

Zoology 61: Teaching eugenics at WSU

by Stephen Jones



In the end it just ended. No arguments, no intellectual battles among faculty, no acknowledgement of racial hygiene programs. At Washington State College at least, there just weren't enough students who wanted to take Zoology 61, Eugenics. By the beginning of 1950, only six students had pre-enrolled in the course for the following school year, down from 12 the year before. In a memo to the faculty on January 17, 1950, the instructor, Professor Ray Moree, stated, "Enrollment in Zool. 61, Human Heredity and Eugenics is not sufficiently high to justify its continuation; it is believed this course can be replaced by a new one which will meet the needs of a larger number of students." The staff of the Department of Zoology met one week later. Item number 2 on the agenda was Zoology 61. The only record was "Motion Farner, second McNeil. Discontinue Zool. 61. Carried by staff." And that was it. After 30 years, the faculty had dropped course number 61.

Eugenics, the study of improving the human race, was named and formalized as a science in 1883 England by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. By the early 1900s the United States had taken the lead in research, teaching, and funding for the new field. Germany took over that role in the early 1930s.

The first U.S. scientists to accept eugenics were the plant and animal breeders at the land-grant universities and in the United States Department of Agriculture. It seemed only natural to apply the "science," which had met so much success in the planned breeding of farm crops and barn animals, to humans. The result was one of the most tragic episodes in modern science.

Membership in eugenic societies included university presidents, congressmen, philanthropists, representatives of research institutions and insurance companies, clergymen, journalists, physicians, social workers, and scientists.

American eugenicists were united by the idea that the human race—or at least the white, northern European, and affluent part of it—was degenerating because inferior people were breeding more quickly than those who were "well born," and that these inferior types were intermingling with the chosen classes and races.

These beliefs were presented in posters at county and state agricultural fairs that read, "Some people are born to be a burden to themselves and to the rest of society. The American Eugenic Society aims to eliminate hereditary degeneracy from future generations of the human family by eugenical sterilization, segregation, and other measures."

By the 1930s, sterilization, segregation, and "other measures" were carried out for eugenic purposes in the United States with complete openness.

Around 60,000 forced eugenic sterilizations had been performed at U.S. hospitals, asylums, schools, and other institutions by the 1950s. Washington was the second state in the country to legalize forced sterilizations. More than 700 were sterilized here. Nationwide, more than 65 percent of those sterilized were women. The legal test case for these sterilizations was *Buck v. Bell*, which was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1927. Carrie Buck, age 17, was sent to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded in Lynchburg, Virginia, in 1924. Her mother, Emma, had been at the same institution since 1920. Carrie had just delivered a baby that had resulted from a rape. IQ tests showed her mental age to be nine, and that of her mother to be eight. Carrie's sterilization was ordered soon after her arrival at the colony and was immediately challenged by her court-appointed guardian. A Red Cross worker examined Carrie's eight-month-old baby, Vivian, and testified that she was below normal intelligence for a child her age. Experts from the Eugenics Record Office then testified that the feeble-mindedness that they witnessed in the family was definitely heritable and warranted sterilization.

The state's case for sterilization was upheld by the Federal Supreme Court by an 8 to 1 vote. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. summed up the feeling of the court with, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Carrie Buck and more than 1,000 other residents of the colony were sterilized in the decade following the ruling. Stephen J. Gould noted that in the end, contrary to the opinions of the eugenic experts, there was no feeble-mindedness among the three generations of Bucks. In later years, in fact, Vivian made the honor roll in high school.

In 1920, the first year that eugenics was taught at WSC, you could enter a "Fitter Family" contest at local and state fairs. Based on your pedigree, appearance, race, family size, intelligence, and lack of "defects," eugenic judges, many of them college faculty and extension agents, might have awarded you a blue, red, or white ribbon, or even a medal proclaiming, "Yea I Have a Goodly Heritage." And new on the shelves for 1920 was New York eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard's book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy*. Adolph Hitler called the book his "bible."

In *The Right to Be Well Born: Horse Breeding in its Relation to Eugenics*, W.E.D. Stokes addressed an important branch of eugenics, economics. Eugenicists felt that too much time and money was spent on caring for the poor and "defective." They also fought against unions, because they felt that men were not created equal and thus should not be paid equally for the same work. The rich should get richer so they could have bigger families, and the "poorly born," if they must be around (and can't be sterilized), should at least be paid less so that they could only support smaller families.

Eugenics was firmly rooted in academia. The University of Idaho, for example, had been teaching it since 1913. In a 1920 survey response to the Carnegie Institution's Eugenics Record Office, UI professor of zoology J. E. Wodsedalek wrote, "Heredity & Eugenics and Social Hygiene are the two most popular courses in the University." The UI dropped eugenics in 1947.

In the late 1920s, at the peak of its popularity, eugenics was taught as a science in nearly 400 colleges and universities in the United States, including Harvard, University of California, Berkeley, and Columbia.

In 1920 WSC's department of zoology split its heredity course into two separate courses, Genetics and Eugenics. The course description in the college catalog for that first year read, "A study of the hereditary traits and characters of man." In 1929 department chair R.L. Webster, who taught the class, changed the ending of the course description to read, "...and mental characters in man." By 1946 the description had been updated to include, again at the end, the words, "...and their relation to eugenic problems." These changes may seem subtle; they are not. The American Eugenic Society, of which Professor Webster was a member, defined "eugenic problems" very clearly. A partial list of eugenic problems included feeble-mindedness, criminality, epilepsy, prostitution, rebelliousness, manic depression, nomadism, ethnicity, inferior races, birth defects, moral perversion, schizophrenia, racial hygiene, homosexuality, immigration, poverty, and feminism. Eugenic problems, it was felt, had simple genetic causes and thus simple eugenic solutions. It was nature rather than nurture that determined if you as a person were adequate or inadequate.

Various levels of segregation, by color, status, and perceived deficiency, were already in place in much of the country in the 1920s, but eugenicists were worried about new immigrants as well, and began to focus on immigration reform. They considered immigration from anywhere other than northern Europe to be a problem. One of their greatest victories was The Immigration Restriction Act, or Johnson Act, of 1924, which was designed to reduce southern and eastern European immigration by over 80 percent. Albert Johnson, congressman from Washington State's third district, chaired the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. He was an American Eugenic Society member and president of the Eugenics Research Association. According to Mark Haller's book, *Eugenics*, Johnson was elected to Congress in 1912 "as a conservative with a record of strong action against foreign radicals and strikers and a crude hatred for oriental immigrants." Testifying to Congress in favor of the immigration law was expert eugenic witness and friend of Johnson's, Harry H. Laughlin, who read from 106 pages of testimony that he titled, "Analysis of the metal and dross in America's modern melting pot." Laughlin was a founding member of the American Eugenic Society and the author of the Model Eugenic Sterilization Law that was used as a template for the 30 states that adopted such laws.

The Nazi party was very interested in the American eugenic movement and used Laughlin's model to come up with its 1933 Law for the Prevention of Progeny from Hereditary Diseases. At least 225,000 Germans had already been sterilized by 1936 under the guidance of this law when Heidelberg University, which by this time was controlled by the Nazi party, gave Laughlin an honorary M.D. for being a "successful pioneer of practical eugenics and the far-seeing representative of racial policy in America." By all accounts, he was honored to accept the degree.

In addition to teaching eugenics, several universities also performed research. The University of Vermont was singled out in the May 1929 issue of *Eugenics* for special attention because of the statewide eugenic survey of families that originated from the university's zoology department. The survey, which was started in 1926, concentrated on "low grade families." According to Professor Henry F. Perkins, "The characteristics of these families were gone into in order to get at the apparent causes of their deficiency, degeneracy or dependency."

The class syllabi from WSC's Zoology 61 appear to be lost, but the textbooks are still available. One was *Genetics and Eugenics*, by Harvard professor W.E. Castle. It was printed in four revised editions from 1912 to 1931. In the first edition Castle turned over the eugenics completely to Charles Davenport, head of the Eugenics Record Office. Davenport had 41 pages. Here we learn of the genetics of human traits such as wanderlust, suicide, eccentricity, and licentiousness. Davenport also pointed out with pride that the Germans "have recently organized an International Society of Race Hygiene."

Eugenicists were swept up in a cult that existed because of the need for simple solutions to perceived societal problems. These solutions were based on bad and/or simplistic science. Eugenics fell out of favor by mid-century. There were many reasons for the decline. Scientifically, it was a politicized mess. Geneticists, who as a group were painfully slow to criticize, finally began exposing its flaws by the late 1920s. They pointed out that many eugenic traits had no simple genetic basis. And those traits that might have had a genetic component were still influenced by the environment and its interactions with genes.

The field of statistics, invented by English eugenicists to prove their theories, was also turning against eugenics. It was shown that, even if traits targeted for removal were controlled by only one recessive gene, the removal of individuals from the breeding pool would have a very small effect on whole populations over time. Once the criticisms became more frequent and broad-based, eugenics became increasingly discredited as a field of science. Racism and white supremacy were also falling out of favor in most quarters of American culture. Anthropologists, many of whom had been saying publicly for decades that eugenics had no scientific basis, were now being listened to. Finally, in the aftermath of World War II, the horrors of Nazi racial hygiene programs were becoming clear to most Americans.

American universities had played a large role in popularizing and legitimizing eugenics as a science. By contrast, they did little to formally reject it, choosing instead in many cases to back away slowly from any involvement.

By 1950 eugenics as a word, as a mode of action, and as a topic of study was on its way out of the mainstream. And in the end, at Washington State University, it seems that it was the students who just didn't want to have anything more to do with it.

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