

EUGENICS: TOOLBOX FOR TEACHERS

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What? A 19th century movement exploring and advocating racial hierarchies to solve societal issues. The goal was to arrange reproduction within human population to increase the occurrence of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable. “Positive Eugenics”: “Valuable” (ablest, healthiest) humans should reproduce. “Negative Eugenics”: Inferior people are a threat and burden (physically and financially) and should not reproduce.

Why? A world in rapid, traumatic change. Social changes due to the French Revolution and rapid urbanization caused by the Industrial Revolution motivated people to identify issues that needed solving.

How?

What began as an intellectual exercise that reinforced and justified social prejudice quickly became adopted by a variety of people who either believed its scientific claims or utilized parts of its outcomes to benefit their own goals. Antisemitism, bigotry, racism, misogyny, and ideologies from the right and the left fueled its social acceptance – especially after the trauma of World War I.

TERMS

Eugenics: 19th century idea (Greek for “good birth or stock”) to arrange reproduction within a human population to increase the occurrence of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable. Nazis used the term “racial hygiene”.

“Positive” Eugenics: “Valuable” (ablest, healthiest) humans should reproduce.

“Negative” Eugenics: Inferior people are a threat and burden (physically and financially) and should not reproduce.

Herero and Namaqua peoples: Victims of German eugenics studies and colonial mass atrocity (genocide not a legal term until 1951) in German SW Africa (now Namibia) at the beginning of the 20th century.

Sterilization: Permanently stopping the ability to reproduce in males or females.

Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Antisemitic conspiracy fraud invented in Russia in 1902-03 “revealing” a nonexistent secret Jewish conspiracy to control the world.

Eugenics Records Office: Center for U.S. eugenics “research” in NYC.

Immigration Restriction League: Boston-based anti-immigration group that utilizes eugenics arguments.

Kaiser Wilhelm Institute: German version of the American Eugenics Records Office.

Hereditary Health Courts: Nazi Germany institutions to “process” forced sterilization of German citizens.

Rassenschande: Nazi Germany concept of “race mixing” that shaped racial policy forbidding sexual relations between people of “Aryan” race and “inferior” races, particularly Jews.

T4: Nazi Germany operation (T4 is the bureaucratic address in Berlin) to murder teenagers and adults deemed to be “life unworthy of life”.

PEOPLE

Francis Galton: 19th century English naturalist and mathematician, (Darwin’s half cousin) who coins the term “eugenics” in 1883.

Herbert Spencer: 19th century English philosopher who introduces “Survival of the Fittest” (negative eugenics).

Dr. Eugene Fischer: 19th-20th century German eugenicist. He will conduct eugenics research in SW Africa and help to craft the Nazi Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935.

Charles Davenport: 20th century American leader of eugenics who establishes the Eugenics Record Office in NYC.

Harry Laughlin: Eugenics Records Office researcher and data collector who will have a great influence on Nazi eugenics thinkers.

Henry Goddard: American eugenicist who invents “categories” of moral and eugenically “defective” people. He will write *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1912) that drives eugenics into the American mainstream and will later guide Nazi German thinkers.

Madison Grant: American lawyer, writer, and zoologist he writes *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) which will reinforce racial eugenics thinkers and have a powerful impact on Hitler.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

- Why/how does an elitist, antidemocratic (white supremacy), race-based, unscientific, eugenics ideology become popular and shape norms and laws in the U.S.?
- Which groups in the U.S. benefitted from the use of eugenics language to further their goals – whether they fully believed in eugenics or not?
- Does U.S. eugenics have an impact on, and connection to, Nazi race policy?
- Does the U.S. have any responsibility for Nazi race policy? If so, what questions do we need to ask?
- Why did eugenics lose its momentum in the U.S. at the same time as it picked up momentum in Germany?
- How do healthy democracies confront difficult history?
- How is hate both destructive and self-destructive?
- Discuss the following quotes from Rutherford's *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*:
 - "Eugenics is a manifestation of power... it is the powerful dominating the powerless, in the most freedom restricting way possible – which is reproductive freedom."
 - "We expose it as a non-scientific idea... Eugenics was bigotry disguised as biology."
- Classroom discussion toolbox: Facing History and Ourselves:
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/legacy-eugenics-facilitating-classroom-conversation>

LESSON PLANS AND CALSSROOM VIDEOS

Facing History and Ourselves: Extensive resources, videos to spark discussions, and lessons.

https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library?keys=eugenics&sort_by=search_api_relevance&items_per_page=12

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum: This lesson examines Nazi Germany and the United States during the 1930s.

<https://www.ushmm.org/teach/holocaust-lesson-plans/racial-science-and-law-in-nazi-germany-and-the-united-states>

Western States Center: This lesson traces racist, classist, misogynistic, nationalist, and other roots of eugenics.

<https://www.westernstatescenter.org/classroomresources/eugenics-then-and-now>

Personal Genetics Education Project adapted by PBS: Using Primary Sources to Examine the History of Eugenics

https://pged.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/LP_UsingPrimarySourcesToExamineTheHistoryOfEugenics.pdf

Eugenics and Its Afterlives: Interesting images and lessons about eugenics in Connecticut.

<https://www.antieugenicscollective.org/k12-lesson-plans>

USC Shoah Foundation: Using testimonies and documents to interpret the Nuremberg Laws.

<https://iwwitness.usc.edu/activities/3938>

PBS: Using primary sources to interpret the eugenics movement:

<https://nhpbs.pblearningmedia.org/resource/2a62503d-31f6-4b17-9dab-0d496d3dc62a/using-primary-sources-to-examine-history-of-eugenics-video-ken-burns-the-gene/>

Ken Burns short video, "Genetics, History, and the American Eugenics Movement":

<https://nhpbs.pblearningmedia.org/resource/58488eff-d80d-4468-b5fd-6820aeec78cc/genetics-history-american-eugenics-movement-video-ken-burns-the-gene/>