

A History of Eugenics in the United States and Germany

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I wrote this because of an intense interest in analyzing the eugenics movement and letting people know about the history. I have a B.A. in History, and I focused on Carrie Buck and Buck v. Bell. The case is considered a pivotal moment in eugenics movement, but I take a look at her personhood and discuss eugenics through a disability rights framework. I [have authored a piece](#) in a disability literary journal on the subject.

This is the second version of a PDF I drafted in 2015. This version completed December 2016. If you want to use this document specifically please provide credit. If you wish to use some of the definitions I came up with on my own, please give credit. The historical information and quotes I cite are not mine exactly - this is not a historical argument and analysis per se. Please note the footnotes are not formatted perfectly; my Chicago footnoting is a bit rusty.

Words in **bold purple** indicate that a definition or explanation will occur shortly after. This is not intended to be a fully comprehensive history but more of an introduction.

Introduction and General Information

Introduction

In many countries there were (and in some, still are) laws that restricted the ability to have children through forced surgical means. These laws allowed for the forced **sterilization** of many people. ("**Sterilization**" means a surgical procedure that ends someone's ability to have children). These laws targeted a lot of people. The targets included disabled people, low-income people, people of color, sex workers, people with substance abuse disorders, and women - or any intersection thereof.

The laws existed as a product of the **eugenics movement**. It peaked in the early 20th century (in the UK, US and Germany). Eugenics still has a lot of stealthy influence today. I want people to remember this sordid, nasty history. This is especially when they think of banning certain people from having children. That people already tried this.

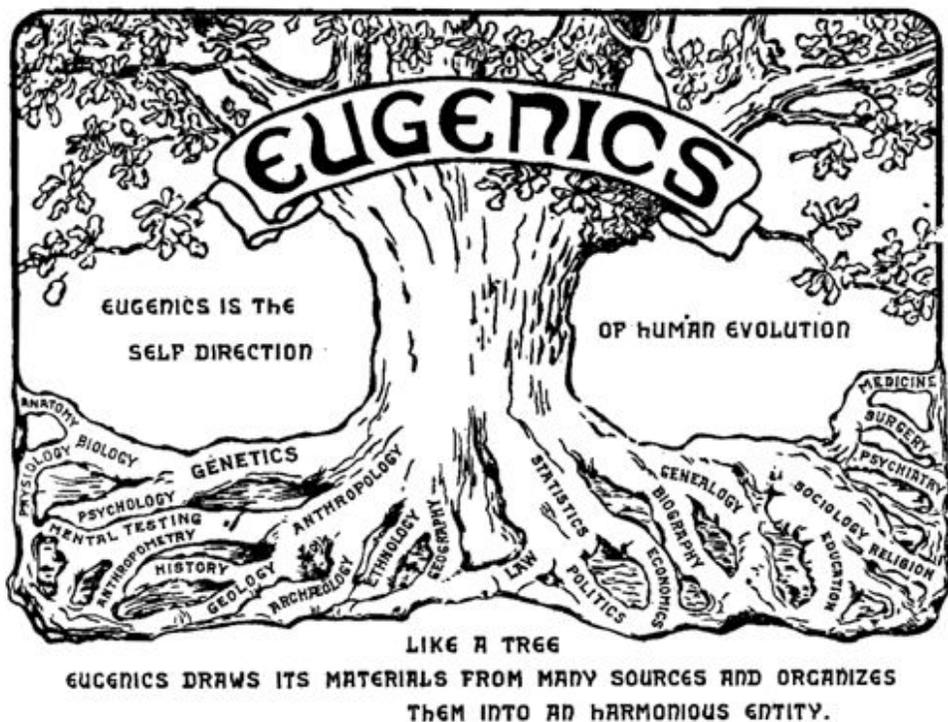
I routinely see jokes and not-jokes saying that certain people shouldn't be allowed to breed. And In the United States at least, many - progressives among them - are talking about the mental health crises that land many in dire situations. About income gaps. About people being homeless for a variety of reasons. About any number of

issues that could either worry people or make them feel inconvenienced and disgusted - or both.

This doesn't even go into the barely regulated field of human gene editing that could bring about a flood of thinly veiled "new" eugenics, or that many parents are routinely stripped of their parental rights, [such as disabled parents](#).

General Information

The **eugenics movement** sprang from across the Atlantic to the United States from the U.K. starting in the late 19th century. It reached its peak in the United States in the early 20th century, especially the 1920s and 30s. It took deep root in the United States as a movement, and leaped back to Germany from the Americans prominently in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The ideas behind eugenics were that low intelligence and mental flaws caused the moral failings of people. The **eugenicists**, or scientists and medical professionals behind the eugenics movement, mostly meant "women" when they discussed the growing "threat."



[Image is a large tree with the banner "Eugenics" written toward the top with branching arms. The tree has an extensive root system labeled with various fields of study: genetics, biology, statistics, history, medicine, sociology, etcetera.

Below the branching arms, the left side has written "Eugenics is the self-direction," and the right side says "human evolution." Below the roots is the text "Like a tree eugenics draws its materials from many sources and organizes them into an harmonious entity."]

This design was used at the second International Eugenics Congress in 1921, and was designed by Harry Laughlin. This Congress was important in that it resumed the work of eugenicists who had been interrupted by World War I. The design also helps to understand and identify the many fields that made up eugenics - namely, that eugenics was not a stand-alone field.

Eugenicists also posited that this prevented most **"feebleminded"** from being a productive part of society. **"Feebleminded"** was a broad term for those they thought were "mentally deficient" with bad morals.

It was recommended by eugenicists that the "feebleminded" be kept off the streets and prevented from having children, believing they were especially prone to "fecundity" and having children. They divided those labeled as "feebleminded" into categories as seen on the next page:

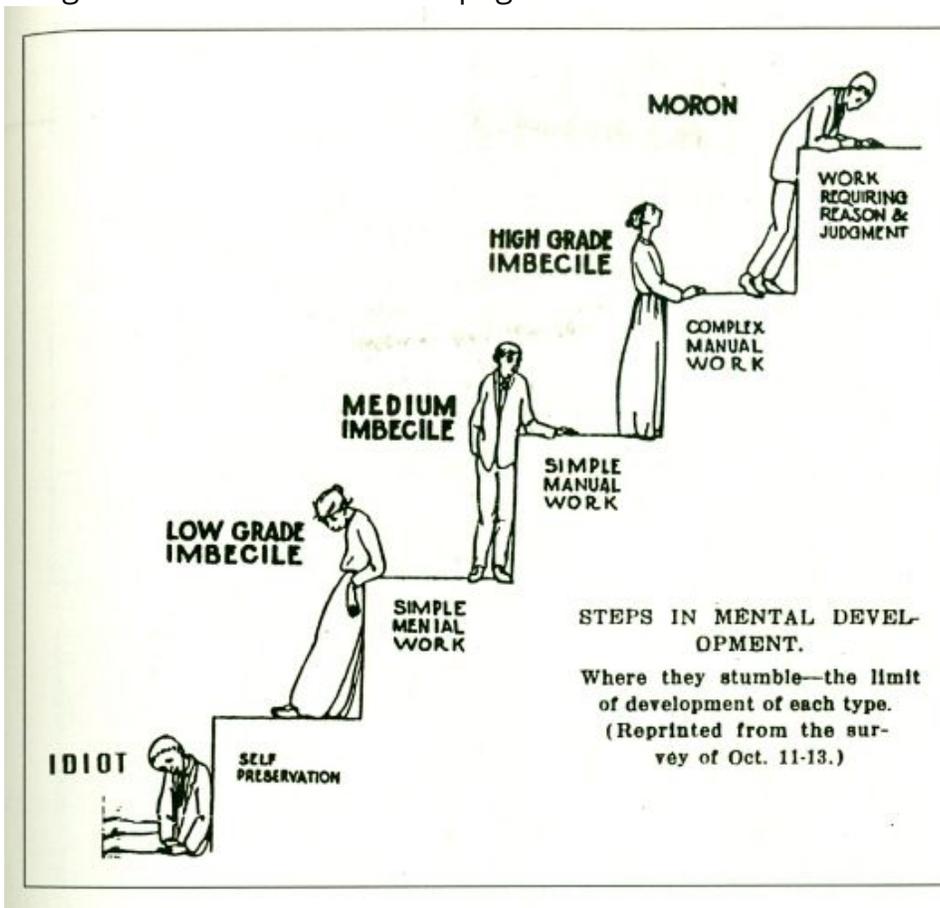


Photo scanned from *Feeble-Minded in our Midst* by Steven Noll, pp. 81.

This is not an exact image description, but here are the labels eugenicists used to categorize the people they deemed "feeble-minded":

- Moron: IQ of 55-70. Eugenicians considered this class the most dangerous, as they seemed the most “normal” and could “infiltrate” society. Carrie Buck was classified as a moron.
- Imbecile: IQ of 25-55. Eugenicians considered this class less dangerous than morons, and less trainable in labor-based areas.
- Idiot: IQ less than 25. Eugenicians considered this class completely incapable of functioning, learning, or working.

The IQ tests were originally created by Frenchman Alfred Binet in 1906 as diagnostic tools for educational remediation. They were never meant to be applied in the way that Stanford University academic Lewis Terman decided to, which was to standardize these tests and use them to classify “**mental ages**” for people in 1916. The “**mental age**” theory was that a “feble-minded” adult had the mental capacity of a child.

Central to putting policy in place around these beliefs was the growing field of genetics. Eugenicians such as Henry Goddard, Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin argued that “mental inadequacy” and poor morals passed down through a “**germ plasm.**” They described this as akin to a “taint” carried down generations, as though morals were like Mendel’s peas.¹

It also spread to other countries, but for this post, I'm using the United States and Germany. If anyone ever makes a post about other places, I can add links to this post.

Background

United States

Legal, involuntary sterilization of patients in institutions and prison inmates gained traction quickly among medical professionals working in those locations. It occurred in state laws in the United States as early as Indiana in 1907.¹ Medical professionals and eugenicians deemed it less invasive than a full removal of the reproductive system.

An example of a sterilization is when Superintendent John H. Bell writes in post-surgical notes for his sterilization of **Carrie Buck** in 1927 that “one inch was removed from each Fallopian tube, the tubes ligated and the ends cauterized by carbolic acid followed by alcohol, and the edges of the broad ligaments brought together with continuous suture.”² They often did not tell the person undergoing

¹ I first read these facts in Harry Bruinius's *Better for All the World*; however it is commonly found in most books on eugenics and on the Web

² John H. Bell, Post-Surgical Notes on Carrie Buck's sterilization, October 19, 1927 at the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded.

surgery what they were really doing to them. For instance, Buck only got the information that she had to have an operation.

(For more on Carrie Buck, I am attempting to edit a senior thesis from college on her and find an open access journal for it. In the meantime, you can visit ["On Buck v. Bell, the Real Tragedy of Eugenics, and Adam Cohen's Imbeciles"](#), a publication of my work in The Deaf Poets Society disability journal.

Germany

They got their ideas from the American eugenicists (there is actually a book on it called *The Nazi Connection* by Stefan Kühl). They thought highly of American eugenicists. **Harry Laughlin** received an honorary degree for his eugenicist work from Heidelberg University while it was under the operations of the Nazis and accepted it with no qualms.³ **Harry Laughlin** was one of the most esteemed American eugenicists at the movement's height, and the director of [Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory](#) under fellow eugenicist Charles Davenport. Laughlin pushed involuntary sterilization hard. He also testified before Congress about immigration restrictions, including restrictions on largely Eastern European Jews who would attempt to flee the Nazi Party.

Germany also managed to sterilize at least 300,000 people in the years before the war.⁴ Through 1933-1938, the ideology of the Nazis enabled them to carry out compulsory eugenics-based sterilization with a calculating efficiency surpassing the United States' programs. Their ideology was that the racial purity of the "Aryan German" had to be upheld through eventual genocide. They would do this through racist and anti-Semitic policies against "non-Aryans," especially Jewish people, the Roma, and Afro-Germans. They would also do this with discrimination against the disabled and those seen as "hereditarily ill" or "defective"⁵ in the population.

Legislation

United States

The governor of Indiana signed the first United States sterilization law in 1907. But many state laws that had backing failed due to their lack of constitutionality, as did Indiana's in 1921. This is where Virginia came in. The then-superintendent of the **Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded** (this article [has a description](#) of the colony model included in a larger piece) was A.S. Priddy. He selected Carrie Buck

³ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2006)

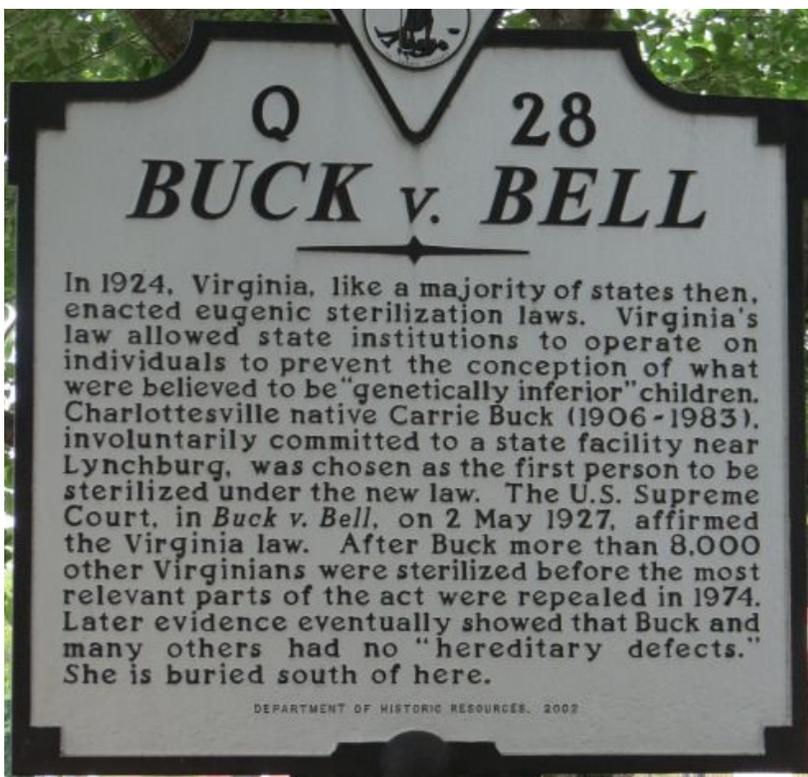
⁴ Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

⁵ "Defective" here meaning not just those having mental illness or being disabled, but those perceived to be disabled in such a way and those who were considered asocial, and those who held ideals loathed by the Nazi Party (such as communists).

as the test case for the new 1924 Virginia sterilization statute. She was supposed living proof of the hereditary nature of "mental defects." Her mother resided in the same institution and Buck's child had been born out of wedlock - she had been sexually assaulted by her adoptive family's nephew. An appeal test case - as per the Virginia law, the person ordered sterilized had the right to appeal the decision in courts - carefully orchestrated by Priddy, a Virginia lawyer and politician named Aubrey Strode, other eugenicists, and later the new superintendent, John Bell - shifted through the courts of Virginia to the Supreme Court of the United States.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., delivered the infamous line in the 8-1 decision affirming the Virginia sterilization statute: *It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind...Three generations of imbeciles are enough.*⁶

In 2002, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources erected a highway memorial in memory of *Buck v. Bell* in Charlottesville. A picture of the *Buck v. Bell* highway marker that I photographed while doing research is below.



The highway marker reads: *In 1924, Virginia, like a majority of states then, enacted eugenic sterilization laws. Virginia's law allowed state institutions to operate on individuals to prevent the conception of what were believed to be "genetically inferior" children. Charlottesville native Carrie Buck (1906-1983), involuntarily committed to a state facility near Lynchburg, was chosen as the first person to be sterilized under the new law. The U.S. Supreme Court, in Buck v. Bell, on 2 May 1927, affirmed the Virginia law. After Buck more than 8,000 other Virginians were sterilized before the most relevant parts of the Act were repealed in 1974. Later evidence eventually showed that Buck and many others had no "hereditary defects." She is buried south of here.*

⁶Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927).

The legal victory ensured little backlash against the later sterilization. Eugenacists celebrated “a momentous day” because “it had taken over three years to test and litigate Carrie's case, but less than an hour to ligate her Fallopian tubes.”⁷ To them, it paved the path to a superior race of humanity. Eugenacists had a landmark win that they hoped would cause a growth of sterilization. They hoped it would prevent the spread of the “feeble-minded.”

Germany

Germany passed their first law about sterilization in 1933 with the “Law for Preventing Hereditarily Ill Progeny.”⁸ It was in effect by early 1934. Adolf Hitler signed it. There was no test case required.

The Nazis had studied similar state laws in the United States. The law also compared with a [Model Sterilization Law](#) written in the United States by Harry Laughlin, and enabled the Nazis to point at the U.S. for many of the law's tenets. They concentrated on making their law appear as gainful and legal as possible so no other countries would challenge them.⁹

Affected Groups

United States

Eugenacists and eugenics-based policies targeted already disadvantaged groups. It affected, for the most part:

- disabled people (people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in large part, though people with different disabilities were also targeted);
- many who resided in institutions and “colonies” for the “feeble-minded,” disabled or not;
- people who appeared disabled in any way;
- low-income people;
- women, especially women of color;
- those who engaged in activities considered immoral, such as sex work;
- those with substance abuse disorders

Here are some statistics or logical reasoning on that:

⁷ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World*.

⁸ With differing translations, an alternate name for the law is the *Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring*.

⁹ Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994

- Between 1945 and 1977; women and girls made up 85% of the total compulsory sterilizations.¹⁰ 40,000/65,000 sterilizations were to women;¹¹
- “African Americans have always been staggeringly over represented in the ranks of the sterilized. When the North Carolina Eugenic Commission sterilized 8,000... persons throughout the 1930s, 5,000 were Black. By 1983, when Black people constituted only 12% of the population, 43% of the women sterilized in federally funded family planning programs were African Americans.”¹²
- State statistics for North Carolina indicated “nonwhite minorities comprised 40% of all forced sterilization cases in the state between 1945 and 1977”¹³
- Some statistics also show that “the Indian Health Service - a nationally chartered entity - has been accused of forcibly sterilizing a quarter of all Native American women.”¹⁴)
- In addition, [this article discusses](#) the Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics’ role in targeting non-white people for sterilization.
- lived in institutions, as most laws targeted those living there
- low-income people usually had less means to fight any legal battles and could easily be written off by the public

Reaching its “Logical Conclusion” in Nazi Germany

There could only be one conclusion for the escalating practice of eugenics practiced by the Nazis. The aim of eugenics is to purify bloodlines. Even before “Aktion T-4,” killing of the disabled occurred. At least 5,200 infants, children and adolescents were killed preceding *Aktion T-4* for research at the University of Leipzig if born or seen with any disabilities.

In the summer of 1939, Hitler ordered a “euthanasia” program for disabled adults, called “Aktion T-4.” The Nazis took the victims from various institutions in Germany. The murder program totaled about 70,000 victims before the program was officially halted. Killing of people with disabilities continued, but not on the same scale as before.¹⁵

¹⁰ Maggie Lawrence, “Reproductive Rights and State Institutions: The Forced Sterilization of Minority Women in the United States”. Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2014. Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/390>

¹¹ Rebecca Kluchin, “Fit to be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980,” New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009)

¹² Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York, NY: Harlem Moon, an imprint of Random House, 2006.

¹³ Lawrence, “Reproductive Rights and State Institutions: The Forced Sterilization of Minority Women in the United States”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: University Press, Cambridge, 1991)

Is Eugenics Still Here?

Sterilization laws in the United States remained on the books until the 1970s. Even today, the entirety of *Buck v. Bell* has never been overturned - though many parts were repealed in 1974, it has not been fully overturned. It has taken until 2015 for some states to begin offering compensation to sterilization victims. Virginia [apologized and offered reparations](#) as of December 2015, but hasn't made a lot of effort to find survivors. North Carolina is still [hashing out their details as of June 2016](#).

Even as the United Nations considers sterilization a form of torture, yes, eugenics is still around. Women, many of whom were women of color, [were sterilized in California, US prisons](#) as recently as 2014. A Tennessee, US prosecutor tried to make a woman agree to sterilization [in a plea deal](#) in 2015. In Australia, sterilizations of mostly women with intellectual disabilities occur so routinely that the [UN was investigating](#) as of November 2015. In February 2015 in the UK, a judge declared a mother with an intellectual disability unable to litigate and that, as it was in her best interest, [she could be forcibly sterilized](#).

And, as Robyn Powell notes [in a piece for the Boston Bar Association](#), *Buck v. Bell* has been cited as recently as 2001 in *Vaughn v. Ruoff* - though the plaintiff was still found to have due process violated, an appeals court said "involuntary sterilization is not always unconstitutional if it is a narrowly tailored means to achieve a compelling government interest."¹⁶ Powell also notes that a woman with an intellectual disability, attempting to challenge a sterilization statute, petitioned the Supreme Court to review Pennsylvania's sterilization statute in 1995 and was unsuccessful.¹⁷ Powell also states that several states maintain their sterilization statutes on the books, some with particularly offensive language about the best interests of society - Her citation lists eleven states that still have sterilization statutes.

The Washington Post [ran an article](#) questioning whether "scientific racism" was creeping back into people's thoughts in 2015. A disability rights blogger [wrote a piece](#) called "The History of Eugenics Isn't as Historical as It Should Be." There is the threat of gene editing with eugenics lurking behind it, as [this post](#) details; in 2014 Forbes [had an article](#) questioning whether genomics could revive eugenics.

I've read testimonials of women encouraged by their doctors to undergo sterilization today in the US, targeted for income level and non-whiteness. I've read stories of people who got told by society, if not their doctors, that they should not pass their genes on.

¹⁶ *Vaughn v. Ruoff*, 253 F.3d 1124 (8th Cir. 2001).

¹⁷ *Estate of C.W.*, 640 A.2d 427 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1994), cert. denied, 115 S. Ct. 1175 (1995).

In the United States at least, there may be a perfect storm rising. Scholars have also written about it. Authors of a chapter in *A Century of Eugenics in America* note: “Geneticists often avoid discussing eugenics, which may foster its re- emergence by avoiding notice of the scientific, medical and social factors that are realigning.”¹⁸ The authors of two chapters in the book agree that societal conditions are forming in the same manner as they did in the twentieth century. There are many of the main concerns around as there were then - and many Progressive Era reformers supported eugenics for the “greater good,” as many progressives would now.

I don’t even *know* how to talk about the impact the future of US politics will have on all this. Just remember: We already tried having a popular eugenics movement, and aspects of it linger on well into the 21st century, cloaked under different names and excuses. Remember that, at least. And fight eugenics if you can, when you see it.

Additional Resources

For further resources, please [visit the Tumblr blog](#), “Eugenics & Disability: History & Modern Trends.” I maintain it somewhat on eugenics and disability history. The blog has many details in its archives, and a [Historical Resources](#) list that I am updating.

¹⁸ Linda L. McCabe and Edward R.B. McCabe, “Are We Entering a “Perfect Storm” for a Resurgence of Eugenics? Science, Medicine and Their Social Context” in *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, ed. Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press 2011), 193.