. Alexandra Stern, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Julie Aultman argue that eugenics functioned as a technology of governance that policed women's bodies and constructed disability and poverty as biological deviance. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of biopower, these historians emphasize continuity between early twentieth-century reproductive control and modern genetic medicine.

This study builds on that scholarship by placing primary institutional case files, popular media, medical-legal advocacy, and presidential rhetoric in direct dialogue. It intervenes by showing how elite political authority and everyday popular culture worked together to normalize eugenic governance — and by centering how this process unfolded most intensely on poor women.

Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair's *Human Sterilization: Its Social and Legislative Aspects* (1922) offers one of the clearest windows into the movement's political ambitions.³ Her insistence that the state must "invade personal rights" for the "general welfare" exposes how eugenics was translated from scientific rhetoric into legal authority.⁴ Owens-Adair framed sterilization not as punishment, but as civic necessity—an extension of the police power of the state. This language stripped reproductive autonomy of its private character and transformed women's bodies into sites of governance. Yet Owens-Adair's text, like most elite eugenic writing, is nearly silent on the lived conditions of the women whose bodies would bear the consequences of these policies. That silence is filled by institutional case files such as Bertha's, which reveal how poverty, sexual violence, and family abandonment were misdiagnosed as hereditary defect.⁵ Bertha's confinement after incest, exploitation, and coerced labor exemplifies how women's trauma was biologized and then used to justify continued institutional control and eventual sterilization. These records expose the profound gap between eugenic theory and lived reality.

Popular media and public spectacles further demonstrate how eugenic ideology moved from policy circles into everyday life. "Better Baby" and "Fitter Families" contests staged heredity as entertainment while training Americans to rank human worth according to physical and behavioral metrics. Examination cards and scoring sheets transformed private family life into a public assessment of racial and civic value. Newspapers amplified this message, circulating warnings about "defectives," "race suicide," and national decline. Together, these sources show that eugenics was not imposed solely from above but absorbed into popular

³ Owens-Adair, 7-10.

⁴ Owens-Adair, 12-15.

⁵ Owens-Adair, 18.

culture, becoming a shared moral framework through which Americans interpreted poverty, sexuality, immigration, and reproduction.

Within this broader cultural system, the influence of Theodore Roosevelt's writings was uniquely decisive. Roosevelt's 1902 letter to Bessie Van Vorst and his 1905 address to the National Congress of Mothers recast reproduction as a patriotic obligation and voluntary childlessness as a form of civic betrayal. By declaring that those who avoided marriage or limited childbirth were "criminals against the race," Roosevelt transformed private family decisions into matters of national survival.⁶ Though he spoke in gender-neutral terms, his rhetoric operated within deeply gendered social structures. Women—socially defined as the primary reproducers and moral guardians of the home—became the practical bearers of this civic burden. Roosevelt's prestige as a former president gave eugenic moral claims extraordinary authority; his words circulated widely through newspapers, reform organizations, and legislative debates, lending the movement mainstream legitimacy.

The gendered consequences of this legitimization are unmistakable in the institutional record. Families were far more likely to institutionalize daughters than sons when confronted with poverty, disability, or sexual scandal. Women's pregnancies—often the result of coercion, incest, or abandonment—produced the bureaucratic "evidence" used to label them feeble-minded. Sterilization statutes, made politically palatable by figures like Roosevelt and Owens-Adair, operated directly on female bodies through gynecological surgery and reproductive confinement. Men were certainly touched by eugenic exclusion through immigration restriction

⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, Address to the National Congress of Mothers, Washington, D.C., 1905, in *Presidential Addresses and State Papers of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Albert Shaw (New York: Review of Reviews, 1906), 103–108.

and some sterilization regimes, yet women's biological and social visibility made them far more susceptible to bodily intervention and moral surveillance.

Taken together, these primary sources prove that eugenics in America functioned as a national project of social engineering, not merely a medical experiment. It fused political authority, popular spectacle, scientific language, and moral panic into a single framework of civic judgment. Roosevelt's rhetoric supplied the moral vocabulary; Owens-Adair provided the legal mechanism; newspapers and fairs supplied cultural reinforcement; and institutional case files reveal the human cost. Although the movement claimed to protect society as a whole, its logic of control was enacted most intensely on poor women, whose poverty and vulnerability were recast as genetic threat. In this way, eugenics became not only a science of heredity but a system of gendered governance—one that transformed women's reproductive lives into instruments of state power.

In her 1922 treatise *Human Sterilization: Its Social and Legislative Aspects*, Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair articulated with striking clarity the ideological currents that helped eugenics seep from policy advocacy into the cultural consciousness of early-twentieth-century America. Arguing that “all persons... who are potential parents of degenerate or socially inadequate offspring... should be made subject to the law,” Owens-Adair framed reproductive control not merely as a medical concern but as a civic duty grounded in the state's police power.⁷ She insisted that the state must “invade personal rights in a thousand ways” for the “general welfare,” a legalistic logic that normalized profound violations of bodily autonomy.⁸ Her appeal for “constitution-proof” legislation positioned sterilization as a natural extension of modern

⁷ Owens-Adair, 32-33.

⁸ *Ibid.*

governance—an effort echoed across popular journalism, scientific discourse, and political correspondence.

This framing proved crucial to the cultural work eugenics performed in the decades that followed. Owens-Adair’s rhetoric resonated within a movement determined to align public perception with pseudo-scientific notions of fitness. The popular “Fitter Families” contests of the 1920s translated legislative ambitions into public spectacle. Archival examination cards and scoring sheets from the Kansas Free Fair and Texas State Fair reveal how hereditarian ideals were operationalized in carnivalesque settings.⁹ Earlier “Better Baby” contests, celebrated in newspapers such as the *Daily Capital Journal*¹⁰ and formalized in promotional materials like the *Eugenics Catechism* (1926),¹¹ made eugenic principles digestible to middle-class families who saw themselves as guardians of the nation’s health. By celebrating “good stock” and implicitly denouncing those deemed unfit, these contests domesticated the language of eugenics, embedding its assumptions within everyday social values.

Contemporary newspapers further amplified this sensibility. The *New York Tribune* warned that “freedom of intercourse among defectives is the despair of eugenicists,”¹² while the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* lamented the “tremendously complicated problem of practical eugenics.”¹³ Rural papers also propagated eugenic anxieties: the *Western Kansas World* described heredity as a “curse” threatening national vigor,¹⁴ and the *Essex County Herald* in

⁹ American Philosophical Society, “Fitter Families for Future Firesides: A Report of the Eugenics Department of the Kansas Free Fair, 1920–1924,” ERO, MSC77, Series VI, Box 4.

¹⁰ *The Daily Capital Journal* (Salem, OR), “Program of State Fair Is Greatest Ever Given,” September 18, 1913, 6.

¹¹ *Eugenics Catechism* (1926).

¹² *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), “Freedom of Intercourse Among Defectives Is the Despair of Eugenicists,” April 21, 1912.

¹³ *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), March 28, 1915, 55.

¹⁴ *Western Kansas World* (WaKeeney, KS), “The Curse of Heredity,” October 28, 1911.

1904 advocated “improving the race” through the selective reproduction of the “best types.”¹⁵ Serialized features—such as the *Ogden Standard*’s claim that “Eugenics First in the Ghetto”¹⁶ or the *Daily Telegram*’s proclamation of a coming “new aristocracy” of “human thoroughbreds”¹⁷—reveal how deeply eugenic thought saturated American media landscapes.

The influence of eugenic ideology in America was not confined to obscure clinicians or fringe publications. By the early twentieth century, it had gained the endorsement of major political figures — none more consequential than Theodore Roosevelt. His writings and speeches helped shift eugenics from a fringe scientific discourse into a widely cited rationale for family, social, and national policy. In an October 18, 1902, letter to journalist and social reformer Bessie Van Vorst, Roosevelt expressed alarm over what he called “race suicide.” In his words, “An easy, good-natured kindness, and a desire to be ‘independent’ ... are in no sense substitutes for the fundamental virtues ... for the practice of the strong, racial qualities ... of eager desire to work or fight or suffer ... provided the end to be gained is great enough, and the contemptuous putting aside of mere ease, mere vapid pleasure ...”¹⁸ He continued that those who “deliberately avoid marriage ... and ... dislike having children ... is in effect a criminal against the race” and should be “an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people.”¹⁹ This denunciation of voluntary childlessness or small families as a racial crime both moralized and racialized reproduction, laying moral groundwork for eugenic policies.

¹⁵ *Essex County Herald* (Guildhall, VT), “Improving the Race,” August 5, 1904.

¹⁶ *Ogden Standard* (Ogden City, UT), “Eugenics First in the Ghetto,” January 17, 1914.

¹⁷ *The Daily Telegram* (Clarksburg, WV), “New Aristocracy Will Be Human Thoroughbreds,” March 29, 1916.

¹⁸ Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Bessie Van Vorst, October 18, 1902, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, [Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Bessie Van Vorst - Theodore Roosevelt Center](#).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Roosevelt's commitment to these ideas was not limited to private correspondence. In a 1905 speech before the National Congress of Mothers, he warned that if the "average family" produced only two children, "the nation as a whole would decrease in population so rapidly that in two or three generations ... the race would be on the point of extinction."²⁰ He declared that a "race that practiced race suicide ... would thereby conclusively show that it was unfit to exist," and argued that only by embracing "hard duty well done" in home and family life could honorable national character survive.²¹ In Roosevelt's framing, raising many children of the "right type" was not a private matter of family preference but a patriotic duty, essential to the preservation of the nation's character, stability, and future.²²

Roosevelt's private letters also connected him directly to leading eugenic advocates and policymakers. In a letter to John J. Cronin on May 3, 1907, he expressed sympathy with Cronin's concerns about declining birthrates and "race culture," though he criticized certain rhetorical aspects of Cronin's article.²³ In earlier correspondence, including letters to Mrs. J.H. Sine in 1911, Roosevelt suggested that the average couple capable of reproduction should have at least three children to offset mortality and ensure continuation of the "right stock."²⁴ He likened the decision to have fewer children to a soldier "doing only a part of his duty on the battlefield."²⁵ Through these letters, Roosevelt did more than signal personal beliefs — he actively participated in the cultivation of a pro-natal, hereditarian ethos that dovetailed with the institutional aims of the nascent eugenics movement.

²⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, "Remarks Before the Mothers' Congress," 1905.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to John J. Cronin, May 3, 1907, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*, Library of Congress Manuscript Division.

²⁴ Roosevelt correspondence to Mrs. J.H. Sine, 1911, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*, Library of Congress Manuscript Division.

²⁵ Ibid.

Roosevelt's eugenic advocacy aligned closely with broader discourse around national fitness, racial hierarchy, and immigration. His emphasis on "race culture," "racial quality," and "national fitness" reinforced the racialized assumptions embedded in eugenics, often overlapping with nativist sentiment and policies restricting immigration and controlling reproduction among perceived "undesirable" populations.²⁶ Historian accounts note that Roosevelt's belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and concern about immigrant and "degenerate" populations dovetailed with calls for sterilization laws and coercive social policies.²⁷ In public life, Roosevelt's prestige and prior presidency lent exceptional weight to eugenic arguments, legitimizing the notion that the "right blood" was essential to national survival and that reproduction was a civic responsibility rather than a private choice.

Because of Roosevelt's status and influence, his endorsement of eugenic values had a cascading effect. His letters and speeches were used by eugenic organizations as quasi-official sanctions for campaigns aimed at improving population quality. Newspapers and magazines quoted his ideas widely, embedding them into public debate and popular consciousness. Legislators and social reformers invoked his language in arguing for immigration restriction, marriage laws, and eventually sterilization statutes. Wenworth Rollins suggested that Roosevelt could push through legislation that would better the human race by "prohibiting marriage of incompetents."²⁸ By framing the act of reproducing—or failing to reproduce—as a moral duty and national imperative, Roosevelt normalized eugenic ideology in the moral vocabulary of

²⁶ History.com, "Teddy Roosevelt: Race, Imperialism, and National Parks," https://www.history.com/news/teddy-roosevelt-race-imperialism-national-parks?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Letter from Wenworth Rollins to Theodore Roosevelt*. [March 25, 1911]. Theodore Roosevelt Papers. Library of Congress Manuscript Division. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o66132>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.

ordinary Americans. His rhetorical and institutional enmeshment with eugenics transformed what might have remained a marginal scientific theory into a mainstream ideology capable of shaping the demographics, policies, and cultural identity of the nation, demonstrating the movement's reach from the White House to the average household.

Modern historiography on eugenics begins with its progenitor, Francis Galton, whose late-nineteenth-century theories of heredity and human improvement framed the moral and scientific vocabulary of the movement. In his 1876 essay *A Theory of Heredity*, Galton proposed that the laws of inheritance applied not only to physical traits but to intellect, morality, and temperament.²⁹ This idea—what he called “the science of improving stock”—combined Charles Darwin’s natural selection with Victorian moralism to produce a vision of society governed by hereditary merit. The early historiography of Galton, represented by Nicholas Gillham’s *Sir Francis Galton and the Birth of Eugenics*, interprets his work as an effort to extend empirical science into social reform.³⁰ Yet, as Chris Renwick argues, Galton’s ambitions were as much sociological as biological; he sought to remake social order itself through the language of heredity.³¹

Historians of science have long debated whether Galton’s eugenics should be understood as a misuse of science or as an extension of the scientific worldview of his era. Gillham positions Galton as a man of his time, whose statistical innovations and anthropometric surveys reflected a faith in quantification shared by other Victorian reformers.³² In contrast, Renwick situates Galton

²⁹ Galton, Francis, “A Theory of Heredity,” *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 5 (1876): 329-348

³⁰ Gilham, Nicholas, “Sir Francis Galton and the Birth of Eugenics,” *Annual Review of Genetics* 35 (2001): 83-101.

³¹ Renwick, Chris, “From Political Economy to Sociology: Francis Galton and the Social-Scientific Origins of Eugenics,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 44, no. 3 (2011): 343-369

³² Gillham, “Sir Francis Galton,” 92.

within a broader intellectual genealogy that links political economy to social science.³³ Galton’s belief that “character is hereditary” became the cornerstone of a new mode of governance—one in which social hierarchy appeared natural, measurable, and improvable. This epistemological shift, from moral to biological explanations of inequality, marked the birth of what historians call *scientific racism*.

The historiography of early eugenics has also turned toward institutional analysis, particularly through the study of the Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man (1918–1935). As Aliya R. Hoff demonstrates, the Galton Society represented an attempt by American scientists and anthropologists to professionalize eugenics as a legitimate academic field.³⁴ Its members—Charles Davenport, Madison Grant, and Henry Fairfield Osborn among them—sought to link heredity to civilization itself, arguing that social decay could be arrested through selective breeding. Hoff’s work challenges earlier narratives that framed eugenics as purely pseudoscientific, showing instead that it was deeply entwined with legitimate academic inquiry and the institutional formation of American anthropology.³⁵

This interpretation aligns with the synthesis offered in *The Oxford Handbook in the History of Eugenics*, edited by Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, which situates eugenics within the broader intellectual and imperial contexts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁶ Bashford and Levine’s contributors emphasize that eugenics emerged not as a fringe ideology but as part of a global discourse of improvement—linked to colonial governance, social

³³ Renwick, “From Political Economy,” 351.

³⁴ Hoff, Aliya R., “The Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man (1918)-1935),” *Embryo Project Encyclopedia* (2021)

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Bashford, Alison, and Levine, Philippa, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

hygiene, and modernization. By framing eugenics as a moral science of population, these scholars reorient the historiography away from its Nazi associations and toward its broader social function as a mode of statecraft.

Daniel Kevles's *In the Name of Eugenics* (1985) remains a cornerstone of this historiography, arguing that eugenics gained authority because it married scientific legitimacy with moral urgency.³⁷ In Kevles's account, eugenicists believed they were serving both science and society: purifying the gene pool was a public good. Subsequent historians such as Diane Paul and Alexandra Stern have expanded on Kevles's insight by tracing how these ideas translated into public health campaigns and domestic ideology.³⁸ This line of scholarship has redefined eugenics as a civic project rather than a purely scientific one, revealing how the language of "fitness" became embedded in notions of citizenship, gender, and morality.

The origins of eugenics, therefore, cannot be understood solely through the biography of Galton or the institutions that followed him. As Susan McKinnon's study of the American Eugenics Record Office shows, the movement was animated by an obsession with lineage—what she calls the "technologies for terminating 'degenerate' family lines."³⁹ McKinnon argues that eugenic research functioned as an apparatus of national purification, mapping heredity as a moral geography of the nation. This conceptualization reflects a shift in historiography from studying eugenics as science to analyzing it as a *cultural technology*—a set of practices that made the social world appear biologically determined.

³⁷ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 20.

³⁸ Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

³⁹ McKinnon, Susan, "The American Eugenics Record Office: Technologies for Terminating 'Degenerate' Family Lines and Purifying the Nation," *International Journal of Anthropology* 65, no. 4 (2021).

By the early twentieth century, eugenics had moved from theory to application. The rise of biometric statistics, the establishment of heredity laboratories, and the proliferation of genealogical surveys transformed eugenic thought into a bureaucratic and pedagogical enterprise.⁴⁰ Historians such as Garland-Thomson and Paul have pointed out that this transformation was not simply about science but about power: the ability to define normalcy and deviance through measurement.⁴¹ Eugenics promised control over social disorder by locating it in the body, offering the modern state a way to moralize inequality under the guise of progress.

These intellectual foundations laid the groundwork for eugenics' popularization in Progressive America. What began as an elite academic discourse became a pervasive civic creed—translated into contests, textbooks, sermons, and laws. As Kevles observed, “the eugenicist’s dream of social improvement by biological means” became the nation’s dream of perfectibility.⁴² This vision of socially engineered improvement gained traction in the Progressive Era, where reform movements increasingly framed heredity as a matter of public responsibility and civic duty.

By the early 20th century, eugenics had moved from theory to practice. Across Europe and North America, it evolved from an intellectual discourse into a machinery of public policy. Governments, universities, and philanthropic foundations invested in programs that sought to apply the “laws of heredity” to social reform. The historiography of this institutional phase emphasizes the divergence of eugenic models across national contexts, shaped by differing moral philosophies, political systems, and scientific traditions.

⁴⁰ Hoff, “The Galton Society.”

⁴¹ Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, “Eugenics in America: A History of Injustice and Continued Implications,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 11 (2012): 2026-2031.

⁴² Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 34.

In the United States, the eugenics movement gained remarkable institutional momentum between 1900 and 1940. The Eugenics Record Office (ERO), established in 1910 under the direction of Charles Davenport and funded by the Carnegie Institution, became the epicenter of eugenic research. As McKinnon notes, the ERO represented “a bureaucratic dream of hereditary management,” combining genealogical data with a technocratic belief in the perfectibility of society.⁴³ The ERO’s reports, such as *The Kallikak Family* and *The Jukes in 1915*, codified social prejudice as science, framing poverty, criminality, and disability as hereditary degeneracy.

Legal historians have drawn attention to the interplay between eugenic science and judicial authority, epitomized by *Buck v. Bell* (1927), in which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously declared, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”⁴⁴ The ruling legitimized the forced sterilization of Carrie Buck and over 60,000 others across 30 states. Kevles interprets *Buck v. Bell* as the institutional culmination of a scientific ideology that had been fully absorbed by the American legal and medical establishment.⁴⁵ Daniel Paul situates this decision within a broader culture of “scientific management of heredity,” a term that captured Progressive Era faith in expert authority.⁴⁶

Buck v. Bell (1927) remains one of the most consequential and disturbing Supreme Court decisions in United States history. In an 8–1 opinion, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. upheld Virginia’s compulsory sterilization statute and declared that the forced sterilization of Carrie Buck was constitutional. Holmes’s pronouncement—“Three generations of imbeciles are enough”—not only legitimized American eugenics policy but also provided the legal scaffolding

⁴³ McKinnon, *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Buck v. Bell* (1927)

⁴⁵ Kevles, 120-124.

⁴⁶ Paul, 53-54.

for a vast expansion of reproductive control over marginalized populations.⁴⁷ Adam Cohen's account of the case reveals how deeply flawed science, social prejudice, and legal manipulation combined to shape a ruling that still has not been overturned. The case, engineered by prominent eugenicists, relied on Carrie Buck's status as a vulnerable young woman institutionalized under false pretenses after being raped by a relative of her foster family. Her subsequent pregnancy and the institutionalization of both her and her mother were taken as proof of hereditary "feeble-mindedness," although these claims rested on stigma, class bias, and fabricated evidence rather than medical fact.⁴⁸

Carrie Buck's attorney, Irving Whitehead, had extensive ties to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded and offered a weak, even complicit, defense. Cohen notes that while Whitehead's actions fell short of active conspiracy, his strategic failures and refusal to contest the state's claims ensured that the case progressed as eugenics advocates intended.⁴⁹ The state's attorney, Aubrey Strode, drafted the sterilization statute and defended it vigorously before the Supreme Court; although Cohen occasionally frames Strode as more moderate than his counterparts, his determined advocacy served the aims of a movement grounded in social Darwinism and elite anxieties about poverty, race, sexuality, and class.⁵⁰ Holmes, often celebrated as a champion of civil liberties, revealed in this case a deep disdain for ordinary citizens and a readiness to subordinate individual bodily autonomy to the perceived needs of the state. His opinion not only misrepresented Carrie Buck's intelligence—she had been labeled a

⁴⁷ Cohen, Adam. *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck*. New York: Penguin, 2016. 2.

⁴⁸ Cohen, 24-30.

⁴⁹ Cohen, 254-255.

⁵⁰ Cohen, 210.

“moron,” not an “imbecile”—but also enshrined the idea that reproductive control was a legitimate tool of public welfare.⁵¹

The consequences of *Buck v. Bell* were sweeping. The ruling provided constitutional legitimacy for compulsory sterilization programs across the nation, leading to the forced sterilization of between 60,000 and 70,000 Americans, some as late as the 1980s, and often without their knowledge or consent.⁵² Although white women like Carrie Buck were among the early test cases, sterilization policies disproportionately targeted Black, Native American, Latina, and other women of color, particularly in the American South and West.⁵³ The decision also fueled eugenic public health campaigns such as “Fitter Families” contests and “Better Baby” initiatives, which framed selective reproduction as a civic responsibility and legitimized the government’s interest in determining who was “fit” to parent.

In the early twentieth century, American eugenicists routinely drew upon analogies from animal husbandry and crop breeding to argue that the nation should apply similar strategies to its own population, insisting that “human stock” could be measurably improved through selective reproduction. Their confidence derived from an agricultural worldview in which farmers had long manipulated plant and animal lines for greater yield, hardiness, or aesthetic appeal. This worldview permeates the 1912 *New York Tribune* article titled “Eugenicists Would Improve Human Stock by Blotting Out Blood Taints,” which explicitly frames human heredity as a matter of breeding management and genetic purification.⁵⁴ The very phrase “blotting out blood taints” reveals the extent to which eugenicists collapsed human social complexity into the simplified logic

⁵¹ Cohen, 270.

⁵² Cohen, 10.

⁵³ Cohen, 58.

⁵⁴ “*Eugenicists Would Improve Human Stock by Blotting Out Blood Taints*,” *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), February 18, 1912, 2. *New-York tribune*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83030214/1912-02-18/ed-1/>.

of livestock improvement: eliminate “undesirable strains” and cultivate “desirable” ones. Yet embedded within this article is a telling anecdote about a young woman deemed “unfit,” a story intended to dramatize hereditary decline but which, on closer reading, illustrates the limitations—and distortions—of the agricultural analogy itself. While eugenists present her as evidence of degeneracy, the details of her life reveal that poverty, lack of education, and little control over her own circumstances shaped her situation far more than any so-called genetic “taint.” Her struggles are rooted not in innate defect but in the structural constraints of class and gender that eugenic rhetoric deliberately obscured.

By recasting deprivation as heredity, eugenists could claim scientific authority while shifting responsibility away from social systems and toward individuals’ bodies and bloodlines. The agricultural metaphor facilitated this narrative sleight of hand: just as a farmer improves seed stock by discarding “inferior” plants, society, they argued, must intervene to restrict the reproduction of those who appeared unsuccessful—regardless of whether their difficulties stemmed from biological inheritance or socioeconomic injustice. This approach allowed eugenists to curate stories of hardship and then reinterpret them as proof of degeneracy, turning poverty into pathology through the veneer of biological inevitability.

The same logic reverberates through another 1912 *New York Tribune* article, “Freedom of Intercourse Among Defectives Is the Despair of Eugenists.”⁵⁵ Here, again, readers encounter episodic narratives of individuals labeled “defective,” ostensibly demonstrating the dangers of unrestricted reproduction. But as in the February article, these vignettes reveal more about the conditions of poverty, inadequate schooling, and social marginalization than about any hereditary

⁵⁵ “Freedom of Intercourse Among Defectives Is the Despair of Eugenists,” *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), April 21, 1912, 51. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83030214/1912-04-21/ed-1/>.

threat. The agricultural comparison—so central to eugenic thinking—renders these individuals as if they were livestock breeding outside a farmer’s control, “wandering stock” that must be fenced in for the good of the herd. In this framing, the lived realities of inequality become raw material for a deterministic argument about heredity, converting economic precarity into biological doom.

The gendered dimension of this rhetoric is especially visible when placed alongside the 1911 *Western Kansas World* piece “The Curse of Heredity,” which asserts that “feeble-minded mothers are twice as prolific as normal women.”⁵⁶ This claim, presented as a scientific statistic, extends the agricultural metaphor to women’s bodies, casting them as reproductive vessels whose fertility threatened the imagined national gene pool. By singling out mothers—rather than fathers, communities, or structural forces—the article reinforces a worldview in which women bore primary responsibility for hereditary “decline,” a stance that dovetailed with broader cultural anxieties about female sexuality, class mobility, and social control. The assumption that women in poverty were “too prolific” allowed eugenicists to portray the reproductive behavior of the poor as biologically reckless, even though such fertility patterns were shaped by limited access to education, medical care, and opportunities for autonomy. Taken together, these three articles show how eugenicists leaned on metaphors from farming and breeding not because they illuminated the real causes of social problems, but because they offered a convenient, seemingly scientific justification for interventions that targeted the poor, the marginalized, and especially women. The language of improved “stock,” of “blotting out” undesirable traits, and of maternal over-fertility transformed human inequality into an agricultural management problem. In doing so, eugenicists naturalized injustice, presenting systemic deprivation as hereditary inevitability and

⁵⁶ “*The Curse of Heredity*,” *Western Kansas World* (WaKeeney, KS), October 28, 1911, 3. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82015485/1911-10-28/ed-1/>.

insisting that the solution lay not in social investment but in reproductive regulation. Such rhetoric enabled a powerful and enduring narrative in which the nation's most vulnerable populations were cast as biological threats from which society required protection—an argument as strategically constructed as it was scientifically unfounded.

The international repercussions were equally profound. Nazi Germany explicitly modeled aspects of its 1934 sterilization law and its hereditary health courts on American precedents. During the Nuremberg Trials, Nazi defendants cited *Buck v. Bell* to argue that their own eugenic policies differed only in degree, not kind, from those endorsed by the United States.⁵⁷ Thus, an American Supreme Court decision intended to prevent “defective” citizens from reproducing contributed to the ideological framework of one of history's most infamous regimes of medicalized violence.

Although *Skinner v. Oklahoma* (1942) limited the sterilization of male prisoners under the Equal Protection Clause, it left *Buck v. Bell* intact. Justice Douglas's opinion in *Skinner* acknowledged the dangers of arbitrary or oppressive applications of sterilization but reaffirmed the underlying constitutionality of such legislation so long as it adhered to procedural safeguards.⁵⁸ As Molly Ladd-Taylor observes, the Court's failure to repudiate *Buck* ensured that compulsory sterilization remained legally permissible, even as public sentiment shifted.⁵⁹ This omission has had lasting implications: *Buck v. Bell* has been cited in cases upholding limited sterilization policies, including *Vaughn v. Ruoff*, and echoes of the ruling appeared in the involuntary sterilizations uncovered in California's women's prisons between 2006 and 2010.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Cohen, 11.

⁵⁸ Cohen, 318.

⁵⁹ Ladd-Taylor, Molly. Review of *Imbeciles*, by Adam Cohen. *The Journal of American History* 104, no. 2 (2017): 516–17.

⁶⁰ Cohen, 318.

The persistence of *Buck v. Bell* as valid precedent underscores the fragility of bodily autonomy when legal systems align with flawed science and cultural bias. While most states eventually repealed their sterilization statutes due to public outcry, the Supreme Court has never reversed the ruling. As sociologist Ryan Kelty notes, this reality leaves open unsettling questions about how easily eugenic policies might reemerge when public fears about disability, addiction, poverty, or social deviance intersect with calls for state intervention.⁶¹ Far from being an anomaly, *Buck v. Bell* reflected broader American anxieties about degeneration and social order—anxieties that found expression through policies of reproductive control. Its legacy reveals how deeply eugenics once shaped U.S. law and public policy, and how the remnants of that framework continue to shadow contemporary debates about rights, autonomy, and state power.

Although *Buck v. Bell* is often framed as a singular legal failure, the conditions that enabled it were neither isolated nor fleeting. The ruling emerged from—and helped reinforce—a broader cultural logic that linked social progress to the surveillance and regulation of reproduction. This logic did not end with the decline of formal eugenics programs but instead migrated into the language of public health, social welfare, and criminal justice, where ideas about “fitness” and “burden” continued to shape policy long after the worst abuses came to light. As scholars have noted, the mechanisms that sustained eugenic thinking were less about explicit doctrine than about administrative practices, cultural norms, and assumptions about whose bodies required oversight. It is within this wider intellectual and bureaucratic landscape that

⁶¹ Kelty, Ryan, and Adam Cohen. “Teaching Eugenics: A Cross-disciplinary Dialogue.” *Teaching Sociology* 46, no. 2 (2018): 178–80.

contemporary scholarship on gender, disability, and reproductive governance situates the history of American eugenics.

It is important to note that contemporaries were critical of the eugenics movement during this time. In *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922), G. K. Chesterton critiqued the eugenics movement for reducing human life to a utilitarian calculation, warning that it threatened individual liberty and targeted the poor, disabled, and socially marginalized for coercive interventions.⁶² While eugenic organizations such as the American Eugenics Society (founded 1926) and the British Eugenics Society (founded 1907) promoted sterilization and selective breeding as scientific solutions to social problems, critics argued that such programs ignored moral, religious, and social dimensions of human life.⁶³ Prominent opponents included Catholic intellectuals and social reformers who condemned eugenics as a form of social engineering incompatible with human dignity.⁶⁴ Even within scientific circles, figures like geneticist J. B. S. Haldane voiced concern about the ethical implications of coercive policies, emphasizing voluntary education and welfare rather than state-imposed breeding programs.⁶⁵ These debates illustrate that the eugenics movement, though influential in the early twentieth century, faced persistent moral and scientific opposition that questioned both its assumptions and its social consequences.

The scholarship on American eugenics has increasingly turned toward gender and disability as categories of analysis. Alexandra Stern's *Eugenic Nation* reframes eugenics not as a deviation from American liberalism but as an integral part of it — a reflection of the same

⁶² Chesterton, G. K. 1922. *Eugenics and Other Evils*. London: Cassell.
<https://ccel.org/ccel/c/chesterton/eugenics/cache/eugenics.txt>.

⁶³ Kelves, Ibid (1985), 75-77.

⁶⁴ Paul, Diane B. 1995. *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press. Pg. 112-15.

⁶⁵ Haldane, J. B. S. 1932. *The Causes of Evolution*. London: Longmans, Green. 203-05.

rationalist and reformist impulses that produced public health and welfare policy.⁶⁶ Garland-Thomson and Aultman have extended this argument, emphasizing how the language of “fitness” and “reproductive responsibility” encoded gendered and ableist hierarchies that persist in contemporary bioethics.⁶⁷ Stern’s archival work in California — home to nearly a third of all U.S. sterilizations — reveals how eugenics functioned through mundane bureaucratic mechanisms rather than overt ideological fervor.⁶⁸

These interpretations challenge earlier historiographical trends that treated eugenics primarily as a “pseudoscientific aberration.” Instead, scholars like Bashford, Levine, and Kevles locate eugenics within a continuum of technocratic governance, linking Progressive reform, public health, and population management.⁶⁹ In this view, the eugenic state was not exceptional but emblematic — a manifestation of modern rationality’s dark underside.

In Britain, eugenics assumed a more voluntarist and reformist tone. While figures like Karl Pearson and R. A. Fisher contributed to its statistical and biological legitimacy, British eugenics remained intertwined with social policy and class anxiety. John Macnicol’s study of the Voluntary Sterilization Campaign (1918–1939) highlights how British reformers framed sterilization as a humanitarian measure to prevent suffering rather than a punitive one.⁷⁰ Yet, as

⁶⁶ Stern, Alexandra Minna, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). 11-15.

⁶⁷ Aultman, Julie M., “Eugenomics: Eugenics and Ethnicity in the 21st Century,” *Genomics, Society and Policy* 2, no. 2 (2006): 28-49.

Garland-Thomson, Ibid.

⁶⁸ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 65-87

⁶⁹ Bashford and Levine, 12-18.

⁷⁰ Macnicol, John, “The Voluntary Sterilisation Campaign in Britain, 1918-39.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2 (1992): 422-437.

David King and Ray Hansen argue, this rhetoric of benevolence masked deep anxieties about national decline and working-class fertility.⁷¹

British historiography often emphasizes the moral ambivalence of its eugenics movement. While American eugenics operated through state coercion, the British version relied on persuasion, propaganda, and public education. Galton's own preference for "positive eugenics" — encouraging the fit to reproduce — persisted among his successors, even as "negative" measures like sterilization gained traction. Nevertheless, as Bashford and Levine note, both variants shared a common logic: that human heredity was a legitimate object of state and social control.⁷²

Broberg and Roll-Hansen's *Eugenics and the Welfare State* extends this argument to Scandinavia, where eugenic sterilization policies became central to modern welfare ideology.⁷³ Their comparative analysis of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland reveals how the rhetoric of "social hygiene" fused with the postwar welfare agenda. Eugenics was not merely tolerated but institutionalized as a means of promoting "collective health." By the mid-20th century, thousands of citizens deemed "feeble-minded" or "asocial" had been sterilized, often without consent.

This Scandinavian case has profoundly shaped the historiographical understanding of eugenics as biopolitical governance. Far from a totalitarian anomaly, eugenics thrived in liberal democracies that valued social efficiency and public health. The welfare-state eugenics model challenges the older narrative of eugenics as a purely right-wing or racist phenomenon; instead,

⁷¹ David King and Ray Hansen, "Experts at Work: State Autonomy, Social Learning and Eugenic Sterilisation in 1930s Britain," *British Journal of Political Science* 29 (1999): 77-107.

⁷² Bashford and Levine, *Oxford Handbook*, 20-21.

⁷³ Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hanson, eds., *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996).

it underscores its flexibility as a moral and administrative technology adaptable to various political regimes.⁷⁴

The German eugenics movement — or *Rassenhygiene* — stands as the most infamous realization of eugenic ideology. As Paul Weindling’s seminal *Health, Race and German Politics* demonstrates, German racial hygiene emerged from the same intellectual milieu as its Anglo-American counterparts but acquired a distinct state-racial synthesis under National Socialism.⁷⁵ Early 20th-century German scientists such as Alfred Ploetz and Ernst Rüdin sought to integrate heredity into national policy, linking racial purity to biological health.

Historiographically, scholars have debated the extent to which Nazi eugenics represented a radical rupture or a continuity with international eugenic science. Emily Wittmann’s comparative study of British, American, and Nazi eugenic ideologies argues that transatlantic exchanges normalized many of the conceptual tools later weaponized by the Third Reich.⁷⁶ While Nazi policies were extreme in their racialized violence, their intellectual underpinnings — biometric classification, sterilization laws, and hereditary courts — drew directly from international precedents.

Kevles and Weindling both stress that the Nazi regime’s embrace of eugenics was not a distortion but an acceleration of a global scientific consensus that conflated heredity with destiny.⁷⁷ The difference lay in scale and intention: whereas Anglo-American eugenicists sought social improvement, the Nazi state aimed at racial purification. The 1933 *Law for the Prevention*

⁷⁴ Broberg and Roll-Hansen, *Eugenics and the Welfare State*, 10-15.

⁷⁵ Weindling, Paul, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 125.

⁷⁶ Wittmann, Emily, “To What Extent Were Ideas and Beliefs about Eugenics Held in Nazi Germany Shared in Britain and the United States Prior to the Second World War?” *Vesalius* 10, no. 1 (2004):16-19.

⁷⁷ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 155-160.

of Genetically Diseased Offspring and the 1935 *Nuremberg Laws* institutionalized biological racism under the aegis of medical science.

Postwar historians have grappled with the moral reckoning provoked by the Holocaust's revelation of eugenics' ultimate consequences. Daniel Kevles's essay "Eugenics and Human Rights" frames the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial as a critical turning point in the global discrediting of eugenic ideology.⁷⁸ Yet, as recent scholarship reminds us, the language of genetic improvement and reproductive control did not vanish — it evolved.

Across national contexts, the historiography of eugenics has shifted from moral condemnation to structural analysis. Early narratives, particularly in Anglo-American scholarship, emphasized individual culpability and pseudoscience. More recent works — such as those by Bashford, Broberg, and Stern — stress the institutional continuities between eugenics and modern biomedicine. Eugenics is now understood less as an aberrant ideology and more as a form of governance, a method of translating social norms into biological imperatives.

This reconceptualization aligns with broader theoretical turns in historical scholarship, including Foucault's notions of biopower and governmentality. Eugenics, in this light, was a rationalized effort to optimize populations — a project that extended well beyond sterilization laws and racial classification. It encompassed public health campaigns, welfare policy, and medical ethics — arenas where the line between care and control often blurred.

The devastation of World War II and the exposure of Nazi atrocities forced a global reckoning with the scientific and moral assumptions that had underpinned eugenics. In the immediate postwar period, "eugenics" became a politically toxic term, but its conceptual

⁷⁸ Kevles, Daniel J., "Eugenics and Human Rights," *BMJ* 319, no. 7207 (199): 435-438.

frameworks—biological determinism, population optimization, and hereditary improvement—persisted under new names and institutional guises. The historiography of this period traces both rupture and continuity: the formal discrediting of eugenics as ideology alongside the persistence of eugenic logics in medicine, policy, and public health.

The 1947 Nuremberg Doctors' Trial was a turning point in the history of both eugenics and medical ethics. It marked the first systematic effort to define crimes against humanity in relation to scientific practice. The Nuremberg Code, established as part of the verdict, articulated principles of voluntary consent, informed participation, and human dignity in research—foundations that would shape modern bioethics.⁷⁹ As Faden and Beauchamp argue, these principles introduced “a moral language of autonomy” that reoriented medicine away from the paternalism of the eugenic era.⁸⁰

Yet historians such as Jay Katz have cautioned against romanticizing this moment as a clean break. Katz's influential essay, *Informed Consent—Must It Remain a Fairy Tale?*, contends that the ideals codified at Nuremberg were rarely realized in practice, as postwar medicine retained hierarchical structures that privileged institutional and state authority over patient agency.⁸¹ This gap between moral aspiration and institutional behavior has remained a key theme in historiographical debates about postwar science and ethics.

Kevles's *Eugenics and Human Rights* (1999) repositions the Nuremberg moment not as the end of eugenics but as its transformation into a technocratic biopolitics.⁸² Rather than

⁷⁹ *The Nuremberg Code* (1947), reprinted in *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949).

⁸⁰ Ruth R. Faden and Tom L. Beauchamp, *A History and Theory of Informed Consent* (New York: Oxford university Press, 1986), 113-15.

⁸¹ Katz, Jay, “Informed Consent—Must It Remain a Fairy Tale?” *Journal of Contemporary Health and Law Policy* 10, no. 1 (1994):69-91.

⁸² Kevles, *Ibid.*

rejecting the idea of hereditary management, postwar societies sought to humanize it—recasting “race hygiene” as “genetic counseling” and sterilization as “family planning.” The rebranding reflected both genuine moral reorientation and a strategic adaptation to new scientific and political realities.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the emerging field of human genetics sought to distance itself from the moral taint of eugenics while inheriting much of its conceptual apparatus. As Kenneth and Bettylee Garver observed in their 1991 retrospective, scientists reframed the study of heredity as a neutral, clinical endeavor focused on disease prevention rather than social engineering.⁸³ This rehabilitation of genetic science depended on a rhetorical inversion: where eugenicists had spoken of “degeneracy” and “fitness,” geneticists now emphasized “health,” “risk,” and “informed choice.”

Historians such as Daniel Kevles and Diane Paul have highlighted the institutional continuity between eugenics and genetics.⁸⁴ The American Society of Human Genetics, founded in 1948, counted among its members several former eugenicists. Their research, often funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and other philanthropic bodies, reflected a persistent interest in population control and hereditary improvement—albeit couched in the language of modern biomedicine. The tension between scientific progress and moral restraint became a defining feature of mid-20th-century genetics.

In Europe, the Scandinavian welfare states continued sterilization programs well into the 1970s, justified by appeals to public health and social well-being. Broberg and Roll-Hansen’s

⁸³ Kenneth L. Garver and Bettylee Garver, “Eugenics: Past, Present, and the Future,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 49 (1991): 1109-118.

⁸⁴ Kevles, *Ibid*, Paul, *Ibid*.

comparative study revealed that these programs operated under a “benevolent paternalism” that blurred the distinction between coercion and care.⁸⁵ Even as Nazi eugenics had discredited racial hygiene, social-democratic governments defended sterilization as compassionate policy—a paradox that has fueled subsequent debates over the moral legacies of welfare-state modernity.

The historiography of eugenics underwent a major transformation beginning in the 1980s. Early postwar narratives had treated eugenics as a cautionary tale—a moral failure of science corrupted by ideology. Later scholars reframed it as a structural feature of modern governance, drawing on sociological and philosophical frameworks such as Michel Foucault’s *biopower*. Alison Bashford’s *Global Population* and Philippa Levine’s contributions to *The Oxford Handbook in the History of Eugenics* reframed eugenics as part of the biopolitical infrastructure of modernity—a system that sought to manage life, not merely destroy it.⁸⁶

This shift from moral to analytical historiography was crucial. It allowed historians to interrogate how eugenic thinking persisted within public health, welfare, and reproductive policy. As Bashford and Levine note, “Eugenics was not a deviation from modern rationality; it was one of its characteristic expressions.”⁸⁷ Rather than focusing solely on atrocities, scholars began tracing eugenics’ embeddedness in everyday practices—child welfare inspections, marriage counseling, immigration policy, and school health programs.

At the same time, feminist scholars such as Garland-Thomson and Stern reoriented the field toward questions of gender, disability, and reproductive autonomy.⁸⁸ They argued that eugenic logic depended on the policing of women’s bodies and the construction of disability as

⁸⁵ Brober and Roll-Hansen, *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bashford, Alison, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁸⁷ Bashford and Levine, 14-16.

⁸⁸ Garland-Thomson, Stern; *Ibid.*

social deviance. By centering the experiences of those sterilized, institutionalized, or deemed “unfit,” this scholarship transformed eugenics history from a narrative about scientific hubris into one about social injustice.

The legacies of eugenics extend far beyond the early twentieth century, persisting in the frameworks and ethical questions that shape contemporary medicine, genetics, and social policy. The rise of bioethics in the 1970s and 1980s institutionalized reflection on medical practice, yet scholars have traced the “ethical inheritance” of eugenics in debates over genetic testing, prenatal diagnosis, and reproductive choice.⁸⁹ Julie Aultman’s concept of “eugenomics” captures the continuity between classical eugenics and modern genetics: whereas early reformers sought to engineer populations, contemporary interventions enable individuals to select traits under the rhetoric of choice.⁹⁰ Similarly, technologies such as CRISPR-Cas9, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, and widespread genomic sequencing have revived debates over human improvement and genetic determinism.⁹¹ Critics, including Derek So, caution that these technologies may perpetuate aesthetic and moral hierarchies reminiscent of early eugenic discourse, raising urgent questions about what counts as “improvement” and whose values determine desirability.⁹²

These debates echo the concerns of Owens-Adair and Roosevelt: who bears responsibility for reproduction, and how are social and biological norms enforced? Institutional records and public spectacles from the early twentieth century—Better Baby contests, fairground exhibitions, and sterilization files—demonstrate that women, particularly those who were poor,

⁸⁹ Braverman, Shapiro, and Bernstein, *Ethics and Genetics in Contemporary Medicine* (2010), 45–72.

Benjamin Sovacool, *Social Movements and Scientific Governance* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 89–110.

⁹⁰ Julie Aultman, “Eugenomics: Continuity and Choice in Modern Genetics,” *Hastings Center Report* 47, no. 2 (2017): 22–30, 25.

⁹¹ Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier, “The CRISPR-Cas9 Revolution,” *Science* 346 (2014): 1258096. Braverman, Shapiro, and Bernstein, *Ethics and Genetics*, 58–65.

⁹² Derek So, *Gene Editing and Social Hierarchies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 41–67.

working-class, or otherwise marginalized, were the primary targets of intervention.⁹³

Contemporary scholars confirm that reproductive governance continues to intersect with race, class, gender⁹⁴, and disability, shaping access to assisted reproductive technologies, prenatal screening, and genomic medicine.⁹⁵ Braverman, Shapiro, and Bernstein note that ethical dilemmas in consent, privacy, and risk assessment are deeply intertwined with the coercive logics of hereditarianism, highlighting the persistence of eugenic reasoning under the guise of voluntary or therapeutic interventions.⁹⁶

Public history projects, including the Anti-Eugenics Collective and the NIH's *Unfit to Breed* initiative, demonstrate that confronting this history is both an ethical and scholarly imperative.⁹⁷ These efforts memorialize the victims of sterilization and reproductive coercion, providing contemporary society with critical lessons about how scientific authority, state power, and social hierarchies can converge to restrict autonomy. Historians argue that understanding this continuum—from early twentieth-century legislation and popular culture to modern genetics and bioethics—is essential for evaluating questions of social justice, equity, and human value.

Eugenics in America was not simply a scientific aberration but a social, political, and cultural project whose logic persists across generations. Its influence is evident not only in historical practices—such as sterilization, confinement, and moral regulation—but also in contemporary ethical dilemmas surrounding reproductive choice, genetic enhancement, and societal valuation of life. By tracing the intellectual, institutional, and moral trajectories of eugenics, scholars illuminate how historical injustices continue to shape modern governance,

⁹³ Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 67–96.

⁹⁴ Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 134–159.

⁹⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 110–134.

⁹⁶ Braverman, Shapiro, and Bernstein, *Ethics and Genetics in Contemporary Medicine* (2010), 45–72.

⁹⁷ Anti-Eugenics Collective, *Unfit to Breed Project* (New Haven, CT, 2021).

medical practice, and social norms, particularly for women and marginalized populations. Understanding these continuities underscores the critical responsibility of science, policy, and public engagement in fostering reproductive autonomy, equity, and justice in the twenty-first century.

American eugenics, as this essay has argued, did not emerge merely as a misguided scientific trend but became a culturally normalized and politically enforceable system of **gendered governance**, constructed through the mutually reinforcing authority of medical–legal experts such as Bethenia Owens-Adair and political leaders like Theodore Roosevelt. Together, their rhetoric transformed reproduction from a private right into a civic obligation, recasting individual family choices as matters of national survival. While eugenics claimed to protect the health of the nation as a whole, its practices of confinement, surveillance, and sterilization fell most violently on poor and working-class women, whose poverty, sexual vulnerability, and trauma were recoded as biological threat. As the case files and public discourse reveal, daughters were institutionalized more readily than sons, and social vulnerability was systematically biologized to justify coercive intervention.

Moreover, eugenics achieved its power not only through law and policy but through its deep absorption into the cultural life of everyday Americans. Newspapers, popular contests, and maternal organizations diffused eugenic thinking into ordinary moral frameworks, fusing heredity, virtue, and civic duty into a national narrative that defined who was fit to belong—and to reproduce. In this process, women, especially those who were poor, disabled, or socially marginalized, bore the greatest burden of regulation and stigma. As G. K. Chesterton warned, the fundamental flaw of eugenics lay in its attempt to impose a false universal biological rule onto human worth, substituting genetic theory for ethical judgment. The consequences of this

substitution were not only misguided but profoundly dangerous. By tracing how medical authority, political rhetoric, and popular culture worked together to legitimize reproductive control, this essay shows that American eugenics functioned as a moral and political project of exclusion whose legacy continues to shape modern debates over reproductive autonomy, public health, and the limits of state power.

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