

Science saturated with racism

Race Unmasked: Biology and Race in the 20th Century

Michael Yudell

Columbia University Press, New York, 2014

Jerry Bergman

This book makes an important contribution to understanding the origins of one of the most fundamental problems in contemporary society and science, namely what is race, and are the races, however defined, biological equals. Yudell, Associate Professor at the School of Public Health, Drexel University (Philadelphia), charts the evolution of the ‘scientific’ race concept during the last century to today, with a particular focus on eugenics and its history in the USA, focusing almost entirely on the problem between the black and white ‘races’. Yudell documents that there is often more genetic diversity within a given racial group than between any two races, yet race is still critical, sometimes disturbingly so, in its political and social applications.

The book also documents the enormous harm that eugenics and its applications to social policy have caused. This was summarized by one author who wrote: “In the 1930s, America was infatuated with the pseudoscience of eugenics and its promise of strengthening the human race by culling the ‘unfit’ from the genetic pool.” These “unfit” humans included:

“... the ‘feeble-minded’, insane, and criminal, those so classified included women who had sex out of wedlock (considered a mental illness), orphans, the disabled, the poor, the homeless, epileptics, masturbators,

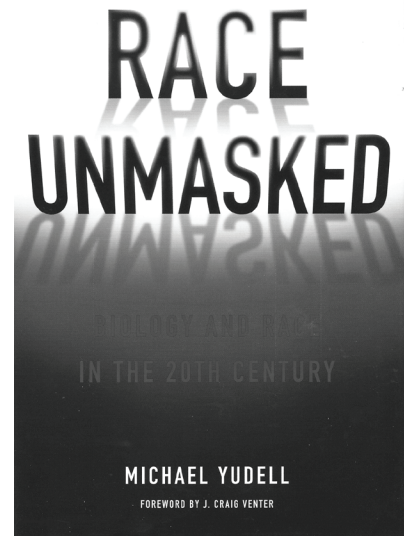
the blind and the deaf, alcoholics, and girls whose genitals exceeded certain measurements. Some eugenicists advocated euthanasia, and in mental hospitals, this was quietly carried out on scores of people through ‘lethal neglect’ or outright murder.”¹

An example she includes occurred at one Illinois mental hospital:

“... new patients were dosed with milk from cows infected with tuberculosis, in the belief that only the undesirable would perish. As many as four in ten of these patients died. A more popular tool of eugenics was forced sterilization, employed on a raft of lost souls who, through misbehavior or misfortune, fell into the hands of state governments. By 1930 ... California was enraptured with eugenics, and would ultimately sterilize some twenty thousand people.”¹

In the end, “social prejudices became scientific” which justified a wide variety of abuses (p. 18). This field, one that Hillenbrand called a pseudoscience, was embraced by many “well-respected geneticists” who concluded that “the Negro race differs greatly from the white race, mentally as well as physically” (p. 15).

Francis Galton, Darwin’s first cousin, borrowed heavily from Darwin, writing that, as an inferior race, the “negro may himself disappear before alien races, just as his predecessors disappeared before him” (p. 28). To Galton “race improvement was ‘so noble in its aim’ that it rose to the level of ‘religious obligation’” (p. 29). Furthermore, Galton’s writings were “read widely” and greatly influenced not only the eugenic movement but also governmental policy (p. 19).



Almost all leaders of the various racist eugenic movements were academics with Ph.D.s from leading universities, a virtual “‘who’s who’ of the natural and social scientists of the time” (p. 77). The leading eugenicist, Charles Davenport, had a Ph.D. from Harvard. Dr Harvey E. Jordan, Professor of Embryology, and later Dean of the College of Medicine at the University of Virginia, had a Ph.D. from Princeton University. Yudell described him as “a noted eugenicist and racist” (p. 38). Paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn was head of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City for over 25 years, during which time he accumulated one of the finest fossil collections in the world. Johns Hopkins University Professor of Biostatistics and Genetics, Dr Raymond Pearl, was a leading eugenicist who researched the “racial pathology” of blacks compared to whites (p. 69). The implication of his research was that certain internal organs of blacks “were somehow more primitive” than those of whites, and the same organs of whites “represented an evolutionary advance” (p. 71).

As Yudell makes clear: “social Darwinism and craniometry were the scientific backbone of a 19th century

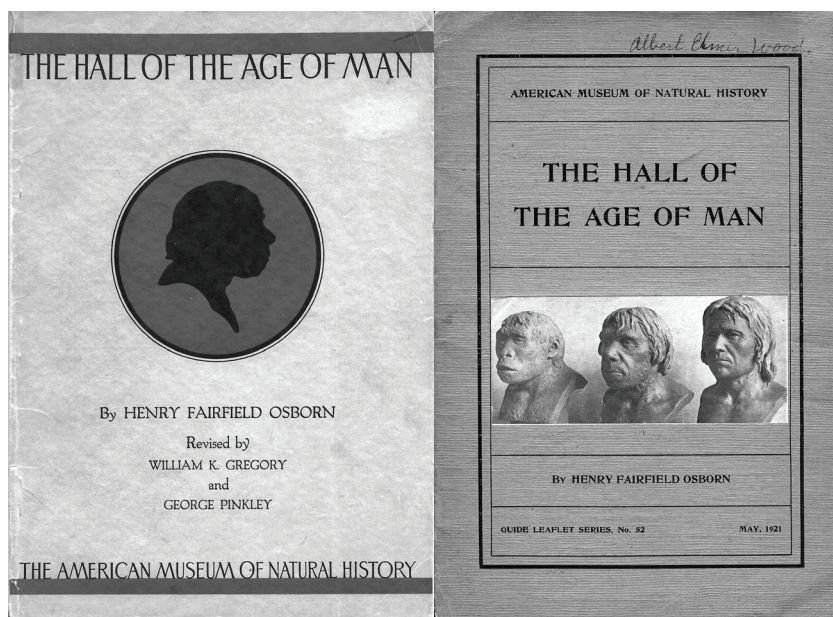


Figure 1. Two covers of Henry Fairfield Osborn's book *The Hall of the Age of Man*

understanding of race, then in the 20th century eugenics [provided] the formative language of modern racism" (p. 2). In fact:

"... the biological race concept, as we understand it today, originated with eugenic theories of difference and was re-created and integrated into modern biological thought by population geneticists and evolutionary biologists in the 1930s and 1940s during the evolutionary synthesis in biology (the union of population genetics, experimental genetics, and natural history that reshaped modern biology)" (p. 6).

The main applications of eugenics in America and other countries, such as Sweden, were the large sterilization programs (63,000 in the United States alone) and immigration restrictions, especially of Jews, as codified in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 (pp. 9, 10, 14). The main reasons for these immigration restrictions were to keep people that had "bad germ plasm" out of America and to stop other countries from pouring their "pestilential sewage into our reservoir" (p. 32).

Osborn was a main force behind lobbying congress for "sweeping

immigration restrictions" (p. 33). Osborn pushed the claim that certain "countries are now striving to keep the desirable people at home, and are sending the undesirables, especially the Jews, to America" (p. 33).

Harry Laughlin, the superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, "ferently promoted the eugenics cause", maintaining that "recent immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were afflicted 'by a high degree of insanity, mental deficiency, and criminality'" compared to past immigrants, polluting America's racial stock (p. 34). Consequently, "eugenics was, in many ways, the most compelling ideology generating support for the bill" (p. 34). As a result of the bill most of those kept out of America were Jews and persons from Eastern Europe.

The impact from the "push to integrate eugenic theory into American immigration policy by Osborn and others was considerable, and the consequences" had clear

"... damaging effects on both immigrants to the United States and eventually on those who died in the Nazi genocide against the Jews in

Europe. Federal immigration restrictions were, as such, buoyed by eugenicist sentiment" (pp. 33–34).

Harry Laughlin appeared before Congress several times in the early 1920s promoting the belief that immigration was foremost a "biological problem" (p. 34). In the 20th century, it was primarily the field of eugenetics,

"... from which racial scientists freely exploited both language and prestige. This legacy can be explained largely by the history of genetics itself, which at its founding was inseparable from the eugenic theories that were mired in examining hereditary traits both within and between human races" (p. 3).

Science 'fact' of Negro inferiority

A leading medical journal, *American Medicine*, editorialized in support of the conclusion that "no amount of training" will cause the black race's "brain to grow into the Anglo-Saxon form", indicating that studies have proved an "anatomical basis for the complete failure of Negro schools to impart the higher studies" (p. 54). In 1909, Professor Franklin Mall tried to verify the claim that black brains were significantly smaller than white brains, without success. He

"... could find no significant differences between black and white brain structures. 'I have now had considerable experience in the dissection of the Negro and have yet to observe that variations are more common in the Negro than in the white', Mall wrote in a rebuttal in the *American Journal of Anatomy*" (p. 54).

Nonetheless, "ideas about racialized anatomy quickly became the scientific and popular norm, while Mall's work had little impact" (p. 54) in spite of much contrary evidence, such as the "black high school" that academically outperformed at least two "white schools" in the district as

far back as 1899! The school called M Street School was later renamed Dunbar High School in 1916. Their outstanding academic success continued until about the 1950s, due to inappropriate external decisions.² Other examples were documented by scholar Thomas Sowell, who has written extensively on racial relations.

The Ku Klux Klan

The Klan often exploited the literature of the eugenic scientists, and some scientists even worked to support their racist agenda. For example, historian Lothrop Stoddard advised the Klan on race matters and, in 1923, was shown to be a member of the Klan (pp. 41–42). He also implored Klan members to read his book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, which claimed that non-whites were reproducing far more rapidly than whites. Negroes, he warned, remain savages and their increasing dominance will eventually be disastrous for white society. Stod-

dard lectured to audiences as large as 4,000 members (p. 103).

Henry Fairfield Osborn was also actively involved in supporting eugenics by his work in the International Congress of Eugenics; the second was held at the American Museum of Natural History in 1921 (p. 43). Their goal was to use race betterment programs to improve and evolve humanity. The museum, “one of the world’s leading institutions for anthropological thought”, was active in supporting numerous other eugenic programs (p. 47).

Presenters at the conference included leading scientists, such as Professors Sewell Wright and L.C. Dunn, telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell, and Dr Thomas Garth and zoologist Theophilus Painter, both from the University of Texas. Dr A.H. Schultz, Department of Embryology at Carnegie Institution, Washington D.C, compared white and Negro fetuses (p. 51), and Painter’s presentation was on the chromosomes of whites and blacks, purporting to show subtle but,

he thought, significant differences between them.

Osborn had a permanent display at the museum on eugenics titled *The Hall of the Age of Man* (see figure 1). Yudell described Osborn as a “notorious anti-Semite and an active booster of Nazi Germany” (p. 47). Osborn even visited Nazi Germany, “enthusiastic” about its eugenic programs. For his work in this area he received an honorary degree at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in 1934 (p. 47).

In the end, an exhibit on eugenics set up in conjunction with the congress drew between 5,000 and 10,000 visitors (p. 49). Race and human evolution was a theme in all of the booths. The attendees included many college and university professors plus investigators in various scientific institutions who, no doubt, took the ideas gleaned from the exhibit back home to their students and colleagues.

American eugenics and Nazism

European political events, specifically the rise of Nazism, helped to popularize the link between race and genetics. The German biologists “actively and without compunction sought” to apply eugenics to their society, and to “a significant degree, Nazi eugenic zeal was inspired by American eugenics” (p. 108). Madison Grant’s eugenic apologetic *The Passing of the Great Race: The Racial Basis of European History*, was read by many Nazis:

“... its ideas about Nordic racial purity influenced many Germans. In a letter to Grant, Hitler called *The Passing* ‘his Bible’. In 1933 the *Eugenical News* ... noted the American influence on German sterilization policy: ‘To one versed in the history of eugenic sterilization in America, the text of the German statute reads almost like the American model sterilization law’” (p. 108).

Furthermore:



Figure 2. The KKK was very active for several decades in the United States, not only in the South but also in the North in some states such as Indiana. Their influence was so high in some areas that to be elected to a high level political office in some states required the endorsement of the KKK. The KKK also enjoyed significant support from academia, which helped to boost their scientific legitimacy.

“American philanthropists, including those of the Rockefeller Foundation, also gave scientific grants to German eugenicist researchers, both before and for several years after the rise of Hitler. And even as the world recoiled in horror at the ways in which the Nazis integrated eugenics into their political philosophy—mass sterilizations and concentration camps—American eugenicists continued to support their Nazi brethren” (p. 108).

The Nazis were so grateful for the help of Americans that several were awarded honorary doctorates from major German universities. One example came in 1935 when Harry Laughlin was awarded

“... an honorary degree from the University of Heidelberg for ‘being one of the most important pioneers in the field of racial hygiene.’ The dean of the University of Heidelberg’s medical school later helped organize the gassing of thousands of mentally handicapped adults” (pp. 108–109).

In another example, after a 1935 visit to Berlin,

“... the head of the Eugenic Research Association, Clarence Campbell, proclaimed the Nazi eugenic policy ‘sets a pattern which other nations and other racial groups must follow if they do not wish to fall behind in their racial quality, in their racial accomplishments, and in their prospects for survival.’ Finally, in 1937, American eugenicists distributed a Nazi eugenic propaganda film to promote the eugenic cause in the United States” (p. 109).

The eugenics movement ends

A major factor that spelled the end of the eugenics movement was the “worldwide reaction to the eugenical horrors” that occurred in Nazi Germany as well as the effects of the

American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (p. 8).

A major historical fact is that, although humans were historically divided into language and national groups, classifying “human variation in blood or in kinship [genetic] groups is a relatively new way to categorize humans” (p. 25). In other words, the main way of grouping people in the past was based on their national origin, such as an Assyrian or an Egyptian. Only after Darwin, were people commonly also divided on the basis of biology, i.e. physical traits such as skin, eye, and hair colour.

Summary

In short, “Eugenic research throughout the 1920s continued to integrate” the idea that some races were superior to other races into

“... political advocacy, increasingly in the area of black-white difference. The language of science and the language of heredity were integrated into the American zeitgeist to become the intellectual justification behind the pernicious ideology of American racism. In the remainder of the 1920s, with eugenics at its most popular and powerful, the followers of the movement continued the work begun by Francis Galton” (pp. 55–56).

As Professor Yudell documented, most of the leading American eugenicists during this period were professors of biology or anthropology affiliated with leading American universities. This book is highly recommended as a well-documented (the 55 pages of notes and references are in pp. 219–274) review of this now very embarrassing history, a movement inspired by Charles Darwin’s theory.

It must be added that America’s academics are only partly responsible for the rise of racist Nazi Germany. Germany’s own Darwinism was quite sufficient to wreak havoc on German

society as amply documented in Richard Weikart’s book, *Hitler’s Ethic*,³ and the influential eugenic works of Ernst Haeckel—his book, *The Wonders of Life*, is an excellent example of his eugenic crudeness. Conversely, some American anthropologists, such as Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas and his students, including Ruth Benedict, were critical in the eventual overthrow of the racist foundation in anthropology and other fields.

References

1. Hillenbrand, L., *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*, Random House, New York, p. 11, 2010.
2. Sowell, T., Will Dunbar Rise Again? jewishworldreview.com/cols/sowell1050114.php3#VjrBYW7Dg3h, 1 May 2014.
3. Weinberger, L., A review of *Hitler’s Ethic*, by Richard Weikart, *J. Creation* 24(2):17–20, 2010.