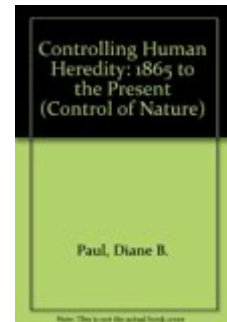


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diane B. Paul. *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995. x + 158 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-391-03916-2; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-03915-5.

Reviewed by Richard Weikart (California State University at Stanislaus)  
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Diane B. Paul's brief overview of the history of eugenics is aimed at students and the general public rather than specialists. Therefore Paul does not provide a new interpretation of the history of eugenics, but she does an admirable job of explaining the issues in short compass.

Paul's interpretations are generally sound. Her nuanced presentation of Darwin's social views is persuasive, though she misrepresents him as a "convinced materialist" (pp. 25, 27, 33). Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, embraced Darwinism and founded eugenics as the study and promotion of measures to improve human heredity. Galton's ideas did not gain wide acceptance at first, since prevailing opinion held that the effects of nurture and the environment were decisive in shaping humanity. The growing acceptance of Weismann's neo-Darwinism and Mendelian genetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would tilt things in favor of nature over nurture.

In the early twentieth century eugenics proponents played on fears that modern society was causing biological degeneration. They focused those fears on two main groups: the mentally handicapped and various races or ethnic groups (in the US this often meant the new immigrants from southeastern Europe). Since these groups were multiplying more rapidly than educated middle-class WASPs, they were allegedly damaging society by passing on their deleterious hereditary characteristics. Eugenists were divided on solutions to the problem posed by heredity, but beginning in 1907 compulsory sterilization laws were passed in many states in the US. Denmark and Germany passed such measures in the 1930s, though Great Britain never even considered it.

Paul states that economic problems brought eugenics

measures to their height in the 1930s, but this is doubtful, since many states already had eugenics legislation before 1929. The reason eugenics peaked in the 1930s was because the notion that heredity was destiny declined in the 1940s and thereafter. Paul attributes this solely to the misuse of eugenics and racism by the Nazis. This was surely a factor, but Carl Degler in *In Search of Human Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1991; not in Paul's bibliography) argues that heredity was experiencing hard times in the face of behaviorist psychology and an emphasis on the primacy of culture in the social sciences that was emerging in the 1920s-30s. This renewed concern with environmental influence on humans would undermine eugenics.

One of the big problems in most of the literature on eugenics is confusion over how eugenics interacts with the political spectrum. Paul asserts early on that most eugenicists were politically conservative, but thereafter she seems to demonstrate the opposite. Even the few eugenicists she identifies as political conservatives, such as Marie Stopes, were often radicals in their social and moral views. Paul shows the enthusiasm of Fabian socialists, Margaret Sanger, Havelock Ellis, and other leftists or reformers for eugenics. She notes that "eugenicists were united only in their enthusiasm for technocratic solutions to social problems" (p. 21). Although Paul does not overtly say so, this means that eugenics was quintessentially reformist or progressive; proponents often sought government intervention. On the other hand, the stiffest opposition to eugenics came largely from social and moral conservatives—the Catholic Church and conservative Protestants.

Paul's book can also serve as a corrective for those

who anachronistically think that racism was the province solely of conservatives in the early twentieth century. Later this was undoubtedly true, but not in the early twentieth century. The Fabian socialist H. G. Wells claimed that “‘there is only one sane and logical thing to be done with a really inferior race, and that is to exterminate it’” (p. 75). Paul describes as reform-minded the sociologist Edward A. Ross, who first warned Americans about the dangers of “race suicide.” Paul also quotes a 1912 Socialist convention report that called racism natural; in their view it was “‘certain to persist under socialism’” (p. 108).

The biggest problem with the book is its lack of balance. It is overwhelmingly concerned with American and secondarily British eugenics; other countries receive only cursory treatment. Paul cites most of the important English-language secondary sources on eugenics in other countries, but makes only fleeting use of it. She is clearly at home only in American and British primary

sources, but she seems to have a good command of these, at least in the pre-1945 period. This brings up the second imbalance—the post-1945 era receives scant attention. Anyone familiar with present debates over human genetics is likely to be disappointed that Paul does not discuss some of the most important current concerns relating to control of human genetics. She never even mentions the Human Genome Project, genetic engineering, or cloning (which was a live issue long before Dolly’s 1997 debut). She does, however, discuss amniocentesis and genetic counseling. Those desiring greater depth and broader coverage of the Anglo-American scene, especially after 1945, should still consult Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics* (U. of Cal. Press, 1985), though for undergraduates, Paul’s brevity is an asset.

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