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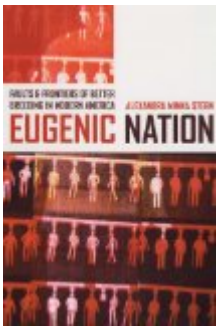

Alexandra Minna Stern. *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xiv + 347 pp. $25.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-24444-3.

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Eugenics was the infamous movement in the twentieth century that sought to increase the propagation of the fittest members of society ("positive eugenics") and prevent the proliferation of the lower breeds ("negative eugenics"). The movement gathered steam on the Atlantic seaboard, particularly in New York City, during the Progressive Era, and reached its apotheosis in the 1920s and 1930s with antimiscegenation legislation, immigration restriction, and campaigns for the coercive sterilization of individuals deemed to be feebleminded or a danger to society. The rise to power of the Nazis and eventual revelations of the horrors of the Holocaust spelled the demise of eugenics as an organized movement in the United States. Such, at least, is the usual chronology and usual geographical focus of historical studies of eugenics.

Eugenic Nation is Alexandra Minna Stern's brief and highly readable contribution to the burgeoning field of eugenics studies. Stern seeks to revise and extend the traditional temporal, spatial, and topical foci of eugenics scholarship to reveal the extent to which hereditarianism shapes American society up to the present. By centering her study on California, Stern is able to revise the chronology of American eugenics to show that the movement did not perish in response to the extremes of Nazism, and that revamped eugenics projects prospered well into the 1960s and beyond. First, such organizations as the Pioneer Fund continued for many decades to fund studies seeking to prove the existence of inherent differences among the races. On a more respectable level, many eugenicists shifted their attention from races to individuals and thereby became involved in genetic counseling and family planning. These practitioners worried less about stemming the growth of the feebleminded underclass, and more about increasing the fertility and domestic happiness (two indices that supposedly went hand in hand) of white middle-class couples. And thirdly, a number of eugenicists shifted their attention from the United States to the Third World where they sought to implement birth control programs via such organizations as the Population Council and International Planned Parenthood Foundation. Stern's point is that the postwar eugenics

movement was repackaged, to be sure, but it never lost its faith in the primacy of hereditarianism.

Having posited this alternative chronology, Stern argues successfully that the true demise of eugenics took place not in the 1940s but during the 1960s when the civil rights and feminist movements challenged the theoretical underpinning of eugenics. After all, antimiscegenation legislation, state sterilization laws, and national immigration quotas were dismantled not in the immediate wake of the Holocaust but two and even three decades later. "By the 1960s and 1970s," argues Stern, "there was increasing uneasiness and anger, in streets and assembly halls, about the lingering and persistent ramifications of hereditarianism on specific groups, such as poor African American women who were being unwittingly sterilized, Mexican American youths whose life options were restricted by the results of intelligence testing and vocational tracking, and middle-class white women who were eager to finally wrest birth control out of the hands of male family planners" (p. 10).

Furthermore, Stern points out that if we concentrate not on the rise and fall of such East Coast-based titans of eugenics as Madison Grant and Charles Benedict Davenport and the organizations they led (e.g., the American Eugenics Society and Eugenics Record Office), but rather on such West Coast figures as Paul Popenoe and Charles M. Goethe and the organizations they led (e.g., the American Institute of Family Relations [AIFR] and Eugenics Society of Northern California), then the rumors of the demise of eugenics after World War II turn out to be greatly exaggerated. "Once situated in this multiregional and transnational panorama, the timetable and topography of eugenics in the United States appears more elongated and striated than previously imagined" (p. 6). And given that twenty thousand sterilizations (one-third of the national total) took place not in New York but in California, it certainly is necessary to shift our attention--like the course of empire--westward. In addition to chronology and geography, a third theme of *Eugenic Nation* is Stern's effort to reconfigure the history of eugenics by placing gender at the center of her analysis and demonstrating that "the disarticulation and transposition of 'race' onto gender and sexuality was an integral component of the mid-century shift" (p. 9) from traditional to postwar eugenics.

Eugenic Nation is comprised of six chronologically arranged chapters. Chapter 1, "Race Betterment and Tropical Medicine in Imperial San Francisco," describes the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915. This is an apt place to start for two reasons. First, many of the individuals who figured prominently at exposition (for example, David Starr Jordan, Popenoe, Lewis B. Terman, and a figure with whom I was previously unacquainted, Claude C. Pierce) went on to play leading roles in the eugenics movement. And second, Stern argues that eugenics in the United States was greatly influenced by the practices of colonial medicine which were on display at the exposition. She shows how the racial imperatives that underlay the work of U.S. doctors in our imperial possessions, like the Philippines and Panama, and their implementation of such practices as quarantine and prophylaxis to rid the tropics of insect- and waterborne diseases and render them hospitable for white Americans informed public health practices and the eugenics movement back in the United States. After all, argues Stern, the adherents of eugenics and practitioners of tropical medicine--two of the leading causes of the Progressive Era--shared the belief that inferior races, deleterious genes, and harmful germs could and should be controlled, whether by surgical sterilization or sanitary brigade, to protect the superior European Americans from lesser breeds.

The second chapter, "Quarantine and Eugenic Gatekeeping on the U.S.-Mexican Border," reiterates not only the ideological, but in some cases also the personal connections between tropical

medicine and eugenics by looking at how U.S. authorities used quarantines to scrutinize and "racialize" the bodies of Mexican workers and immigrants in the early twentieth century. Stern shows how the border embodied both the medicalization and militarization of Mexican-Anglo relations, and she points out that the extreme nature of the extended quarantine along the U.S.-Mexican border stood in stark contrast to practices along the Canadian border. Indeed, Mexican immigrants were subjected to a regime of medical inspection that was significantly stricter than anything in effect at even Ellis and Angel Islands. The chapter's most valuable (albeit not thoroughly proven) insight is that the U.S. Border Patrol from the beginning had a eugenic mandate to protect the white American nation from dysgenic germs attempting to penetrate the southern border.

In chapter 3, "Instituting Eugenics in California," Stern returns to the Golden State to trace the history of the eugenics movement from 1900 through the 1940s. She examines three facets of California eugenics: the state's eugenically minded deportation policies, its use of intelligence testing to segregate schoolchildren, and its coercive sterilization program, which easily outpaced all other states in size before the practice ended in 1979. Along the way, Stern outlines the interwoven organizations (e.g., the Human Betterment Foundation, American Institute of Family Relations, and Commonwealth Club) and influential individuals (e.g., Goethe, Terman, Kimball Young, Popenoe, and yet another previously overlooked figure, John R. Haynes) who were the driving forces behind California eugenics. Stern shows that California's eugenics program disproportionately affected Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and that it was "motivated by deep-seated preoccupations about gender and female sexuality," particularly in the sterilization of young women categorized as "immoral, loose, or unfit for motherhood" (p. 112). But Stern also raises the important caveat that at least some of the more than twenty thousand persons sterilized in California may have welcomed the procedure as a form of birth control. Chapter 3 claims not only that "eugenicists shaped modern California--its geography, inhabitants, and institutions" (p. 84), but also that California stood at the vanguard of the national eugenics movement. Stern argues that the state supplied much of the national leadership and presaged many of the trends that would characterize American eugenics after World War II.

Stern demonstrates the connections between eugenics and conservationism in the Golden State in the following chapter, "California's Eugenic Landscapes." By looking at the life and works of such key figures as Fairfield Osborn, Luther Burbank, Jordan, Goethe, and the founders of the Save-the-Redwoods League--John C. Merriam and Grant--Stern argues that eugenicists influenced the natural landscape of California in three ways. First, they founded the state's seminal environmental organizations. Second, they infused their hereditarian and evolutionary tenets into the myths of the settling of the West. And third, they systematically named the plants, animals, forests, and mountains of the West and thereby "literally left their mark on the landscape" (p. 121). And, as they did so, writes Stern, "they comprehended California's biota and topography through a framework of selective breeding, one in which specific species and organisms were elevated, chosen, and revered over others.... Almost always their vision at once mirrored and extended into the world of plants and animals the Pacific West's brand of nativism and racial exclusion" (p. 119). As such, Stern argues (correctly) that historically speaking, there is a strong ideological affinity between immigration restriction, coercive sterilization, scientific racism, and nature conservation.

Stern also shows how prewar eugenicists influenced later generations of environmentalists, particularly regarding their fear of overpopulation, and she claims that "the alliance between eugenic racism and environmentalism ... continues to flicker on and off in the twenty-first century in

the xenophobic platforms endorsed by the population section of the Sierra Club" and other conservation groups (p. 127). She concludes that "there is no denying that the apparition of eugenics sits restlessly at the heart of American environmentalism, revisited periodically during debates over urban sprawl, immigration, and overpopulation" (p. 148).

In "Centering Eugenics on the Family," chapter 5, Stern navigates one of the more popular paths blazed by postwar eugenicists, as they publicly abandoned their obsession with racial hierarchies and concentrated instead on sex and gender. The author cleverly labels this "a Faustian transposition" (p. 154), as during the Cold War, eugenicists helped to cement in the public's mind the idea that biology determined women's subordinate roles. To demonstrate how and why "the racism of the 1920s was rearticulated into the sexism of the 1950s" (p. 154), Stern relates in some detail the fascinating history of the nation's premier marriage counseling center, the AIFR, directed by the once-household name, "Mr. Marriage" Popenoe. Stern convincingly demonstrates that the AIFR, especially via its reliance on the Johnson Temperament Analysis Test to identify and treat marital and sexual problems, promoted a gender system based on simplistic theories of biological determinism that resonated powerfully with the 1950s apotheosis of hearth and home, and laid the foundation for the strict sex-gender norms espoused by fundamentalist Christians to this day. Not only did the AIFR provide marriage counseling to thousands of couples per year in the 1950s and 1960s, but Popenoe "left a lasting imprint on the intimate lives of ... millions of Americans" (p. 172) through his efforts as a nationally syndicated newspaper and magazine columnist, and radio personality, and his fourteen-year stint on the popular television program *Art Linkletter's House Party*. The topic clearly engages Stern, and the writing in this chapter is particularly gripping.

"Contesting Hereditarianism: Reassessing the 1960s," the last chapter, recounts how activists of all colors, genders, and sexual orientations contested hereditarian thought in the 1960s, with the result that most of the pillars of the eugenics movement--immigration restriction, antimiscegenation, and coercive sterilization statutes--were dismantled during that decade. Stern examines a few aptly chosen protest movements (for example, the storming of the offices of *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1970 by feminists demanding the termination of Popenoe's column "Can This Marriage Be Saved," and the case of *Madrigal v. Quilligan*, which challenged the involuntary sterilization of Chicanas in Los Angeles) to show how liberation movements confronted the legacy of eugenics. Indeed, claims Stern, "although this complex historical period should certainly not be reduced to a eugenic firestorm, it is nearly impossible to traverse the fraught intersections of race, reproduction, sexuality, and gender--all of which were flashpoints of the 1960s--without reckoning with eugenics" (p. 185). It is an intriguing claim, and one that should be welcomed by scholars of eugenics, as Stern's work helps to fill in the historiographical gap between the heyday of eugenics in the 1920s and revival of hereditarian thought at the end of the twentieth century.

As this brief survey of the six chapters demonstrates, *Eugenic Nation* is a compelling overview--a la the works of Gray Brechin (e.g. *Imperial San Francisco*)--that attempts to tie together in a sophisticated yet lucid manner a number of disparate developments. Perhaps because of the wide net that Stern casts, some of her assertions are more stated than proven. For example, the fact that practitioners of tropical medicine and proponents of eugenics both appeared at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition does not prove that the figures interacted to any substantial degree or that their future careers were determined by what happened at the fair. It is a plausible suggestion, but much further research would have to be performed to bear it out. Furthermore,

while Stern does a marvelous job excavating the careers of numerous West Coast eugenicists, readers are left wondering how typical they were of other adherents of the movement and how influential their organizations were. For example, Goethe's many eugenics organizations almost always had a membership of one (Goethe), and thus while he is an undeniably fascinating figure, more research will have to be done to determine just how important he was. And finally, while the book does an admirable job relating what various West Coast eugenicists did, there is little analysis--economic, political, or psychological--of why they thought and acted as they did.

In addition, Stern's focus on California highlights the unfortunate fact that the title of her book promises more than it delivers. To be sure, there are few things worse than a review that chastises an author for not writing the book the reviewer wished the author had written. But in this case, Stern has brought the criticism down on herself, for her book deals with eugenics in California, not the nation as a whole. Stern might reply that this is no different from those East Coast-centric scholars who publish, say, a biography of Davenport and claim they have thereby presented the history of the eugenics movement. Moreover, one of her points is that the eugenics movement in California, like so much else that happens on the West Coast, went on to influence the entire nation. Nonetheless, it must be stated that while a book with a more constricted title--for example ***Eugenics in California***--might have had fewer readers, at least those readers would not have felt slightly misled.

The foregoing observations are really not meant as criticisms. Rather, they are simply to say that for many of the topics addressed in the book, ***Eugenic Nation*** is not the last, but rather a welcome and stimulating first word. And, while the disparate nature of the book means that it might be problematic to use as a text for a history course, particular chapters could certainly be assigned with great success. (Chapters 5 and 6, for example, would work wonderfully in a course on women's history.) Stern always gives her readers something to think about, and we can only hope that future researchers (and not least of all Stern herself) will continue to delve into the important, complex, and absorbing topic of eugenics in California.

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