War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race

Edwin Black

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Review by Robert Moore

No short review can do justice to a book of 550 pages, including over fifty pages of notes and thirteen of sources. Although this is an encyclopaedic volume it tells a good story, albeit something of a horror story. Black gives an account of the origins of eugenics in the USA, inspired by Francis Galton and driven by moral panics about national degeneration and immigration. The ideas were then re-exported with evangelical fervour to Europe, establishing both ideological and quasi-scientific networks that lasted well into the Second World War. The author's dedication 'To my mother … who still remembers when American principles of eugenics came to Nazi-occupied Poland' says it all.

Major figures in sponsoring eugenics in the US included Alexander Graham Bell, Kellogg (the cornflakes man), Carnegie and the Rockefeller Foundations. The key institution, established largely through the generosity of the recently widowed Mrs Harriman, was Cold Spring Harbour. Supporters and advocates of the eugenics cause included Margaret Sanger; the account of how the latter squared her eugenic fervour with ardent feminism is one of the fascinating stories told in this book.

Most readers will be familiar with parts of the history of eugenics so the major value of this book is in linking the parts and identifying the role of key actors in maintaining networks across the USA and western Europe, through publications, academic exchanges and personal correspondence. The Eugenics Research Association (founded as Cold Spring Harbour) promoted research and drafted model legislation for which eugenicists lobbied assiduously – with some success. Eugenics found its way into thousands of reports and journal articles, into college courses and school text books.

Eugenicists advocated segregation, marriage prohibitions, the sterilisation of dysgenic elements and, finally, euthanasia. This review

was drafted in the waiting room of an ophthalmic clinic; all the patients *and their kin and extended families* sitting around me would have been targets for the eugenicists who regarded eye and hearing defects as grounds for eugenic intervention. Mental deficiency was a major issue and with the advent of measurement – notably the Stanford-Binet test – it was possible to 'show' that ' *"47 per cent of whites and 89 per cent of Negroes" had a mental capacity below that of a thirteen year old*'. The tests were highly culturally biased and therefore it is no surprise that they 'showed' that non-white people and immigrants from eastern Europe had lower intelligence than whites from north west Europe. Goddard, who was testing at Ellis Island, rather gave the game away when he boasted that he could spot the feeble-minded at a glance – a claim echoed by Burt's claim to spot a slum child by its looks. Eugenic principles underlay the USA's 1924 Immigration Act which attempted to reduce the numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Italy.

Not only were physical and mental abilities seen as threats but social attitudes also. The Amish[1] were regarded as defective because of their rejection of modern technology and their pacifism – whilst, paradoxically, war was regarded as dysgenic because it culled the best young men, from the eugenist's point of view.

The conclusions are well known; that pauperism was inherited and there was a *hereditary* class of persons who were unwilling to work. How were the dysgenic elements to be identified? The original and basic technique was genealogical; identify one pauper and then trace their families. The search was sure to identify other paupers, thus reinforcing the hereditary thesis. Research assistants combed the documents of agencies across the USA, delving into public records, court reports and newspaper archives. The foundation studies from which these methods derived produced the now (in)famous studies of the Kallikak and Jukes families. The researchers and recorders were not testing any hypothesis. They were simply collecting data to influence policy and in the process demonstrating what was self-evident to them, that mental and social defects were hereditary.

The other line of research entailed measurement using intelligence tests. Here we encounter a fascinating and rather undeveloped sub-theme in the book; there seems to have been some falling out between eugenicists over methods and the use of statistics in particular, with Pearson and Fisher in the UK parting company with American colleagues. It was in the field of eugenics that important statistical tests were developed, notably Pearson's Product Moment Correlation.

[1] Anabaptist communities who arrived in the USA in the 18th ad 19th centuries as religious refugees.

Correlations proved an important aspect of the work of the Galton Eugenics Laboratory at UCL. Goddard, who devised the Stanford-Binet test and an American pioneer of testing, later recanted his eugenic views.

The outcome of eugenic thought was piles of corpses in Europe and the legitimisation of discrimination, segregation and racial violence in the USA that took decades of campaigning to undo, in a struggle that continues to this day. But in spite of our knowledge of the horrors of Nazism and its eugenic aims, eugenic ideas are sedimented in European thought and may even be found today in a naively 'benevolent' form amongst some on the left and among working class people. Eugenics was not without opponents and Black reports the marvellous and characteristic observation of Walter Lippmann on IQ tests as 'a new chance for quackery in a field where quacks breed like rabbits …'
Are there lessons for readers of Radstats? I hope we have all learnt them without needing to read this excellent book. Many of us teach social science students who are reluctant to confront evidence in any serious way and who (erroneously) reject hypothesis testing as 'positivism' in favour of feeling[2]. What this books shows is that if you have prejudices you can always accumulate data that support them. But that is not social science or any kind of science. Whether our data are numerical or qualitative they may be used to form impressions, for exploratory theorisation and hypothesis formation but then the data and theories must themselves be tested to see if they are simply a product of our prejudices (or methodological incompetence) or whether they stand up.

This book works on many levels. It may be read from cover to cover as one story in *our* history (since we can not deny collective ownership of this grim history) or it may be dipped into as a source of important biographical detail, events, specific publications and cross-references to the history of eugenics in the USA and western Europe.

Robert Moore
University of Liverpool
rsmoore@liverpool.ac.uk

[2] I use positivism in inverted commas because the word is not used to refer to a theory-driven enterprise to discover the underlying 'laws' of human society. In its naïve usage it means avoiding the question 'What is the evidence for that statement?' on the grounds that one is not a positivist.