

RACE AND MEMBERSHIP IN AMERICAN HISTORY: THE EUGENICS MOVEMENT



A Resource Book by Facing History and Ourselves

Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement

Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc.
Brookline, Massachusetts



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IN DEDICATION

R*ace and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* is dedicated to Seth A. Klarman, chair of the Facing History and Ourselves Board of Directors and president of The Baupost Group, L.L.C., with the utmost gratitude for his leadership, wisdom, and kindness.

As Seth's partners at Baupost, we considered many ways in which we could honor Seth and express our thanks to him for building such a successful business. We could think of no better way than highlighting the role he has played in leading Facing History and Ourselves. This critical organization has been so important to Seth's personal exploration, both intellectual and practical, of social responsibility. Seth, in turn, has devoted his boundless energy and curiosity, good counsel and generosity to helping make Facing History a success. We chose to dedicate this book to Seth because it exemplifies his deep interest in history, his commitment to intellectual rigor, and his strong conviction about the importance of Facing History's mission—and not least, because he has read and reviewed every word in draft form.

Seth and his wife Beth, who chairs the New England Regional Advisory Board, are vital members of the Facing History family. They have dedicated their time and philanthropy to the organization because they know that Facing History addresses some of the most difficult issues facing our society—the hatreds that exist in our world and how we confront them. Together, their dedication has made a difference to the work of Facing History.

We thank Seth for his hard work on our behalf, the high standard he sets, and his vision that has helped build successful organizations. His ability to combine the best in philanthropy and business with a commitment to family sets a model and helps make the world a better place.

With sincere thanks and true friendship,

Thomas W. Blumenthal

Paul C. Gannon

Scott A. Nathan

Samuel Plimpton

CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Preface	viii
Overview	x
1. Science Fictions and Social Realities	1
1. What Do We Do with a Variation?	2
2. Eye of the Beholder	4
3. Beyond Classification	8
4. "What Is Your Race?"	13
5. "Passing"	17
6. Race and Racism	20
7. Challenging Limits	26
8. The Masterpiece Society	31
2. Race, Democracy, and Citizenship	34
1. Who Is Human?	36
2. Who Is Equal?	39
3. Ranking Humankind	43
4. Science and Prejudice	47
5. Science, Skulls, and Mustard Seeds	51
6. Race and Citizenship	55
7. Challenging Racism	58
3. Evolution, "Progress," and Eugenics	62
1. From Darwin to Social Darwinism	63
2. "Race Improvement"	68
3. The Laws of Heredity	71
4. Eugenics and the Promise of "Progress"	74
5. Tracking Inherited Traits	77
6. All in the Family	82
7. Raising Questions	86

4. In an Age of “Progress”	90
1. “Marvels of a Marvelous Age”	92
2. The End of the Frontier	96
3. A Celebration of “Progress”	99
4. “Progress,” Civilization, and “Color-Line Murder”	105
5. Doors to Opportunity	109
6. Taking Up the “White Man’s Burden”	113
7. Disparities	119
8. “Progress” and Poverty	124
9. Rumors and Fears	129
10. “The Kind of World We Lived In”	133
5. Eugenics and the Power of Testing	140
1. Science, Eugenics, and Propaganda	142
2. Targeting the “Unfit”	146
3. Identifying the “Unfit”	151
4. Revising the Test	156
5. Fears of Declining Intelligence	160
6. Racism and Intelligence Test Scores	164
7. Limiting Opportunity	167
8. Challenging Racial Assumptions	172
9. Intelligence Testing Today	176
6. Toward Civic Biology	181
1. What Did You Learn in School Today?	182
2. Eugenics, Race, and Marriage	187
3. Controlling the “Unfit”	191
4. “Three Generations of Imbeciles”?	195
5. Apology or “Regrets”?	201
7. Eugenics, Citizenship, and Immigration	206
1. Guarded Gates or an Open Door?	207
2. From an Immigrant’s Perspective	211
3. Who May Enter?	214

4. Race and Citizenship	216
5. War, Immigration, and Hysteria	220
6. Restricting Immigration	223
7. The Debate in Congress	226
8. "A Defensive Action"	232
9. Immigration and Racism	235
8. The Nazi Connection	240
1. Eugenicists, Democrats, and Dictators	242
2. The American Influence	244
3. "Thinking Biologically"	247
4. Ideas Have Consequences	251
5. Under the Cover of Law	256
6. Citizenship and "Racial Enemies"	262
7. Eugenics and American Public Policy	266
8. Honorary Degrees and Propaganda	269
9. Protesting Eugenic Policies	272
10. New Discoveries	275
11. "Where Is this Path Taking Us?"	278
12. Confronting a "Twisted Science"	283
9. Legacies and Possibilities	288
1. The Unknown Citizen	290
2. "The Whole Is Not the Sum of Its Parts"	292
3. Is Race "Skin Deep"?	295
4. The Power of Stereotypes	302
5. Measuring Intelligences	310
6. Trends in Genetic Research	315
7. Will Genetic Research Lead to Eugenic Policies?	320
8. Raising Moral Questions	324
9. The Power of History	331
For Further Investigation	334
Index	344

FOREWORD

R*ace and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* has been a long time in coming. After years of revising drafts, piloting lessons in classrooms, and infusing ideas into institutes, we now have a special book that I believe was worth the wait.

The book asks us to rethink what we know about our own past. While barely remembered today, the eugenics movement represents a moral fault line in our history. It was a movement that defined differences in terms of racially superior and inferior human traits. Because these ideas were promoted in the name of science and education, they had a dramatic impact on public policies and the lives of ordinary people at the time and, in turn, created legacies that are still with us today. The eugenics movement is not a historical footnote. It is a fundamental chapter in our history that ought to be examined in our classrooms.

When I first began research on eugenics in 1993, I sensed there was an important story to be told. That story became a manuscript that I completed in 1997. It is now a book that has been rewritten, edited, and commented upon by many people. Often overlooked are those who volunteered their time to comb archives and correspond with scholars. I will not forget the research efforts of Debbie Karpel, Lisa Rivo, Charlie Putnam, Kirsten Greenidge, and Lisa Middents. I thank them very much.

I would like to acknowledge the scholars who have taught me so much about the forgotten history of eugenics and who have also taken the time to review drafts of this book. First is Paul Lombardo who has so kindly sent us his pioneering articles on the history of sterilization and antimiscegenation laws. He has advised us when called upon and recommended our program to educators around the country. I very much respect his intellect and his keen ethical sense of justice in the work he does.

My appreciation is extended to Steven Selden who first alerted me to the role eugenics has played in curriculum and school organization. His book, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America*, is a must-read for anyone who wants to see how eugenic ideas became part of school curricula. I also want to thank Nicole Hahn Rafter for her special contributions to understanding eugenic conceptions of the criminal. Her books, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies* and *Creating Born Criminals* were extremely valuable in helping us to think about how notions of the “criminal other” have become institutionalized over time. Finally, I want to thank Facing History and Ourselves for its support of the book and its mission to provide education for democracy.

Alan Stoskopf
Associate Program Director for Staff Development

PREFACE

Since its inception in 1976, Facing History and Ourselves has been exploring the roots of racism and antisemitism. Eugenics—an early 20th century movement to rid society of “inferior racial traits”—is part of that history. I learned about the movement from Stephan Chorover, the father of one of my first Facing History students. In *From Genesis to Genocide*, he described the connections between the history of “race science” and eugenics in the United States and Nazi programs that aimed at “purifying the race” by murdering millions of children, women, and men.

As Facing History’s interest in the eugenics movement deepened, we featured it at our 1992 conference, “Examining Historical Roots to Racism and Antisemitism: A Profile of Facing History’s Research” and invited Stephen Jay Gould, who has written about the movement, to be the featured speaker. As we prepared for the event, we studied Gould’s work, particularly his now classic *Mismeasure of Man*. In the introduction, he describes a conversation that appears in Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates explains to Glaucon that in his ideal society citizens will be assigned to one of three classes. Uncertain as to how he will persuade people to accept such a division, Socrates decides to create a myth.

Citizens, we shall say to them in our tale, you are brothers, yet God has framed you differently. Some of you have the power of command, and in the composition of these he has mingled gold, wherefore also they have the greatest honor; others he has made of silver, to be auxiliaries; others again who are to be husbandmen and craftsmen he has composed of brass and iron; and the species will generally be preserved in the children.¹

When asked if citizens will believe the myth, Glaucon replies, “Not in the present generation . . . but their sons may be made to believe in the tale, and their son’s sons, and posterity after them.” That myth is still being taught, studied, and believed. Gould’s book explores the scientific version of the myth. In *Killers of the Dream*, Lillian Smith, a white southerner, tells of how that same myth shaped her childhood in the early 1900s:

The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their “place.” The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that “all men are brothers,” trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. . . .

From the day I was born, I began to learn my lessons. . . . I learned it is possible. . . to pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning and to feel comfortable doing both. I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word democracy was used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after

door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality.²

Eventually Smith's struggle with her conscience led her to publicly challenge the myth. *Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* also confronts that myth by describing the support it received from a twisted science that betrayed generations of children and turned neighbor against neighbor.

This new resource book reflects a decade of research and development inspired in part by the teaching of K. Anthony Appiah and funded through the Harvard/Facing History and Ourselves Project. Alan Stoskopf wrote the original manuscript, introduced our staff to leading scholars in the field, shared findings at board meetings, institutes, and workshops in the United States and Europe, and built a team of colleagues who reviewed and piloted lessons in dozens of Facing History classrooms. It is a contribution we value greatly.

Under the leadership of Marc Skvirsky, the staff has incorporated our research into Facing History programs and materials and made it a part of our professional development. Among those who assisted in these efforts are Jennifer Clark, Kevin Feinberg, Karen Murphy, and Adam Strom. Phyllis Goldstein integrated the outcome of our mutual efforts into a resource book with the assistance of Tracy O'Brien and Karen Lempert, who prepared bibliographies and secured permissions, and Jenifer Snow, the book's designer. John Englander has relied on that research in creating an instructional module on the eugenics movement for our website at www.facinghistory.org.

Both the resource book and the module reveal the power of ideas to shape reality and the importance of education in preserving and protecting democracy. Scientist Jacob Bronowski, who lost members of his own family in the Holocaust, believed that societies are held together by mutual respect. He has written that a society fails, "in fact, it falls apart into groups of fear and power, when the concept of man is false." In his view, the never-ending search for what makes us human helps keep democracy alive. To turn scientific inquiry into dogma is in Bronowski's words to "freeze the concept of man into a caricature beyond correction, as the society of caste and master race have done." Exploring our common humanity by confronting the myth of superior "races," classes, and individuals is essential to education for democracy in the 21st century. History suggests we have a lot to learn.

Margot Stern Strom
Executive Director

1 Quoted in *Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen Jay Gould. W.W. Norton & Company, 1996, 1981, pp. 51-52.

2 *Killers of the Dream* by Lillian Smith. W.W. Norton & Company, 1949. Doubleday Anchor edition, 1963, pp. 17, 18-19.

OVERVIEW

R*ace and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* focuses on a time in the early 1900s when many people believed that some “races,” classes, and individuals were superior to others. They used a new branch of scientific inquiry known as eugenics to justify their prejudices and advocate programs and policies aimed at solving the nation’s problems by ridding society of “inferior racial traits.”

Rationale

Eugenics was an international movement that attracted heads of state, teachers, philanthropists, journalists, and ordinary citizens who advocated laws and policies that would shape the most basic decisions that individuals and societies make: Who may marry? Who may have children? Who will be educated? Who may live among us?

Race and Membership in American History considers how people responded to those questions at various times in history. The book takes on special importance at a time when scientists have just completed the first survey of the human genome—a scientific milestone that promises to enhance our understanding of the ways inherited traits influence who we are and what we may become. There is much we as citizens can learn about the relationship between science and society from the history of the eugenics movement.

In Nazi Germany, eugenics was used to shape and ultimately justify policies of mass murder. In the United States, the consequences were less extreme. Nonetheless, eugenics had a profound effect on almost every aspect of everyday life. Long after other scientists had shown that the laws of heredity are more complicated than “breeding the best with the best,” eugenicists were still trying to segregate and sterilize the mentally and physically disabled. Long after anthropologists had shown that intelligence and other human traits are shaped at least in part by culture and environment, eugenicists were still seeking ways to “protect” the purity of the “white race.”

Links to the Curriculum

Race and Membership can be used as a companion to Facing History’s primary resource book, *Holocaust and Human Behavior*. It may also be used to deepen a study of American or world history. The book’s vast array of primary sources can also provide a rich historical context for courses in literature, civics, education, psychology, sociology, and government. In addition, the book can be used to enhance a study of the history of science.

Organization

Like other Facing History publications, *Race and Membership in American History* is a resource book that provides a flexible structure for examining complex events and ideas. Teachers are encouraged to select the readings that are most appropriate for their students and which best match the objectives of their curriculum. They are also encouraged to choose the questions and activities that further those objectives from “Connections,” a

section at the end of every reading with suggestions for discussion, writing assignments, and research projects.

Race and Membership in American History is a departure from other Facing History resource books in that, for the first time, a number of related readings appear on the web at www.facinghistory.org as part of an instructional module that traces the connections between the American eugenics movement and its counterpart in Nazi Germany.

Scope and Sequence

Like all Facing History publications, this new resource book begins with questions of identity and membership. It then moves to a study of a particular history—one that fosters an understanding of the role of citizen, the fragility of democracy, the ways prejudices and other preconceived notions can distort scientific inquiry, and the dangers of resolving complex problems by dividing the world into *us* and *them* and then blaming “them” for all of the ills of society. It is a history that also raises profound questions of right and wrong, of guilt and responsibility. As in other Facing History publications, a variety of questions and activities link that history to our own lives and experiences. The book ends with a thoughtful look not only at the legacies of this history but also of concerns related to prevention.

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces students to key concepts and themes by examining the idea of difference through various lenses. Chapter 2 places those ideas in historical perspective by examining how Europeans and Americans regarded differences in the 1700s and early 1800s. Many of the beliefs we hold today about race, citizenship, and democracy developed during those years. The chapter focuses on the tension between two contradictory notions about human worth—racism and equality—the consequences of that tension, and its effects on the lives of real people in the past and today.

Chapter 3 brings notions about human worth into the 20th century by describing the origins of the eugenics movement. Chapter 4 places that movement in a historical context by examining its links to the progressive movement. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 consider how eugenicists used science to justify social inequalities, deny opportunities, and legitimize violence. The chapters also offer insights into the fragility of democracy by exploring why the movement was attractive to many Americans in the early 1900s.

Chapter 8 outlines the connections between the American and German eugenics movements. Those links reveal fault lines in the relationship between science and society. In Chapter 9, students move from a study of the past to questions of judgment and participation. The first two readings in this chapter return to the questions of Chapter 1. The readings that follow apply those questions to current discussions of the relationship between science and society. Each of these readings is followed by suggestions for independent research or group projects. The book ends with “For Further Investigation,” a list of websites, books, videos, and other resources.

