PROTO-EUGENIC THINKING BEFORE GALTON

Workshop at the GHI, September 25-27, 2008. Partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Conveners: Christoph Irmscher (Indiana University, Bloomington) and Maren Lorenz (University of Hamburg/GHI). Participants: Graham Baker (University of Oxford), Jessica Berman (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), Bernhard Dietz (GHI London/Roehampton University), Sara Eigen Figal (Vanderbilt University), Sander Giloff (Indiana University, Bloomington), Brad Hume (University of Dayton), Sabine Kalff (University of Bielefeld), Sean M. Quinlan (University of Idaho), Kyla Schuller (University of California, San Diego), Frank Stahnisch (McGill University, Montreal), Pavla Vesela (Charles University, Prague), John C. Waller (Michigan State University), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI).

In the preface to the revised edition of his history of eugenics, In the Name of Eugenics, Daniel Kevles suggests that the heyday of eugenics is over. Where there was eugenics, there is genetics. And there is no chance, he says, that “the revolution in human molecular genetics will be turned to eugenic ends.” Kevles’s preface was written in 1995. Since then, the new challenges posed by prenatal diagnostics, the human genome project, and cloning have put paid to his prediction. They have also changed the parameters of the academic debate about eugenics, extending not only its traditional geographical scope but also its conventional temporal framework. Pace the common notion of eugenics as a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars have now realized that concepts of “human breeding” or of the “perfection of the human race” were being developed throughout Western Europe long before Francis Galton, designated the “founder of the faith” in Kevles’s book, published his Hereditary Genius in 1869.

When we convened the workshop, our hope was that we could nudge the study of human breeding from its traditional Anglocentric emphasis in the direction of a more unabashedly multinational (and less temporally limited) model. To that end, we also wanted to leave as much time for conversations as possible: all the papers were pre-circulated, and participants were asked to give only brief summaries of their main arguments.

The first panel addressed “The Genealogy of Eugenic Thought.” Sabine Kalff examined the proposals for human improvement in two early modern Italian utopian texts, Tommaso Campanella’s La Città del Sole (1600-1603) and Francesco Patrizi’s Città Felice (1553). Foucault repeatedly used the metaphor of the shepherd taking care of his flock as a paradigm for the ruler’s spiritual hold over the souls of his state, but Kalff insisted on the literal importance of
this popular model for early modern writers. Both Campanella and Patrizi relied on the contemporary practices of animal husbandry to make suggestions for human improvement. But while in Campanella’s ideal state the moment of conception itself had to be regulated—to the extent that intercourse after dinner had to be avoided because the “spirits” were still busy digesting—Patrizi, in a kind of pre-Lamarckian mode, expressed his belief that the mother’s temperament (as well as her mental state during pregnancy, physical exercise, and environment) had an influence on the embryo’s development, too.

John Waller’s paper gave an overview of a larger, historically oriented study he is currently writing, in which he traces elements of eugenic thoughts throughout Western history, as reflected, for example, in the medieval concern for lineage. Galton, stated Waller, was only “recapitulating an elitist attitude that had already pervaded European social thought for millennia.” Of course, as was pointed out after Waller’s paper, the vast archive such a comprehensive topic demands makes generalizations virtually impossible. Nevertheless, the undeniable heuristic force of Waller’s argument generated an animated exchange of views. Waller’s “long view” of eugenics served to highlight what, arguably, was so disarmingly innovative about the nineteenth-century interest in racial purity: the ability and willingness of the state to interfere actively (through legislation and prosecution) in the reproductive decisions of its citizens.

Sander Gliboff concluded the panel by offering a more uplifting view of nineteenth-century thinking about racial multiplicity—a legacy he claimed had been suppressed or distorted by twentieth-century historians. Framing his paper as a defense of the great late nineteenth-century evolutionary biologist and philosopher, Ernst Haeckel, Gliboff set out to rehabilitate nineteenth-century morphology. Concentrating on the work of three leading morphologists, Johann Friedrich Meckel, the Younger, Heinrich Georg Bronn, and Haeckel himself, Gliboff explained that for them improvement or Vervollkommnung did not mean a single, vertical path towards perfection of the species but Mannigfaltigkeit, i.e., many lines of differentiation and complex interdependencies among the disparate routes of development. Clearly, the eugenics movement did not initially adopt the same pluralistic conceptions of progress and improvement; neither did it value differentiation, diversity, and interdependence. Questions about Gliboff’s paper centered on Haeckel’s difficult concept of race that, to some participants, did retain traces of hierarchical order, as seemed evident in Haeckel’s graphs. But Gliboff argued that the placement of certain races on Haeckel’s evolutionary tree did not imply value and seemed to shift in subsequent revisions.
The second panel (“Debating the Hybrid”) focused on the bête noir (no pun intended) of all those eager proponents of racial purity, the hybrid. At the heart of Sara Figal Eigen’s paper was a conundrum. Drawing on multiple eighteenth-century sources, among them the travel writer Jean Chardin, Figal delved into the genealogy of the label “Caucasian,” that monolithic-seeming racial category that would come to be used as a yardstick by which self-appointed racial theorists determined the inferiority of other races. But, as Figal claimed, the original European was not European at all but the racially ambiguous Circassian woman. Figal’s paper elicited a lively debate, chock-full of suggestions as to how this paradox might be “tamed.”

Figal's comments on the “hybrid” origin of modern racial classifications provided a useful transition to Christoph Irmscher’s contribution on the role of the “half-breed” in the science of Louis Agassiz, once the world’s most famous scientist. Using Agassiz’s correspondence with the physician and abolitionist Samuel Gridley Howe and the papers of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, Irmscher attempted to show that the mixed-race black was the void at the center of American antebellum racial discourse, inaccessible to both a polygenist racist like Agassiz and a freedom-fighting abolitionist like Howe. On behalf of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, Howe later traveled to Canada, where he found ailing mulattoes and their feeble offspring, further proof to him that, “in the struggle for life,” some must and will fall by the wayside. Unlike Agassiz, the anthropologist Henry Lewis Morgan did not reject amalgamation per se, as Brad Hume pointed out in the paper that concluded the panel. Morgan remained committed to the idea of the controlled interbreeding of Native and Euro-Americans, because he was convinced that such unions would improve both the mental and the physical make-up of the whites. However, while Morgan denied the “hereditary legitimacy” of slavery, he also definitively excluded blacks from the racial enhancement he envisioned.

The first day of the conference ended with a panel devoted to “Intercultural Perspectives on Proto-Eugenics.” Extending our time frame, Frank Stanisch talked about the personal and academic connections between European psychiatrists working at the end of the nineteenth century (notably Alfred Ploetz, an early friend of writer Gerhart Hauptmann, who shared his eugenicist beliefs) and American doctors, and he proposed that we view psychiatry’s struggle for independence in the broader context of theories about the degeneration of the brain that spanned the continents. Graham Baker likewise was interested in transatlantic connections, comparing the influence of proto-eugenic thinking on Christian charities in England and the United States, specifically the New York City Mission Society and the London City Mission. Mining the
copious written archives left by both organizations, Baker revealed how easily orthodox Christian theology and eugenics coexisted. However, the missionaries’ hope that spiritual devotion could engender physical strength on a national level—a Lamarckian conviction they shared with other prominent eugenicists of the nineteenth century—remained curiously at odds with their belief in the “corrupt nature of man.” Pavla Vesela then revisited the connections between utopia and eugenic ideologies discussed at the beginning of the workshop, pointing out that the Russian utopian novels left the topic of sexual relations, so eagerly monitored and restricted by all those proto-eugenicists writing utopian texts in the West, pretty much untouched—that is, until Stalin came along.

The workshop reconvened the next day to ponder the connections between proto-eugenics and nation-building. Maren Lorenz, in a wide-ranging survey of sources from both sides of the Atlantic, emphasized the need for more comparative studies on nineteenth-century proto-eugenic theory and practice. The German model—notably Johann Peter Frank’s multivolume *Medizinische Polizey* (1779-1819)—provided her with a framework within which to address similar debates in early nineteenth-century America, where contributors to medical and phrenological journals seemed to be concerned early on with the degeneracy of the white race and called for marriage laws, which were sporadically implemented in the latter half of the nineteenth-century (e.g., the laws against consanguineal or first-cousin marriage in Ohio and Kansas). Lorenz noted the surprising absence of a sustained discourse on race and racial mixing in the more specialized medical journals; writers in the antebellum area seemed more concerned with first-cousin marriages, idiocy, and the “purity” of whites, arguing (as Samuel Gridley Howe did in 1848) that “nature, outraged in the persons of the parents, exacts her penalty from the parents to the children.” The provocative question that ended Lorenz’s talk—why, despite universal agreement about the need to perfect the white race, there wasn’t more widespread eugenic legislation in nineteenth-century America—led to a lively debate, during which participants commented mostly on the differences between the professionalization of science in the European and the American (postcolonial) context.

In his contribution to the panel, Sean Quinlan dealt with books and pamphlets published in post-revolutionary France that were meant to counteract the perceived decadence of the French population and mixed human breeding projects, sex advice, patriotism, and family values. The basic idea behind these publications was that by being devoted spouses (which meant taking their duties in the bedroom seriously) and loving parents, readers could still think of themselves as engaged citizens. Critiquing Foucault’s concept
of biopower (the technologies used by the state to control the bodies of its citizens), Quinlan pointed out that we know little about how people in fact understood these books and used them in their daily lives. The ensuing conversation focused on Quinlan’s concept of authorship and returned to questions of genre and authorship that had come up earlier during the workshop, especially in connection with utopian writing. How does the form of a source influence its content? What role does authorship play in the history of writing on eugenics?

Bernhard Dietz shifted the discussion of nationhood and eugenics to mid-nineteenth-century Britain, probing the connections between ideologies of national degeneracy (often related to studies of human poverty) and human improvability, a source of Galton’s thought that demands more attention than it has hitherto received. In the discussion, participants reflected on the perverse attraction of poverty as a subject in Victorian writing—an interdisciplinary connection that was also of importance to the workshop’s final paper, Kyla Schuller’s observations on the Orphan Train Riders, which centered on the ambivalent figure of Charles Loring Brace, a cousin of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine and Henry Ward Beecher. Brace developed his plan to remove urban children from the noxious influences of their neighborhoods and families under the sway of the Transcendentalists as well as evolutionary theory (he had encountered Darwin through Asa Gray). Schuller explained how Darwin’s theory of the gemmule (pre-genetic latent forces inherited from one’s ancestors) and a fuzzy kind of Lamarckism joined forces in Brace’s worldview with a syrupy sentimentalism derived from popular fiction (such as Susan Warner’s novel *The Wide Wide World*, about an orphaned city girl embracing Christianity when sent to work in the country). Brace focused on girls because boys, in his view, inherited, to an unusually high degree, “the human tendencies to evil.”

In the workshop’s final panel, participants identified the topics we had not covered: we had not consistently paid attention to the importance of the human-animal relationship, we had barely focused on scientific writing, and the relevance of legal discourse had remained unexplored. While we acknowledged that more work needed to be done on proto-eugenics, the workshop participants agreed that our conversations had yielded one important result: paying attention to the history and practice of eugenic thinking before Galton makes evident that hereditarianism is not useful as a model for understanding eugenics. We also agreed that future scholarly treatments would have to find a way of incorporating the voices of the victims of eugenic planning.
At the end of my report, I would therefore like to invoke the spirit of Asa Tenney from New Hampshire, an old man often described as severely mentally impaired. He was the first close friend and teacher of Laura Bridgman, the deaf and blind girl later rescued (or so Howe thought) by the nineteenth-century physician, Samuel Gridley Howe. Rejecting Howe’s attempts to “civilize” Bridgman, with whom Tenney had roamed the New Hampshire countryside, Tenney associated himself with the Indians, people who had already been purged from this part of New England. Here is what Tenney, liberated from the tyranny of spelling, wrote to Howe on 17 September 1839:

The indain [sic] chief that I have seen in this village, when the younger in- dian spoke of talking by signs, said the chief held the opinnon [sic] there was one language that was universal, and he could talk that language. Laura was improving in that verry [sic] language as well as knitting work before leaveing [sic] home.

As Tenney observed, in the only letter he has left us, the only improvement Laura needed—learning a simple language of signs—was the one she had already embarked on herself. He feared that in Howe’s fancy institute she would miss him dreadfully (as she did). Others might think of him and her as deficient. Old Asa Tenney, the man rumored to have been born with a crack in his skull, knew better.

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