

## **Sinister Science: Eugenics, Nazism, and the Technocratic Rhetoric of the Human Betterment Foundation**

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*H*istorians such as Richard Hofstadter have tended to view the eugenics movement as an ancillary of Social Darwinism, though, in keeping with a Burkean dramatist principle, it seems more likely that both merely represent a stage in the unfolding narrative of the nature-versus-nurture debate. The same root word “gene” used in the formation of the term “genocide” (Black 402) was previously employed by Francis Galton to form the term for technologies of human breeding he dubbed “eugenics,” or the science of the well-born. Scientists such as Galton, Huxley, and Davenport would spawn an international forum for improving human heredity known as the “eugenics movement” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the idea of the biologically determined nature of human beings, and the belief that, thus, race and mental hygiene could solve social problems, eugenic scientists set an inexorable course for the death camps of Nazi Germany.

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This has been the subject of study among historians such as Stefan Kühl, Stephen Trombley, and Edwin Black, who highlight the political affinities and research exchanges of British and American eugenicists with their Nazi colleagues.

The historiography of the eugenics movement often breaks down into an argument between those historians insisting that eugenicists *reformed* the movement in response to Nazi atrocities and those who insist that eugenic discourses maintain discomfiting rhetorical topoi from the past to the present. In one camp are historians such as Mark Haller, Carl Degler, and Daniel Kevles, who interpret the transformation of eugenic rhetoric during the 1920s and 30s as the decline of *mainline* (or hard-line) eugenics and the rise of *reform* eugenics, while in the other are historians skeptical of the idea of a reformation in eugenic ideology. Barry Mehler, Garland Allen, and Alexandra Minna Stern have all been critical of the historiography which presents the defeat of Nazi race hygiene programs as the cause for the dichotomization of the movement into mainline and reform eugenics largely because it does not account for the continued prevalence of hereditarian orthodoxy in American public discourse. Though historians may disagree on an interpretation of the changes in the eugenics movement, there can be little doubt that the rhetoric of the movement did, indeed, undergo an important alteration and it is this modification in rhetoric that is the subject of my paper. I believe that the dispute over an interpretation of the intent of eugenicists can be resolved by applying a Burkean rhetorical analysis to the motives underlying the shift in eugenic discourse in the period leading up to the war.

Most would agree that the promotion of a responsible and principled discussion on the issues of our time requires a basic understanding of the rhetorical histories that have brought us to this point. How did the U.S. eugenics movement present national identification at a time of broad territorial expansion, massive immigration, and historical confrontation with other races, religions, and cultures? What can we learn about the responsibilities of rhetoric through a rhetorical analysis of the eugenics movement?

The idea that Progressive Era eugenicists could refine and enhance humanity's gene pool through the breeding in and winnowing out of pre-

selected genetic traits was always controversial. Eugenicists campaigned for policies of anti-miscegenation or the prohibition of inter-racial marriage in order to prevent what they viewed as the “race mongrelization” of the United States. They were active in advocating immigration restriction quotas in order to prevent foreign germ plasm from flooding the country and bringing about the “race suicide” of Anglo-American stock. They frequently set up fitter family contests at state fairs and tried to establish a preliminary genetic database on millions of Americans at Cold Spring Harbor, New York.

One of their most controversial social measures was the compulsory sterilization of all those of unsound mind or body. In the case of California, eugenicists would be particularly active in attempting to curtail the reproductive capabilities of the alleged socially unfit through state sterilization of the insane and feebleminded. California’s Department of Institutions (currently the Department of Mental Health) enforced a stringent program of mental hygiene through mandatory sterilization of the mentally ill with the backing of a Pasadena eugenics organization called the Human Betterment Foundation (HBF).

My examination of the responsibilities of rhetoric takes the technical papers of the HBF as its artifact for analysis in a study of a socio-epistemic rhetoric promoting American identification through mental hygiene and civic biology. Eugenicists targeted specific groups as being particularly problematic and this dyslogistic discourse served to alienate, segregate, and demonize those unfortunates outside the mainstream. Typically, these constituted the poor, the sick, immigrants, and criminals. The archival papers of Ezra S. Gosney and the Human Betterment Foundation, as well as the records of the Historical Files on Biology Division at the archives of the California Institute of Technology, serve as the basis for my research. Through them, I explore the gradual morphing of eugenic discourse over time as the HBF evolved from a hereditarian rhetoric predicated on strict biological determinism to a socio-scientific rhetoric that finally acknowledged environmental factors in human development. The HBF would eventually give rise to three successor organizations focused on marital counseling, population control, and behavioral biology known respectively

as the American Institute of Family Relations (AIFR), the Association for Voluntary Sterilization (AVS), and the Gosney Research Fund of Caltech. The HBF's rhetorical transition from compulsory to voluntary sterilization with the rise of its sister organization, the AVS, represents one aspect of the HBF's shift in discursive practices in the period leading up to the Second World War.

Founded by E. S. Gosney, a wealthy Pasadena businessman worried about dysgenic trends in California and the United States, the Human Betterment Foundation employed Paul B. Popenoe to study the problems associated with the differential fertility rate of the insane and feebleminded, and to advocate the compulsory sterilization of those responsible for "dumbing-down" the human gene pool. The HBF sought to quell criticisms of the opponents of sterilization by publishing authoritative, scientific reports demonstrating the benefits of sexual surgery for mental patients, their families, and society, and to encourage wider application of eugenic sterilization laws both at the state, national, and international level. Significantly, while the national rate for state legislated sterilizations was about 60,000, California accounted for approximately 20,000 of these, or about one third of the national average.

The HBF undertook an ambitious study of the results of California's experimental program in order to document the "physiological and mental effects of sexual sterilization" on mental patients (Harry H. Laughlin Papers, D-2-3:24). It published the results in scientific and medical journals such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, and the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. A bound volume of its preliminary reports entitled *Collected Papers on Eugenic Sterilization in California* was published in 1930. The HBF also published a more popular book "stripped of technicalities" for the general reading public entitled *Sterilization for Human Betterment* (E.S. Gosney/HBF Papers, Box 1.6).

The latter was to be used by Hitler's Third Reich to buttress and expand upon Germany's nascent race hygiene programs. In a letter to Dr. K. Burchardi from Dr. G. Gyssling of the German Consulate in Los Angeles dated March 24, 1936, Gyssling praised *Sterilization for Human Betterment* and the work of Gosney and Popenoe:

It is my honour and gives me great pleasure to inform you, that, when my Government passed its National Hygiene Legislation, it was well aware of the work which had been done already in this field in the United States. The books published by such eminent authorities as Mr. E. S. Gosney and Dr. Popenoe, particularly their *Sterilization for Human Betterment*, and the experiences made by such outstanding organizations as "The [American] Institute of Family Relations" and "The Human Betterment Foundation" have been very well known in Germany and have proved to be a valuable contribution to the considerations which led to the legislation in question (E.S. Gosney/HBF Papers, Box 8.13) (The legislation in question was a precursor to the Nuremberg Laws and the genocidal Action T4 program).

For their part, Gosney and Popenoe, along with other U.S. eugenicists similarly feted, basked in the praise of the German Reich and continued to defend its developing racial hygiene policies in eugenic journals and newsletters, not beginning to exhibit any degree of caution on the subject until shortly before the outbreak of WWII.

The technical reports of the HBF concluded that sterilization was therapeutic for the patient and prophylactic for society. The HBF insisted that sterilization was neither mutilation nor punishment and sought to dispel the widespread notion that sterilization inhibited the sex drive or, conversely, increased sexual promiscuity. It estimated that about 10 million Americans could produce "eugenically undesirable children" and that it would take a single generation of vigorous sterilization to reduce incidences of mental abnormality by as much as 36%. Yet, other scientists objected to the notion of a so-called "submerged 10<sup>th</sup>" of the American population and pointed out that according to eugenicists' own estimates on recessive genes, about 89% of feebleminded children actually had *normal* parents (Kevles 165). The latter assertion became the bane of the HBF's existence. New advances in molecular biology soon brought a better understanding of the pleiotropic/polygenic nature of genetic transmission, effec-

tively destroying the premise of strict hereditarian eugenicists and creating an ideological crises in the eugenics movement.

Faced with a loss of scientific credibility compounded by Nazi eugenic atrocities, leaders of the movement began seeking alternative outlets for their beleaguered social reform efforts. The traditional eugenic historiography suggesting that eugenics either “declined” or “reformed” in this period entirely misses the deliberate modification of eugenic rhetorical tactics as eugenicists strove to regain their former scientific ethos. Many historians have not paid enough attention to the rhetorical adaptability of eugenicists, a feature contributing significantly to the movement’s ideological resilience in the face of widespread criticism. Indeed, the use of conscious rhetorical tactics endowed hereditarian ideologues with a near protean ability to re-invent their basic premises. In a memorandum assessing the eugenic conundrum for “the Rockefeller interests” in May, 1933, Osborn argued that the “rediscovery of Mendel...and the marvelous development of a science of genetics in the succeeding years distracted attention from the social and psychological studies necessary for a broader base in eugenics” (qtd. in Mehler, *A History* 117). Realizing that they could no longer qualify eugenic social improvement based on strict genetic determinism, eugenicists turned instead to the human sciences as the new platform for social improvement. This move was partly facilitated by the Rockefeller Foundation’s “Science of Man” initiative at research schools such as Caltech, which sought to make “a strategic attack on the problems of human behavior” through the study of a wide variety of medical and natural sciences under the general rubric of psychobiology (Kay 46).

Yet, the incorporation of a more psychobiological perspective in eugenic ideology did not significantly change the underlying goals and pursuits of eugenicists (Mehler, 119). Where once eugenicists had railed against immigrants and the perils of race mongrelization, they would now rail against the immigrants’ inability to assimilate American customs and attitudes and the overarching threat posed to American cultural hegemony. Former eugenic arguments favoring genetic integrity would now just as strongly advocate *cultural* integrity (98). Similarly, eugenic sterilization campaigns switched tactile emphasis from the benefits to society in limiting

dysgenic births to the benefits to the *individual* in practicing reproductive choice through vasectomies, salpingectomies, and birth control (279).

While the traditional eugenic historiography suggests that it was a reformist change of heart that inspired eugenicists to embrace the cause of population control and family planning, it seems more likely that eugenicists employed yet another deliberate rhetorical tack in order to reestablish the movement on a broader socio-scientific basis. Eugenicists hoped to, thereby, recoup their lost ethos. Eugenicists who had formerly fought for compulsory sterilization switched instead to supporting *voluntary* sterilization as the more politically expedient of the two. Overtime, eugenicists would merge their original sterilization campaign with the birth control movement and found the earliest population control and family planning clinics in the U.S. "As Henry Fairchild, president of the AES, remarked in 1940, eugenics and birth control 'have come to such a thorough understanding and have drawn so close together as to be almost indistinguishable'" (Kline 132).

The HBF maintained correspondence with a variety of like-minded sterilization organizations through the years, one of which was the New Jersey Sterilization League. When Gosney passed away in 1942, many of the HBF's sterilization articles and reports were turned over to the League, which tried to establish a more national base when it changed its name to the Sterilization League for Human Betterment. However, former members of the HBF protested the League's new name, so it was changed instead to Birthright, Inc. (AVS - *SWHA*). Notwithstanding the brief skirmish over names, many of Gosney's associates found their way to the HBF's successor organization in the ensuing years.

The transfer of records, staff, and membership from the HBF to Birthright, Inc. is indicative of the tactical move to reformulate compulsory sterilization as voluntary sterilization and, ultimately, a palatable form of birth control. In 1964, Birthright became the Association for Voluntary Sterilization (AVS), a name it would stick with for the next twenty years. Starting in the 80s, the organization went through another succession of name changes, becoming, first, the Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception and, finally, EngenderHealth (Valone, "Foundations" 41). These more

recent name changes are indicative of the widening scope of socio-scientific population control and family planning programs as they have moved successively from the national to the international level. They are also indicative of the sterilization movement's relationship with national and international government bureaucracies in the form of NGOs.

In 1974, Henry Kissinger wrote the summary for National Security Study Memorandum 200 (NSSM 200), in which population growth in developing countries was identified as a concern to "U.S. security and overseas interests" (Wikipedia.org; search on NSSM 200). Two years prior to that, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID - one of the recipients of NSSM 200) made a grant to AVS to increase access to voluntary sterilization through the dissemination of its programs and services abroad (AVS - *SWHA*). In its current incarnation as EngenderHealth, this NGO continues to work in Bangladesh to reduce poverty via fertility-control, one of thirteen countries whose population growth has been identified as a U.S. security interest. The fact that non-white and indigent people seem again to be the targets of U.S. sterilization programs is in itself telling, especially in light of the rhetorical elasticity of the HBF's eugenic ideology from the past to the present. (Valone notes that the United Nations presented the Population Award to EngenderHealth in 2002.) (Valone 41 - 42)

Burke warns against the peddling of social improvement schemes that "provide a non-economic interpretation of economic ills" for being, in essence, "snake-oil" (Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" 219). The continued eugenic focus on the birth rate of minorities and the poor is an instance of this. By employing the scene/act ratio of the dramatist pentad, it becomes clear that one of the underlying motives of eugenicists' is to deflect attention from historical and economic realities (scene) by insisting that the real source of the problem lies in the fecund instincts of the underclass (agent) (Burke, *A Grammar* 17). Eugenicists rely on a simplistic Malthusian paradigm dictating that the proliferation of the poor and the non-white lies at the root of world poverty, thus diverting scrutiny from the socio-economic order into which they are born in the first place. Burke observes that this is essentially an argument of convenience, for in attacking a group of people as the cause of economic misery, it leaves the attacker in

the advantageous position of controlling the sum of economic resources, having once reduced (or eliminated) the offending population ("The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" 219).

What is more, Burke claims that by failing to distinguish dialectical realities at the crux of social relations, those who would sell snake-oil as a social panacea only aggravate the condition. Burke states that "...emotional trickeries that shift our criticism from the accurate locus of our trouble" are never a solution "since the factors pressing toward calamity remain" (230). By diverting attention away from pre-existing political and economic realities, eugenicists successfully disguise social control as social improvement.

My analysis of the rhetorical history of the HBF undermines the notion of a "reform" eugenics succeeding "mainline" eugenics by demonstrating, instead, the rhetorical transition from a discredited *hereditarian eugenics* to an authoritarian *socio-scientific eugenics*. The HBF's transmutation from eugenic sterilization to voluntary sterilization is indicative of this new rhetorical strategy of post-WWII eugenicists as they adapted to the prevailing ethos, pathos, and logos of a war-weary public and sought to regain their credibility as technocratic experts for the public good. Furthermore, the narrative history of the HBF greatly complicates the current discussion that takes for granted the idea that family planning, genetic counseling, and population control are all aspects of social "progressivism." The rhetorical history of the HBF reveals that what some historians have insisted is the post WWII transformation from mainline to reform eugenics is, in fact, the conscious rhetorical and ideological transition from hereditarian to socio-scientific eugenics in order to maintain the viability of a eugenic technocracy in the face of the discredited science of its former political initiatives.

Burke cautions against the rise of "sinister science" in fascist regimes where universal principles of scientific clarity and fairness are subsumed to the exigencies of national security (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 35). The technocratic topoi linking EngenderHealth, the Human Betterment Foundation, and Nazi race hygiene programs suggests a rhetoric of motives that begs for broader explication especially in current debate over fertility control and limits to population growth. After all, just whose population is on

the table in such discussions? As has been remarked often enough before, those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. Without the countervailing balance of an informed and responsible public rhetoric, the long shadow of eugenics will continue to cast a sinister pall over ethical considerations in genetics, medicine, and the human sciences.

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