

Abstract

Eugenics in America is the most unknown darkness in our history. Coming from the teachings of Charles Darwin, eugenics was the perceived science of better breeding. There are two branches of eugenics, the first being positive and the other being negative. Positive eugenics is the promotion of good qualities such as beauty, strength and intellect through selective breeding. Negative eugenics is a much more nefarious practice, and is what my paper concerns. I focus on one American eugenicist in particular, Harry Hamilton Laughlin, and examine his contribution to eugenics at home and abroad.

Harry Hamilton Laughlin: Honorary Doctor of Death

Negative eugenics is the practice of trying to kill off certain qualities deemed undesirable. These qualities included those with diseases that we now know to be neurological and not hereditary in nature such as epilepsy, depression and schizophrenia. (Brunius, 2006). Most important, was the discrimination regarding people called feeble-minded. Feeble-mindedness was an early term for what we now know as learning disabilities including Autism Spectrum Disorder, and numerous other conditions. The problem with feeble-mindedness was that these people were viewed as burdens on society, and thus were institutionalized. (Cohen, 2016). When institutionalization became too expensive for the states, eugenicists began to seek a more permanent solution, successfully passing forced sterilization legislation in as many as 27 states by the mid-twentieth century.

Discussion

With the beginnings of sterilization law, arose a young scientist named Harry Laughlin, fresh off a doctorate in biology from Princeton University. (Gur-Arie, 2014). Hired by the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor, New York, he published a book in 1922 that featured a fill in the blank model for sterilization law. (Laughlin, 1922). This model law as it became known was used in the famous Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* in 1927, and was used by legislators to move forward eugenic policies in their individual legislatures. California was one of the most successful states in its adoption, and is the key connection between Harry Laughlin and the early days of Nazi Germany. (Cohen, 2016).

Conclusion

In 1936, Harry Laughlin was invited to the University of Heidelberg in Germany on the occasion of its 550th anniversary. (Laughlin, 1936). He was presented an honorary doctorate in medicine from the head of the school, who was also a prominent Nazi figure. Although Laughlin was not able to travel to Germany, this recognition is proof of the influence of his works on the beginnings of Nazi social policies. Citing the California law (based on Laughlin's model law), the Nazis began their own sterilization programs in the early 30s. (Brunius, 2006). The result of this, the T-4 program as it was called, became a place of experimentation for leading Nazi scientists. It was also the place where the systematic extermination of peoples with the use of gas was first tested. The snowball effect of eugenic ideals can be clearly seen. Why institutionalize when you can sterilize? Why sterilize when you can euthanize? Lastly, and most tragically, why euthanize when you can exterminate? These are the questions that one must consider when relating the work of Harry Laughlin to the eugenics movement both in America and overseas.

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