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In his work, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America*, Steven Selden “… argues that whether in historical or contemporary context, the belief that complex human behavior is determined by genetics is without substantive merit” (xiv). He presents a solid account of the history of eugenics in the United States and makes a case for understanding the more complex relationship between genetics and human behavior. Selden asserts that, “Genes do not produce behavior. Genes produce enzymes and enzymes control chemical processes. The search for social legitimacy can more easily be found in political and ethical discourse than in genetics” (156). He uses the work of contemporary researchers to support this assertion:

Meaney’s work (1994) suggests that while genes are surely a factor in explaining complex behavior, they are not necessarily the significant factor. … Meaney finds that it is the organism’s environment that affects the chemistry of neurotransmission. It is environment that changes the brain. (141)

In the final chapter of his book, Selden concludes that it is not biology that determines human potential; rather it is the relationship between biology and environment that shapes human potential. This assertion follows a thorough exploration of the history of eugenics, setting the context for the ever-present nature vs. nurture debate in the United States.

Selden begins his investigation of this history with the work of Francis Galton of England, who “… by the early 1880s … had coined the term *eugenics* based on the Greek root meaning ‘good in birth’” (xiv). He then moves on to the United States and explores how eugenics took shape in this country. “… eugenics was described by its twentieth-century supporters as the science of human improvement through programs of controlled breeding” (xiii). Positive eugenics focused on encouraging the parentage of those determined to have “good” hereditary traits and negative eugenics sought to discourage those seen as “defective” (23). This movement had distinct racist underpinnings initially, but over time this changed,
Kevles argues that the first or mainline eugenics had lost its scientific legitimacy after the criticism of the 1920s. This form of racist eugenics was not only judged immoral, it was judged to have no scientific warrant. The second variety or reform eugenics was stripped of its racial over tones and appeared as a benign source of “nature” to the newly interactive vision of the nature-nurture debate. (125)

Selden examines both periods of eugenics, from 1903 to 1922 and then from 1922 to 1932, highlighting those who supported it, including well-known scientists, educators, social activists, and politicians, as well as many “average” Americans. These supporters included, Theodore Roosevelt; university presidents David Starr Jordan, Charles Eliot, and Glenn Frank; Robert M. Yerkes, President of the American Psychological Association; John C. Merriam, President of the Carnegie Foundation; a range of scholars including Charles Davenport, J.F. Bobbitt, Leta Hollingworth, G. Stanley Hall, Henry H. Goddard, Lewis H. Terman, and Edward L. Thorndike; social activist Margaret Sanger; and investigative journalist Ida Tarbell. These influential proponents of eugenics actively lobbied for its policies, wrote or spoke in support of it, or served on the advisory committees of those associations focused on it, including the Galton Society, the American Breeders Association, and the American Eugenics Society. They varied in their zeal for its more extreme policy recommendations, such as segregation and sterilization of the “unfit”, but many endorsed its ideas of better families through better breeding or for the use of “intelligence” testing. With strong support from these powerful individuals eugenic ideas became part of the discourse of the day and some influenced government policy. “The history of American Eugenics can be traced to the founding of the Carnegie Institution in Washington, DC, to the formation of the American Breeders Association (ABA) in 1903, and to the person of Charles Benedict Davenport [professor of zoology at the University of Chicago]” (4). In this concise statement Selden clearly establishes that capital, organization, and intellectual clout were the building blocks of the eugenics movement.

Eugenics became popular in part because powerful people promoted it, but Selden explains that eugenics gained the support of these individuals and the wider society to some extent because of concern over broader social issues. “Appropriate to an age that saw itself as progressive, eugenicists searched for scientific solutions that could order the disarray they saw in an urban corporate America impacted by a large immigrant population” (7). At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the United States was becoming a significant force in
global politics and trade, while experiencing mass urbanization, immigration, migration, and industrialization at home. Some citizens, mostly middle class, tried to devise ways to solve what they perceived to be the social ills of the day. This period, typically known as the “Progressive Era”, was characterized by its social achievements, such as the passage of child labor laws, prohibition, and the right to vote for women. However, Selden argues that,

Our contemporary understanding of the era would be greatly enhanced if we broadened our conception of Progressivism to include modest settlement-house reformers as well as radical biological determinists. The continuing belief on the part of many of today’s educators that Progressivism was a period of solely liberal motives, action, and consequences seriously limits our critical abilities. (25 & 26)

In fact, “Progressivism and self-conscious class interest were comfortable bedfellows during this period and the American Eugenics Society was a progressive organization” (25). The irony here may seem significant, but given the rhetoric of eugenicists, it is plausible that those who wanted to solve the “problems” of their time saw eugenics as a rational and viable option.

The social efficiency movement, which complimented eugenics, also flourished during the Progressive Era. “… social efficiency educators valued social organization over the individual. It was a movement with a strong process-product orientation toward research and it had powerful vocational interests” (125). Looking at essentially the same time period as Selden, Barrow (1990) asserts that the events of this era in higher education “… were part of the much larger social and political struggle that accompanied the building of a corporate-liberal state in America. … The age of reform was therefore dedicated to the administrative reconstruction of American institutions as diverse as the judiciary, civil service, military, parties, municipal government, schools, and universities. Each in turn was reorganized, expanded, and staffed with newly professionalized personnel” (7). Like Barrow, Selden argues that this reform movement, which focused on increasing efficiency in all areas of life, was fueled by the emerging corporate culture in the United States.

[Princeton professor Edwin G. Conklin’s] recommendation for increasing families of the better types was matched with the political visions that individuals were to be “subordinated to racial welfare” (Conklin 1923, 311). It was a vision of a corporate order, actually a biological corporate order, in which an individual’s importance would be rationalized into the “great organism of humanity” (Conklin 1923, 342). There is an
interesting parallel here between the plea for corporate form in biological improvement and the similar corporate claims being made in business, industry, and the schools of the period. (61)

Selden complicates our understanding of the “Progressive Era” by portraying it as more than a valiant fight to emancipate people and improve their standard of living. He demonstrates that there were “progressives” who preferred to solve America’s “problems” through authoritarian means, by categorizing and processing people through public institutions like schools.

Many eugenicists considered schools the natural place to promote their ideas. What better venue than a mandatory audience? In order to be sure that eugenics made its way into schools, eugenicists knew that they would need to influence teachers. They set their sights on pre-service educators and teacher training. Selden offers evidence that the support for eugenics in teacher education found a strong advocate in Helen Putnam of the National Education Association, who “expanded the NEA’s popularization of eugenics to include programs of teacher education” (58). Eugenicists also attempted to influence future teachers through the materials they read.

A commitment to the idea of heredity as the primary maker of people also guided the work of one of America’s leading education sociologists, Charles C. Peters. Peters’s Foundations of Educational Sociology (1930) was used extensively in teacher training in the 1930s and dealt directly with the role of the family in human betterment. (91)

In addition to influencing teacher training, eugenicists tried to affect schools directly through the promotion of courses.

Eugenics was having an influence on the university course of study as “the number of colleges and universities offering courses in eugenics increased from 44 in 1914 to three hundred and seventy-six in 1928, when according to one estimate, some 20,000 students were enrolled” (49; Cravens 1978, 53).

Through university courses in eugenics the movement would gain some ground, but the use of textbooks at the college and secondary level asserting the legitimacy of eugenics would actually carry the message farther. Selden devoted a chapter of his work to a quantitative and qualitative analysis of high school and junior high biology textbooks published from 1914 to 1948. He looked at 41 texts in the quantitative study and 8 of those for the qualitative study. “To
questions regarding the presence of eugenics in the textbooks, the answers are overwhelmingly in the affirmative … Over 87% of the volumes included eugenics as a topic and more than 70% recommended eugenics as a legitimate science” (64). Although it may be difficult to prove that students took these eugenic lessons to heart, there is substantial evidence that eugenics occupied a significant place in the curriculum by the number of books that included the concept. At the very least we can conclude that teachers who taught from these texts and students who studied them were exposed to eugenic ideas.

… most of these eight [high school biology] books reflected social attitudes and political theories rather than a clear rendering of scientific data. As this analysis has shown, the texts’ commitment to a hierarchical and corporate social order that assigned individuals social locations based on their hereditary worth preceded and informed their discussion of human possibilities. (82)

As these texts encouraged social stratification, eugenicists also encouraged the adoption of actual policies that would stratify schools.

… eugenics would never control American education. But its popularization would legitimate hierarchical forms of schooling and programs whose effects were the differential distribution of intellectual capital. Eugenics promoted a concept of schooling as an open market in which individuals competed by means of their inherited traits for high scores … (37)

Intelligence testing offered eugenicists a “scientific” way to stratify schools. This practice continues today, where a test can define the academic and social future of a child. In many states, as early as third grade, students are labeled as to whether they will “make it” or not. This testing culture has its roots in eugenics.

… when the object of study was mental acuity, the [American Eugenics Society Committee on Formal Education] recommended the use of the recently developed mental tests. The important role attributed to mental measurements would benefit the eugenicists in at least three ways: First, the use of these tests would aid them in arguing for the hereditary nature of intelligence, a key assumption of the movement. Second, the very fact of administering the examinations would legitimate the test. And third, it would give professional status to those who administered them. (29)

Selden asserts that using science to analyze intelligence had broad appeal because there was “a national anxiety about the intelligence of the American people” (109) and this was fueled by “racial psychology, the [supposed] relationship between low intelligence and crime, and [the
perceived] relationship between intelligence and social status (109). Selden devotes a great deal of his work to examining the use of intelligence tests and the short and long term affects that they had on American society.

… this popular text [A Study of American Intelligence by Carl Brigham] found hierarchies of racial worth legitimated by the differing performance levels of ethnic groups on the American Army Alpha and Beta tests. While Brigham himself would eventually recant and reject these racial interpretations, the damage was done; racism had been given scientific legitimation. (87)

As mentioned earlier, the latter version of eugenics was not overtly racist, however it did incorporate racist measures in its focus on culturally biased testing and promoting unfounded research asserting that the results of these biased tests demonstrated the racial superiority of whites. Selden highlights several questions from an intelligence test of the time to demonstrate its cultural bias. In one example he outlines a question where the test-taker is asked how many legs a “Kaffir” has. In his analysis of the question, Selden states that “Kaffir when capitalized stands for a Bantu-speaking South African, while kaffir with a lower case k is a form of sorghum” (89). Although he demonstrates the bias of the testing instrument by suggesting that some might be confused by the use of the capital “K” and therefore might answer incorrectly, Selden’s definition of “Kaffir” is lacking. In addition to the meanings outlined, the term “… kaffir (not capitalized) is used in a generally pejorative way to mean any African black” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Supporting this, Mark Mathabane (1986) notes, “In South Africa it is used disparagingly by most whites to refer to blacks. It is the equivalent of the term nigger” (xiii). Not including the racist meaning of this word seems inconsistent with the aims of the book.

Along with documenting the history of eugenics in the United States, Selden includes the story of resistance to it as well. “While the Eugenics movement achieved a number of significant social policy successes, they were achieved in the face of an articulate resistance. It was a resistance that rejected eugenics from a variety of perspectives” (107). However, Selden focuses on whites that resisted, rather than, for example, the many African-American scholars who challenged the efficacy of intelligence testing; including W.E. B. DuBois, Horace Mann Bond, Howard Hale Long, and Martin Jenkins among others, all of whom conducted research or
published works refuting these so-called intelligence tests. (Stoskopf 1999) Instead Selden focused on several prominent white scholars and writers of the time:

… while they all held for the import of the environment and hereditary in human development, all [of these] writers … did not reject eugenics. … Herbert Jennings allowed for eugenics programs only after social melioration had taken place; John Dewey never used the term, while he clearly rejected the determinism of the group IQ tests; William Chandler Bagley rejected a socially destructive determinism but embraced eugenics and race thinking; and Walter Lippmann rejected the competence of IQ tests to measure hereditary intelligence while accepting the usefulness of vocational testing. (108)

Perhaps focusing on these writers was in keeping with Selden’s examination of the dominant discourse of the time, however it seems remiss not to include the voices of those who were targeted by eugenic policies and those who most forcefully and deftly rejected eugenics outright.

Selden presents a thorough and detailed account of the history of eugenics in the United States, especially as it relates to education. In addition to this focus he also outlines how eugenics led to immigration restriction and mandatory sterilization of the “feebleminded”. Along with the educational policies that have thwarted the potential of so many U.S. citizens, it is vital that this particular history and the many histories it relates to become part of school curricula, especially in teacher preparation programs.

It is clear from [the] data [of these text books] that eugenics significantly penetrated the high school biology curriculum between 1914 and 1948. While these findings should not be completely unexpected, it is surprising that the training of today’s professional educators includes so little evidence of eugenics’ impact on the curriculum. (69)

Knowing the histories that teachers have been a part of might help raise awareness as to the importance of pedagogical choices. Studying these lesser-known histories might help teachers become more critical and as a result prevent them from contributing to social attitudes and policies that dehumanize or limit the potential of their students.

The eugenicists’ error was to ignore the best scientific studies and evidence of their day and to let their hereditarian social attitudes distort their understanding of that science. … Thanks to the critical literature that has developed as a response to that history, we are no longer as easily prone to such errors. Today’s critical work serves as a corrective to such tendencies. (152)
According to Selden then, the task of intellectuals would seem to include teaching the history of eugenics in the United States and critiquing current social policies. Therefore critique becomes an essential act; the significance of this act can be seen in the documented resistance to eugenics during the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Studying history, particularly this history, offers an opportunity to rethink current realities and examine whether or not our actions limit or expand human potential.

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References


