

Name: Huong Phan

Prompt: How was eugenics implemented in the state of Indiana, and what were some of the outcomes, in the United States and worldwide, of this practice?

The later half of 19th century marked the discovery of Mendel's laws of genetic inheritance and Darwin's theory of natural selection, which sparked new predictions among the scientists that newborn babies would inherit their traits from their parents. That means intelligent parents would give birth to equally talented offsprings, and "feeble-minded" parents would naturally give birth to mentally disabled children. Since then, the notion of eugenics, or good births, was widely propagated in the US. As the implementation of eugenics in Indiana and its implications in the rest of the world are closely interconnected and even overlapping, let's explore the scientific conception of eugenics, the legalization of the sterilization law and the social propagation of "degenerate heredity" (*Fit to Breed: Eugenics in Indiana* 2007), along with their ripple effects on the rest of the world in their respective medical, legal and social contexts.

From the medical perspective, scientists and professors, the earliest eugenicists, proposed to identify the socially unfit individuals for reproduction and incorporate the ideas of eugenics in public health programs involving the prevention the spread of infectious diseases. Harry Laughlin, one of the most controversially zealous advocate of the eugenics movement, defined "socially inadequate groups" as "the feeble-minded, the insane, the criminalistic, the epileptic" and "the drug addicted, the diseased", asserting that the socially abnormal kids would always inherit their behaviors from their parents, and preventing them from being born would eliminate social ills and ensure greater peace and safety for the people (Lombardo 1996). Thus, the eugenicists believed that the "defectives" should be segregated from the rest of the society to prevent them from interacting with each other and reproducing

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intellectually and morally defective babies, just like how patients with contagious diseases are quarantined (Pernick 1997).

Eugenicists also insisted that even infectious diseases are inherited, despite the bacteriologists' opposing claim that infectious diseases had nothing to do with heredity (Pernick 1997). It also seems that eugenics played a big role in public health policies, as they promote "good heredity and good hygiene" for a long life expectancy (Pernick 1997). The scientists also believed Weismann's theory that claimed environmental factors totally could not cause any effects on "germ plasms", the so-called inherited infectious cells. This has been proven wrong as scientists later found out that environmental factors, or epigenetics, can actually influence our genes to a greater extent than inheritance from our parents (Chakravati 2015).

From the social perspective, the idea of eugenic sterilization was promoted through posters, such as The Triangle of Life and the Better Babies Competition. The American Eugenics Society tried to convince the people that no matter how hard they studied, how hard they worked to change their status quo, they would never be able to change who they are. In addition, the xenophobia and the fear of immigrants whom the white Americans population thought would dilute the American familial and cultural values (Cohen 4) only exacerbated the social and racial discrimination and thus propelled the eugenic movement further. The Better Babies Competition is where the families can bring their children to be judged according to several criteria such as physical and mental fitness, and the parents are also educated to how to raise their children healthily. Nevertheless, though the movement was largely

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supported, it met some objections from the Catholic Church members, who actively protested against the sterilization law and actually succeeded in preventing some of bills from being passed (Greely 254, Cohen 300). Furthermore, the state-mandated sterilization caused thousands of adolescents to be sterilized without their consent or at most with forced consent (*Fit to Breed: Eugenics in Indiana* 2007), depriving them of their human rights and causing them to resent the system when they found out the truth of their sterilization.

From the legal perspective, Indiana, the pioneer of eugenic sterilization, contributed significantly to its promulgation to the rest of US and foreign countries. In 1907, it became the first state ever to legalize compulsory eugenic sterilization of “criminals, rapists, imbeciles and idiots” (Baldanzi, et al. 2003), people who were believed to threaten the peace and hamper the development of society, whom behaviors are thought to be associated with mental disabilities. However, it was not made constitutional then and various individuals and organizations that supported eugenics made as much effort as they can to make the law constitutional. One of them is the Indiana Committee on Mental Defectives, established in 1915 to determine the population which had socially undesirable traits for the sake of prevention of future crimes (*Fit to Breed: Eugenics in Indiana* 2007). Conducted by elite groups of graduates from prestigious universities (Lantzer 2007), their study mostly targeted the poor families in Indiana’s impoverished rural neighborhoods where children were not received proper education (“A Perfect Society” 2000). The too big of a gap in social class and literacy clouded the judgment of the elites, who most likely saw the people living in those rustic and ill-educated neighborhoods as less intellectually

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inclined. Those poor residents are categorized into three types of intellectual disabilities, “the insane, epileptics and the feeble-minded”, in which the feeble-minded are further categorized into idiots, imbeciles and morons, those declared to have mental ages of less than twelve (*Fit to Breed: Eugenics in Indiana* 2007). In short, intellectual capacity was intimately linked to social and financial status, as people who cannot afford to receive education were automatically labeled “feeble-minded”. From 1907 to 1974, the year when sterilization law was finally repealed, Indiana had forcibly sterilized about 2,500 people (Stern 235).

However, despite their efforts, the law was ruled unconstitutional in 1921 on the basis of “violation of due process” for an individual to be sterilized without a court hearing (Lantzer 2007). Only in 1927 after The Supreme Court’s ruling of *Buck v. Bell* did the law become constitutional. Carrie Buck was unfortunate enough to have been chosen as the test subject for the sterilization law to be made constitutional by Dr. Albert Priddy, a front-runner in lobbying for the constitutional sterilization law. She was unfortunate enough to have all the socially unwanted traits – she was born in a poor family, with both parents labeled as “feeble-minded” themselves, and gave birth to a child out of wedlock. Despite showing “perfectly normal intelligence” through her school records (Cohen 5), even receiving a “very good – deportment and lessons” comment from her teacher (Lombardo 1985), Buck was still categorized as feeble-minded on the basis of heredity from her intellectually disabled mother and forced to sterilize. The result of the case had already been predetermined to be in favor of Buck’s forced sterilization, as Buck’s “defense” lawyer Irvine Whitehead had been working in “collusion” with Dr. Priddy prior to the trial on the approval of her

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sterilization and thus did not produce any arguments against assertions on Buck's mental defects and socially disturbing behaviors (Lombardo 1985). The Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who delivered the final sentence was also a huge supporter of eugenics and claimed that the feeble-minded will "sap the strength of the State" and they should be stopped from reproducing and propagating feeble-mindedness in the society (Greely 255). The case is a prime example showing how eugenic movement swept everyone up at their feet and catalyzed his or her subconsciously discriminative reactions towards the socially, sometimes racially undesirable people. It clearly shows how prejudiced and unjust can the court be and how the law was never made to protect the lower class, powerless people.

In the end, the constitutional law forced 60,000 "feeble-minded" people to be sterilized (Cohen 10), and following Indiana, 31 out of 48 states in the US and countries such as Denmark, Canada and Germany also legalized sterilization within the decade after the constitutionality of sterilization law in 1927 (Greely 254). The most prominent and infamous example of eugenic sterilization abroad is the Nazi Germany's heinous version of eugenics that mandated the sterilization of not only the feeble-minded, alcoholic, and epileptic but also discriminated races, especially the Jews (Cohen 302). Under the law, more than 375,000 people were sterilized. The law, having become a vehicle for expression of underlying extreme bigotry and cruelty against certain races, raised doubts of whether eugenic sterilization was really a force that could enhance the society, or it could become merely a tool for cruel exertion of power or destruction of one race towards the other.

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In summary, from the examination of Indiana's eugenic movement in medical, legal and social contexts, coupled with its impacts in the US and in other countries, I have come to a conclusion that the eugenics movement is an iconic example of good intention gone awry. Though initially aimed to promote "good births", or the reproduction of babies who possessed socially favorable, healthy genes, and prevent genetic diseases from spreading among individuals in the society (Greely 253 - 254), it unfortunately became a great segregating force among different people. The glaringly narrow and sometimes even misled genetics knowledge and the deep-rooted discrimination against people of certain races and social backgrounds contributed significantly to the downfall of the movement. Only after later scientific research and discoveries that proved the older generations of scientists wrong did we realize how heredity is not the deciding factor of our genetic traits and social behaviors. Nonetheless, despite all its unjust and terrible outcomes, the eugenics movement definitely reminded us to avoid our predecessors' mistakes, not to make any dangerous assumptions in science, and to discard any of our discriminations towards any social or racial groups.

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