

## A Better Breed of American

'Better for All the World,' by Harry Bruinius

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Review by SALLY SATEL

IN 1927, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. declared it "better for all the world" if the "manifestly unfit" could be stopped from reproducing. "Three generations of imbeciles are enough," he famously wrote in his ruling in *Buck v. Bell*, which affirmed the constitutionality of forced sterilization of people deemed genetically inferior.

The disturbing history of the eugenics movement is not a secret, despite the subtitle of Harry Bruinius's highly readable new book. But it should surely be better known by the public, and Bruinius, writing in a novelistic style, has made an admirable effort to convey the "passions and unfulfilled longings of individuals, and the conspiracies and betrayals, and ironies that stand behind a scientific program to purify the human race through genetic engineering."

Bruinius's story begins in the mid-1800's with the British polymath Sir Francis Galton, who introduced the idea of intelligence as an inherited trait and — inspired by his cousin Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species" — developed a science to promote it, which he named eugenics. In America, Galton's ideas were picked up by the biologist Charles Davenport, who in 1904 established Cold Spring Harbor laboratory on Long Island as a national center for eugenics research and policy planning.

Three years later, Davenport created a Eugenics Records Office and recruited an ambitious young high school teacher named Harry Laughlin to join him in an enormous project that sent fieldworkers across the country to identify the "germ-plasm" of unfit family strains so that it could be eradicated. Laughlin became an influential developer of American compulsory sterilization policy, which had officially begun in 1907 when Indiana passed a law allowing scientists to use surgical methods to eradicate the unfit — "the first law in human history," Bruinius writes, "allowing doctors to operate on otherwise healthy citizens against their will." He helped Congress formulate the 1924 Immigration Act, which kept out "inferior" people from Southern and Eastern Europe. Bruinius deftly plays up the contrast between the eugenicists' obsession with cold measurements of human value and their own messy lives, which were marked by disease and behavior that could have qualified them as unfit: Galton suffered from severe depression; Davenport had one child who was sickly and another who was apparently dyslexic; and Laughlin was afflicted with epilepsy.

In America and elsewhere, enthusiasm for eugenics was broadly supported by elites. In Britain, people as varied as [Winston Churchill](#) and George Bernard Shaw embraced its goals, and there was lively debate about how much the state itself should control reproduction of individuals. Eugenic science especially appealed to Fabian socialists,

who saw it as further justification for abolishing class — after all, once the playing field was level the effect of heredity could finally express itself clearly and be studied.

In this country, eugenic theory and practice engaged the likes of [Theodore Roosevelt](#), the birth control crusader Margaret Sanger and leaders of the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations. It galvanized temperance advocates, suffragists, and liberal American churches and synagogues. Citizens enthusiastically entered "Fitter Family" and "Better Baby" contests.

Bruinius sees America's leading role in the eugenics movement as a reflection of its utopianism. "Seeing their country as a land of innocence, many Americans had long clung to the idea of self-purification, attempting to excise that which posed a danger to the social good," he writes. "Eugenics would combine an American self-consciousness with the new and unimpeachable authority of Science."

In the decade after *Buck v. Bell*, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Sweden, Norway and Japan all passed sterilization laws. But it was the influence of American eugenicists on the Nazis that is most chilling. Bruinius describes how [Hitler](#) modeled Germany's sterilization policies on California's 1909 sterilization law. While reports of Nazi racial policies provoked a growing outcry among the American public, eugenicists themselves remained enthusiastic, with some traveling to Germany to study its program. In 1936, Laughlin received an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg University for his work in racial hygiene, and two years later he advised Congress to keep Jews seeking political asylum out of the United States even after the Kristallnacht pogrom.

Meanwhile, the poor quality of Laughlin's work was catching up with him. In 1935 a special committee issued a scathing report on the Eugenics Records Office, and in 1939 it was shut down by the president of the Carnegie Institution (its main backer), who cited the insufficiency of the research and, ironically, Laughlin's poor health. While eugenicists had trouble selling their idea of racial purity in the wake of the Holocaust, many states continued sterilizing patients in mental institutions until the mid-1960's, when sterilization laws finally fell into disuse. In the end, more than 65,000 mentally ill and developmentally disabled people in 33 states underwent the procedure. Some later sued the states for what one victim called "sexual murder." Several states have issued formal apologies, though *Buck v. Bell* remains standing to this day.

Bruinius stakes out little new ground beyond that already covered in Daniel Kevles's more substantial study, *"In the Name of Eugenics"* (1985). And his decision to pay minimal attention to the scientific ideas behind eugenics lightens the narrative at the cost of a fuller understanding of what fueled the passions of eugenicists. Bruinius ends by asking whether biotechnology and genetic engineering will usher in an age in which "genocide — cultural, ethnic or genetic — can seem a rational and desirable goal." Despite this melodramatic ending, his story is one worth hearing, and heeding.

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