

A BETTER RACE OF HUMAN BEINGS: EUGENICS IN THE AMERICAN MEDIA, 1900-1909

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In 1883, Francis Galton, accomplished scholar and cousin to Charles Darwin, coined the term “eugenics.” His work *Essays in Eugenics*, published in 1909, defined the term as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage.”¹ Various incarnations of this science-based ideology took hold in Europe and the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. The strongest period of eugenics support in the United States occurred in the 1920s and the 1930s, following the establishment of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in 1910 and the 1927 Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell*, which upheld the constitutionality of forced sterilization. Support for eugenics grew in response to several large-scale processes and pressures. The intense industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century continued through the early decades of the twentieth century and drove a similar trend of urbanization.² Concurrently, fear of the fertility of newly arrived immigrants sparked panic about “race suicide,” which was the belief that the reckless breeding of the lower classes and unfit would eventually overwhelm the approved reproduction of the white

¹ Francis Galton, *Essays in Eugenics* (London: Eugenics Education Society, 1909), 35 in Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11.

² Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), xvii.

middle and upper classes.³ As competing ideologies and global pressures converged, eugenics emerged in the United States as a response to the ills of society.

This paper examines the American print media's discourse on eugenics from 1900-1909 and how this rhetoric introduced eugenics to the public and contributed to its popularity during the interwar period. It argues that the media discourse blended established nineteenth-century conceptions with emerging Progressive-era ideals, which emphasized the collective over the individual and the need to reform society through scientific means, themes which resonated with the public because of their familiarity. Three themes shaped media discussions of eugenics in this period: science and scientists as vessels of progress, marriage and childbirth, and racial and social stratification.

Scholarship on eugenics in the United States has typically focused on the most renowned figures and institutions of the movement, such as Charles Davenport and the ERO, although in the last decade the scholarship on eugenics has diversified. The first body of scholarship follows a general timeline beginning with the establishment of eugenics by Galton. Key points in this narrative include the establishment of key east-coast based institutions, the support of wealthy corporations, and the charisma of the movement's leaders to push through eugenic-based legislation such as sterilization laws at the state level. Significant works in this field include Daniel Kevles' *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* and Garland E. Allen's numerous monographs and articles. Allen deviates more from the conventional lines of inquiry through discussions of the continuities between perceptions of eugenics in the early twentieth century and genetics in the second

³ Daniel E. Bender, *American Abyss: Savagery and Civilization in the Age of Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 8-9.

half of the century. However, although he acknowledges the diffuse nature of eugenics organizations and figures in the United States, Allen still largely focuses on the most prominent, typically east-coast institutions and eugenicists. In these works, the focus is on the influence of private corporations and a relatively small group of organizations, which overemphasizes the efforts of these groups in fostering national support for the eugenics movement.

The second body of scholarship takes a different approach to the question of how and why eugenics gained prominence. These scholars analyze the evolution of eugenics from a variety of perspectives, which challenge the established chronologically focused narrative, and argued the particular views of individual state societies, rather than the eastern institutions' agendas, shaped the eugenics rhetoric. For example, Alexandra Minna Stern emphasizes the importance of geography to the development of eugenics in America and, in relation to the movement in the western states, argues that “by turning our gaze thousands of miles west, away from the headquarters of the ERO, we encounter a history that was both paradigmatic of large-scale national trends and particular to the region.”⁴ Edwin Black, Marouf Arif Hasian, Edward J. Larson and Christine Rosen have also approached eugenics from differing regional and social perspectives, incorporating discussions of race, religion and gender.⁵ This essay builds upon the more recent literature to analyze how newspapers

⁴ Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

⁵ See Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003); Marouf Arif Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

discussed and portrayed eugenics at the beginning of the twentieth century and how this discourse related to broader social trends.

Newspapers were the main medium through which the public received and responded to new information; the dialogue created by print media facilitated the public's awareness and evaluation of eugenics. As Daniel Kevles noted, "Anglo-American eugenicists reckoned that, before a eugenics revolution could occur, the public would have to be taught to be 'eugenic-minded,'" an observation which highlighted the newness of eugenics and the need for its supporters to educate the public about its theory and goals.⁶ Eugenics rhetoric sought to communicate the characteristics of this new science as well as re-organize society into larger homogenous groups. This aligned with emergent Progressive rhetoric, which emphasized a "collectivist doctrine," one which "rejected individualism in favor of more aggregate units of explanation, the nation or race or class or stratum of intelligence."⁷ The newspapers framed eugenics as a solution to social concerns stemming from intense industrialization and urbanization, which allowed it to enter public discourse in a context familiar and acceptable to readers.

Eugenics discourse used themes of progress and the triumphant reports of prominent scientists to impress upon the public the dynamism and relevance of the new science. Two scientists, Luther Burbank and David Starr Jordan, dominated articles and received disproportionate amounts of attention for their views on eugenics. Burbank's successes with plant breeding experimentation lent him considerable credibility and respect when discussing

⁶ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 60.

⁷ Thomas C. Leonard, "American Economic Reform in the Progressive Era: Its Foundational Beliefs and Their Relation to Eugenics," *History of Political Economy* 41, no. 1 (2009): 136.

hereditary science and its applications to society. One article described his approach to the subject of human breeding with a “degree of certainty.” Scholars referred to Burbank’s expertise with plants and tangible results to convey a sense of inevitability to resolving the questions of human heredity.⁸ Another article on Burbank cheerfully declared his “achievements with the fruits, the flora and the trees coupled with his own practical human and aspiring intelligence have come opportunely to help our species further onward and upward.”⁹ The discoveries he made served as a model for the public of the possibilities of heredity and breeding science, and Burbank himself represented the epitome of progressive science. David Starr Jordan featured prominently in articles on eugenic science, although he was characterized in a different way than Burbank. Jordan, the president of Stanford University, took a more aggressive stance on human heredity and breeding issues. Jordan was one of the leading figures in a distinguished group of speakers, including Alexander Graham Bell, at the first major committee on eugenics in 1906.¹⁰ As one of the most renowned leaders of the eugenics movement, scholars viewed Jordan as an embodiment of progressive goals and reforming science because of his status as the president of a prominent university and his personal contributions to the field of ichthyology. Eugenics articles frequently mentioned Jordan to establish the validity of another person’s work or point of view. By 1909, he and his fellow eugenics supporters were successfully linked in the press with “many of the thinking people of the country” who believed “drastic measures should

⁸ “Selective Environment,” *New York Times*, 2 October 1905, 8.

⁹ *Blue Grass Blade*, 18 November 1906, 1.

¹⁰ “Improve Human Race,” *Washington Post*, 28 October 1906, 13. The committee was a joint venture between the American Breeders’ Association and the Department of Agriculture.

be taken toward the prevention of the reproduction of the strikingly unfit.”¹¹ Print media established Burbank and Jordan as champions for progress through eugenic science.

Turn-of-the-century eugenicists saw their work as solutions to old and unresolved social problems. Newspapers reinforced this view by framing eugenics as a new science-based movement motivated by social reform. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture W.M. Hays released a statement cautiously underlining the potential of eugenics: “The subject of investigating the heredity of man is comparatively much more difficult than in the case of plants and animals. But it is so important that science and religion should join in an investigation at once conservative, careful, and possibly constructive.”¹² The broad training of eugenicists in biology and mathematics led them to believe that their work was a natural extension of agricultural breeding with the nobler goal of “improving the human species in much the same ways as a breeder improves a flock or herd.”¹³ Statements and reports from the 1906 eugenics committee meetings used similar language outlining the objectives of eugenics and eugenicists should apply these principles in practice for the good of society. One of the first reports from the committee redefined eugenics as “the science of generative or procreative development, the doctrine of progress or evolution, especially in the human race, through improved conditions in the relations of the sexes.”¹⁴ The shift in definition from Galton’s benign approach to eugenics to an active selection process established

¹¹ “The Study of Man,” *Washington Post*, 25 June 1909, 6.

¹² “Science to Make Men and Women Better,” *Washington Post*, 18 May 1906, 2.

¹³ Garland E. Allen, “The Ideology of Elimination: American and German Eugenics, 1900-1945,” in Francis R. Nicosia and Jonathan Huener, eds., *Medicine and Medical Ethics in Nazi Germany: Origins, Practices, Legacies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

eugenics as a social program, as well as science. The eugenics committee expected the eugenic science to produce solutions and prove its utility in society. Although they did not promise specific programs or results, reports of the eugenics committee statements in the press still implied a confidence that eugenicists could apply their methods to human breeding for the benefit of society, lending credence to their work.

Many scientists strongly advocated eugenics. Articles featuring these proponents drew attention to the strongest rhetoric in favor of eugenic principles combined with active measures to refine the human population. Garrett P. Serviss boldly declared on page one of the *Blue Grass Blade* that “The new men and women raised up by the new science of ‘eugenics’ will have, by the mere effect of their improved physique, a richer, fuller, more agreeable life than their predecessors have enjoyed.”¹⁵ The idea of an American eugenic utopia emerged from statements like this and became a point of reference for the movement in the 1920-30s. Such advocates argued that America had long struggled with demographic pressures, but the developments in science and breeding meant a conceivable end to concerns about drunkenness, epilepsy, race, and other undesirable aspects of humanity. In contrast to the benign language about eugenic utopias, an aggressive form of eugenics advocacy came from Dr. Eugene Davenport of the University of Illinois. He proposed “that all the ‘culls’ or ‘scalawags’ of the human race should be taken before the courts, scientifically investigated, and if found unworthy, colonized and permitted to die off.”¹⁶ Another writer noted with satisfaction, “the public is finally awakening to the importance of intelligent

¹⁵ *Blue Grass Blade*, 1.

¹⁶ “To Weed Out Human Race,” *Washington Post*, 30 January 1909, 6.

breeding... Had not the law of natural selection protected the human species it could not have advanced itself as it has.”¹⁷ Although scientists varied in their fervor for eugenics and the specifics of implementing eugenics principles, their rhetoric in newspaper discussions consistently emphasized that eugenics presented a scientifically based set of corrections to problems in American society, such as the regulation of marriage and childbirth.

Marriage as a theme for eugenics rhetoric particularly resonated with the public because of long-standing concern over who should marry, and specifically which pairings would be most beneficial to society. Concerns about interracial marriage led to the first miscegenation law in Maryland in 1664, and by 1900, twenty-six states enforced such laws.¹⁸ The importance of marriage to society and a fear of undesirable matches supported miscegenation laws and were quickly incorporated into the turn of the century eugenics discourse. Specifically, proponents claimed human nature and emotions deterred and harmed the selection process; experts, scientists, and eugenicists were trained to evaluate and decide appropriate matches and therefore had a duty to communicate to the public the necessity of eugenic-based couplings. An article from the *New York Times* emphasized how a “eugenicist only puts more care and more intelligence in the selection of his life mate,” because of the eugenicist’s greater knowledge in the desirable traits for a mate. Peter Weingart elaborates on this point by arguing that the “underlying principles of all eugenic utopias was to take decisions about reproduction out of the hands of individuals, with their

¹⁷ Amory C. Stevens, “To Improve Human Species,” *Blue Grass Blade*, 18 November 1906, 1.

¹⁸ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19, 63.

irrational considerations under the influence of passion, and leave only the satisfaction of their sexual needs to themselves.”¹⁹

A subtle distinction emerged in the carefully phrased articles as scientists discussed marriage in relation to eugenics. Dr. H.W. Anderson, president of the California State Eugenics Association, adamantly argued “[l]egitimate eugenics has no quarrel with the church, with marriage... Its mission is to take society as it finds it and improve upon it, and, in ever legitimate way, labor to produce a better race of human beings.”²⁰ Even in his passionate repudiation of legislation regarding marriage, Dr. G. Frank Lydston, professor of criminal anthropology, admitted the process of selection “is usually a matter of emotion and sentiment rather than good sense.”²¹ These statements demonstrated the movement’s apprehension about appearing too socially radical, and therefore limiting its appeal to the public. The institution of marriage commanded respect from eugenicists, who were generally careful about framing their rhetoric to accommodate traditional views. However, the eugenics movement believed that marriage required regulation and reform to ensure that optimum reproduction of the race occurred.

The idea that marriage should be regulated took two forms: the first advocated strict legislation and the second public education. Between 1900-1909, overt calls to legislate marriage restrictions based solely on eugenic principles were rare in the press. Advocacy for a society-driven effort to regulate marriage remained most common. A 1908 article reporting on an address made to the Society for Comparative Legislation in London was a

¹⁹ Peter Weingart, “Eugenics – Medical or Social Science?” *Science in Context* (1995): 199.

²⁰ *San Francisco Call*, 15 September 1907.

²¹ “Quest of Standard,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 25 April 1909, 3.

rare statement addressing eugenic-based legislation. The article referred to recently passed laws in Michigan and Nebraska which prohibited marriage for certain people as indicative of the growing support for eugenics and mused that “time might show that the Michigan enactment was of great value.”²² These comments only suggested the potential merit of such legislation, and in the context of the article, the writer relegated the opinions of eugenics to a small paragraph at the end of the article. However, these sentiments were few in comparison to those espoused by advocates of society-driven reform.

Alexander Graham Bell was among those opposed to legislative measures for marriage. He appealed to the idea that American society wished to produce the finest progeny, and that this desire alone would shape marriage and breeding practices for the nation. In addition to this idea, Bell believed that through public education and the clear explanation of the dangers of the combination of certain groups in marriage that “mere dissemination of that knowledge would of itself tend to promote desirable and prevent undesirable unions of the sexes.”²³ Bell’s language reflected both the progressive desire to reform society and an uncertainty towards the appropriate measures needed to achieve finer offspring. In another argument against eugenics legislation, a *Los Angeles Herald* article employed biblical references to Adam’s pursuit of Eve as an example of the natural right of humankind to choose mates. The author of this article expressed agreement with the principles of eugenics, but then decided it as ineffectual in application.²⁴ Suggestion and education, rather than law, was the appropriate way to affect marriage choices and ensure

²² “Rosebery on Eugenics,” *New York Times*, 5 July 1908, C2.

²³ “Close Divorce Doors If Any Children,” *New York Times*, 30 January 1908, 2.

²⁴ “Scientific Love-Making,” *Los Angeles Herald*, 5 August 1906, 8.

proper breeding. A different set of priorities drove Dr. G. Frank Lydston to express hesitation over marriage legislation in another article. As a criminal anthropologist, Lydston argued that society should prevent all degenerates, the “criminal, epileptic, insane, and drunken,” from marriage unless they submitted to sterilization.²⁵ He believed that barring degenerates from marriage took precedence over broader marriage legislation, because of the danger posed by that element of society. Throughout these early years of eugenics, the proponents of civil instruction heavily contested the push for legislation, although these same people still strongly supported eugenic principles.

Eugenics discourse in particular attracted support from the female population. As Daniel Kevles explains, “women played an insignificant role in the national society but a prominent one in local groups.” Further, “[e]ugenics, concerned ipso facto with the health and quality of offspring, focused on issues that, by virtue of biology and prevailing middle-class standards, were naturally women’s own.”²⁶ The diffuse nature of eugenics in the United States at this time also allowed more participation from women in local organizations. One example, Mrs. Jennie Chamberlain, a California eugenics organizer, exemplified the connection between women and the movement. In her defense of eugenics, she declared that “its purpose is earnest despite the unconventional nature of its line of investigation.”²⁷ The prominence of Chamberlain within the California movement by early 1907 demonstrated the ability of public discourse and rhetoric to persuade women to support eugenic principles.

²⁵ “Quest of a Standard,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 25 April 1909, 3.

²⁶ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 64.

²⁷ “Eugenics propound pointed questions,” *San Francisco Call*, 8 April 1907.

The discourse regarding race and eugenics focused on re-emphasizing the inferiority of minority groups, particularly African Americans, through scientific means. On August 12, 1900 George Tucker Harrison wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in support of these racist attitudes: “I recognize fully that it is the height of folly to ignore the facts of science and the experience of those who know the negro from actual contact... The negro occupies, according to anthropologists, the lowest position on the evolutionary scale.”²⁸ Harrison’s invocation of anthropology, a relatively new discipline in science, exemplified the turn towards new rationale to justify existing racism. He also used phrenology to reference the inferiority of the African American skull, a common discourse in this field. Phrenology, a popular nineteenth-century pseudo-science, claimed that the examination of skulls provided evidence of intelligence and character traits. Proslavery advocates and white supremacists often invoked this theory as proof of the inferiority of African Americans.²⁹

An article entitled “Negro Eugenics” reinforced the concept of racial hierarchy, which placed African Americans at the lowest level. The article emphasized that natural differences between the races supported the denigration of African Americans. It began with an assertion that “most negroes who excel in the arts and professions so possess an infusion of white blood.” The ability to excel clearly had to result from an integration of “white blood” because African Americans were naturally bereft of anything but base skills.³⁰ The same article cited the studies of a Dr. Robert B. Bean who “determined that the average

²⁸ George Tucker Harrison, “The Race Problem,” *New York Times*, 12 August 1900, 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Negro Eugenics,” *New York Times*, 28 January 1907, 6.

negro is fundamentally different from the Caucasian brain.”³¹ The primary difference identified in the African American brain was an overdevelopment in the areas governing emotions and underdevelopment in the cognitive areas.

Another scholar, Professor Pearl, pointed out that “in America the immigrants and the negroes are important factors to take into account,” and it was this diversity of races and ethnicities in American society that reinforced the need for eugenic measures.³² This was yet another example of scientific “proof” of racial differences, descended from the tradition of phrenology and race science. Eugenics rhetoric further warned of the dangers of unregulated mating between the races. Eugenists viewed ethnic minorities and immigrants as potential contaminants to the American population. Luther Burbank warned, “that mere intermixture of blood, unaccompanied by selection and wise supervision, is often ‘most vicious in its tendencies.’”³³ Burbank allowed for selective mixing between different ethnicities and races only in the case of specific matches, which would yield superior offspring.³⁴ Implicit in the media dialogue was the eugenic drive to find beneficial qualities in minority groups. The discovery of such qualities might lead to selective breeding with the “chosen” Anglo American race, whereas the discovery of a preponderance of perceived negative qualities merely reinforced societal views of the inferiority of such groups.

The “white” race did not escape evaluation by the eugenics discourse; in fact, eugenists created finer distinctions to clarify what characterized the ideal race. The chosen

³¹ Ibid.

³² “To Improve the Human Race,” *Washington Post*, 2 February 1906, M1.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

race was identified as a combination of German, Nordic, and white Anglo-Saxon Protestant characteristics.³⁵ Although eugenics broadly targeted non-Nordics, the standard for what constituted “white” or Nordic remained quite specific. Typically, eugenicists identified people from the middle-class as the best breeding stock, with special emphasis on intellectuals, artists, and scientists.³⁶ In racially homogenous areas of the country, the definition of race shifted to focus on class and social factors rather than ethnic differences. A hierarchy existed within the white race, and as Alexandra Stern argues, eugenicists created boundaries by “dividing northerner from southerner, employed from unemployed... schooled from unschooled, sound from unsound and ordered from disordered.”³⁷ Media references to the chosen Anglo race assumed the readers’ familiarity with the hierarchy and acceptance of such a characterization. Members of the white race that did not meet the qualifications of the chosen group faced a different kind of scorn in societal discourse. For example, in Indiana, the first state to pass a sterilization law in 1907, the so-called Tribe of Ishmael, a group of poor white families, personified a different kind of threat to society. Oscar McCullough, a prominent preacher and social reformer, designated this group of poor people outcasts on the grounds that they did not live by middle-class norms; this failure on the part of the “Ishmaels” lowered them to the status of other denigrated groups. This characterization of the poorest classes of white endured until the Great Depression.³⁸ Poor

³⁵ Edwin Black, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 30.

³⁶ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 47.

³⁷ Alexandra Minna Stern, “‘We Cannot Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow’s Ear’: Eugenics in the Hoosier Heartland,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 103 (2007): 20.

³⁸ Nathaniel Deutsch, *Inventing America’s “Worst Family”: Eugenics, Islam, and the Fall and Rise of the Tribe of Ishmael* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 5.

whites potentially posed a greater threat to mainstream society because physically they were not as easily identified as inferior as was the case with African Americans. The complex characterizations and distinctions created to delineate Nordics from non-Nordics highlighted the class concerns of eugenicists and the middle-to-upper-class basis of the movement and further demonstrated the broad scope of reform eugenicists envisioned for the United States.

In conclusion, the earliest discussions of eugenics framed it within popular notions and established ideologies to make it acceptable to the public. First, it was cast as a progressive scientific solution to social problems and eugenicists took on the role of expert reformers. Concerns over “proper” couplings enabled rhetoric arguing for the precise selection, by eugenic experts, of the most desirable people to marry and to reproduce. Ideas on ideal marriage and breeding became choice themes incorporated by eugenics rhetoric. The discourse regarding constructions of race provided the most explicitly negative expression of eugenics aims and principles in the media, but appealed to common claims of the inferiority of minority groups, particularly African Americans. Newspapers played a vital role in disseminating eugenic principles to the public and served to inform and reassure the readership that eugenics was in line with both traditional belief systems and the new progressive movements. The mass of sterilization legislation, the organization of eugenic institutions and associations, and the attention given eugenics in general after 1909 drew upon foundations set by this early public discourse.