

8) Considering that the eugenic policies (such as forced sterilization of the “feeble-minded” and racial marriage laws) implemented in the early part of the 20th century were at least in part a product of the social, political, scientific, and religious attitudes of the time, could such policies possibly re-emerge today? Has our society changed very much? In your opinion, is there anything in those policies worth salvaging?

When the topic of eugenics is brought up, eugenic policies of the early 20th century (such as sterilization of the “feeble-minded”) most often come to mind. However, the scope of eugenics and its implications reach out further in time than just that one, war-torn period in history. In order to see the far reaching implications of eugenics and whether it exists today, a definition of what exactly is eugenics must be derived.

In its most general sense, eugenics is an attempted manipulation of the transference of behaviours and traits across many generations throughout a population by genetic means. The key to this definition is the manipulation of traits over an entire population, an assertion made clear by the founder of eugenics, Sir Francis Galton, “Eugenics is the science which deals with all the influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race...” Therefore, eugenics implies that division in the overall human population exists and certain populations have superior traits.

If eugenics discriminates between superior and inferior qualities of humans, then Nazi policies such as the *Lebensborn* program are not the first in history to show eugenic tendencies. If not for a lack of technology, would it not be fair to say that the Indian Removal Act passed in 1830 in the United States is a somewhat eugenic policy? Native Americans were seen as uncivilized, an undesirable trait, and were pressured into moving further west or assimilating with white culture. Either choice would greatly affect the availability of partners for reproduction and subsequent generations. Going even further

back in history, various “ethnic cleansings” by the Catholic Church, such as the Spanish Inquisition, could also be considered in the same light. In this case, Jews and Muslims were either expelled from Spain or killed, something very reminiscent of 1940’s Germany. The idea of some human qualities being superior to others is the same; it is only the level of technology and scientific knowledge that has changed.

The fundamental pressures that brought eugenics into the world; racism and class bias among others, have existed throughout human history and continue to exist to this day. These factors are no longer as blunt as before; they evolve and change with the times. This can be seen in the transition from outright torture in the Spanish Inquisition, to blatant public racism and segregation against African Americans in the early 20th century, to today where public racism is condemned but private opinions need not agree with public consensus. Eugenics evolved along with the pressures that created it and you need to look no further than former eugenicists themselves for proof, “They won’t accept the idea that they are in general second rate. We must rely on other motivation...Let’s stop telling anyone that they have a generally inferior genetic quality for they will never agree.” Eugenics can still be seen today, but it is not the same as “traditional” early 20th century eugenics.

Eugenics seeks to develop more positive traits in populations using genetic means, a fundamental concept needed to bridge “traditional” eugenics with modern eugenics as it does not define what exactly those traits are and how populations are manipulated genetically. The Chinese law on Maternal and Infant Health Care is the prime example of modern eugenics. It mandates that parents at-risk of passing on genetic disorders must undergo genetic counselling and doctors are empowered to control the behaviour of at risk couples by giving medical advice to what is “considered inappropriate for child-bearing from a medical point of view” (Reilly, 2000). This law differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable traits and seeks to benefit the genetic quality of future generations, the two fundamental components of eugenics. It may be said that genetic counselling is applied on an individual level, therefore it cannot be

eugenic in nature, but like Troy Duster's idea of "backdoor eugenics", the cumulative effect of many private decisions affects the whole (Buchanan et. al , 2000).

It is clear that society changes its methods of delivering and implementing ideas to the public, but the fundamental ideas remain the same, "The core notion of eugenics, that people's lives will probably go better if they have genes conducive to health and other advantageous traits, has lost little appeal" (Buchanan et. al, 2000). Eugenic policies still exist today, in a somewhat modified form and will continue to emerge in the future with advent of newer genetic technologies. In order to prevent atrocities of past eugenic policies, social justice must be strongly implemented into future genetic policies and future genetic challenges must be anticipated. Genetics provides the knowledge to bring about great changes to human kind and the policies shaping these changes must be just as great, for as Peter Parker's uncle once said, "with great power comes great responsibility".