

“The Eugenics Crusade” (PBS)

Review by Jack Yates

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Public Broadcasting Service aired a new documentary as part of its ongoing series “The American Experience” in October 2018, entitled “The Eugenics Crusade.” I would imagine that its broadcast, to be augmented by re-broadcasts and on-line viewing and DVD sales, will bring the most attention paid by the most people to the topic of eugenics since the vogue of the idea in the period around 1910-1935. That renewed attention is certainly a good thing, as eugenics is a chapter not only in the history of our human services for people with intellectual impairment, it is also a revealing chapter in several strands of the main line of the history of the United States, and in the ongoing formation and renovation of the American character and identity.

There had been an almost total failure until the past forty years of any history books or courses (in my experience as an American history major) to deal with eugenics in America. In contrast, in my experience of first encountering the topic in the teaching of Wolf Wolfensberger focusing on the human services realm, and then in teaching my occasional classes on the topic to service workers, most listeners have a sense of (even startling) revelation upon learning about eugenics. Nearly forty years ago many people read a history and commentary by Stephen Jay Gould in his book “The Mismeasure of Man,” and about thirty years a narrower group of readers might have read Daniel Kevles, “In the Name of Eugenics.” In the past ten years I have seen a much bigger group of books focusing on eugenics in America, several authors of which were among the historians interviewed in “The Eugenics Crusade.” My overall judgement of the PBS documentary, therefore, is that I wish every American would watch it.

The stance of the documentary is deeply critical of eugenics. Especially powerful was its scathing account of the story of Carrie Buck (whose case was decided by the Supreme Court). I was impressed, beyond that, by its attention to the fact that eugenics was not at all a right-wing movement, a point I stress in my class because our current human service workers and college students would be very likely to assume it was. The PBS film located eugenics squarely in the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century, and in the broad interest in that era in reform, and in what they termed the “mania” for personal and societal improvement. The film asserted that the motivation of the eugenicists was to improve society.

The film thus pointed out, very constructively, that eugenics was very much mainstream, very much dominant as a line of thinking in human services, in immigration policy, in academia, in law, and in popular culture. They quoted pro-eugenics statements by Progressive leader Theodore Roosevelt and feminist leader Margaret Sanger and early civil rights leader WEB DuBois, and they pointed out that the infamous Supreme Court decision sustaining eugenic sterilization was written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., arguably the most respected American jurist of his era or any other.

Historian Nathaniel Comfort, interviewed in the film, said, “The problem with utopias is that they set a certain set of aspirations that blind you to the consequences.” Summarizing late in the film, it was noted that the “improvement,” the better society, was only meant for some of its members and not others. This inherent element of eugenics was termed early in the film the “underbelly” of the

movement. But as I listened, I thought immediately that it would have been more accurate to call this the “dark side” of the movement, in its moral import. The film asserted that the eugenicists’ beliefs were “naïve;” that is true, but in what other ways must we describe their beliefs and actions?

Most of my reservations about the film derived from this failure to see the wrongness of eugenics in moral terms. Opposition or resistance to eugenics, I would summarize, came from four perspectives:

1) Critique of technical mistakes made by eugenicists. For instance, the film pointed out the sloppiness and subjectivity of the field workers who gathered family histories, their wild inferences and jumps to conclusions and failure to follow leads which did not fit their preconceptions. In another example, the IQ tests used which “proved” that half of all army recruits in World War I were feebleminded were clearly faulty.

2) Critique of the conceptual foundation of the “science” of eugenics. For instance, the film tells a fascinating story in some detail of how experimental geneticists in the 1930’s exposed the faulty reasoning of the eugenic proponents. Note that genetics is a science, the study of how heredity works, while eugenics was a proposal for societal betterment, supposedly (but erroneously) based on science. Geneticists led by TH Morgan (privately) and Herbert Muller (in public statements), as they pioneered in learning how inheritance works in much more complex ways than previously thought, raised a critique of eugenics, concluding about 1935 that it had “no scientific basis.” This opposition was influential in academic and scientific circles (for instance, early eugenics leader HH Goddard substantially repented publicly, a rare and admirable act), and contributed to undermining the vogue for eugenics.

3) Critique based on the impact of eugenic thinking and policies on the poor, and on immigrants. This line of opposition gained currency in the 1930’s with the Great Depression, as more people were sunk into poverty, and the hypothesis that the cause of poverty was heredity became less tenable. This critique of eugenics was societal and political, closer to the moral plane. The film was especially strong in showing eugenics as a basis for restriction of immigration, and its impact on American policies that largely prevented rescue of Jews before and during World War II. This understanding also helped to undermine the vogue for eugenics.

Strangely, oppositions number 2 and 3 took the wind out the eugenicists’ sails, but even as the movement died down in public discourse, the number of eugenic (and involuntary) sterilizations continued to increase. As Wolfensberger pointed out in his very early history almost fifty years ago, eugenics thinking, even after it was thoroughly discredited, continued by inertia to guide policy in human services, first with sterilization and then with continued growth of institutional segregation. That changed only when an alternative “big idea,” a guiding set of principles and practices, came belatedly to replace it in the 1970’s, in the principle of normalization.

4) Critique proposing that eugenics was morally wrong, that it was fundamentally unjust and that it ran counter to the proposition that every human life is a gift from God, created by Him in His image and likeness.

This fourth kind of opposition was not explored by the documentary.

While eugenics had a few individual critics during its vogue, including Clarence Darrow and Walter Lippman who offered opposition on the second and third bases I have enumerated, there was only one substantial organization or institution which opposed it. That was the Catholic Church. Their basis for

opposition included critique of the impact of eugenics on the poor and on immigrants as unjust; but even more sharply the Church's opposition was to sterilization, as an assault on the dignity of the human person created in God's image. This opposition included major lobbying campaigns in several states against proposed eugenic sterilization laws, in which grass roots groups of Catholics were mobilized, in some places succeeding in preventing passage of those laws. Massachusetts, for instance, never passed such a law, largely because of the influence of the Church. The book by Sharon M. Leon which recounts this aspect of the history of eugenics is entitled "In the Image of God," thus locating clearly this line of opposition in the moral realm, and even in the realm of spiritual warfare.

The Catholic opposition to eugenics is not mentioned in the PBS documentary, and in fact is not mentioned in any of the twelve or fifteen other books on eugenics I have read.

It is ironic, then, that the title of the documentary is "The Eugenics Crusade." The film very constructively points out that, for its leading proponents like Harry Laughlin and Charles Davenport, and for the Nazi successors to the American pioneers of eugenics, eugenics was a "religion," in the sense of being a deeply held belief at the core of their identity and their action. In the film, they characterized such leaders as having "religious fervor," as being "evangelists for the movement," as pursuing "a faith, a religion." But I believe the purpose of those characterizations in the documentary were to ridicule the eugenicists as irrational, not to make the point that should have been made, that they were practicing idolatry, worshipping the false gods of science, of human control, of human perfectibility, and of a materialist definition of human identity. The word "crusade" in the PBS title is thus mocking; but I would assert that the most coherent form of opposition to eugenics would have been a crusade.

A few more specific reservations about the film might derive from this shying away from offering critique on the moral level.

While the film did offer several quotations from leading eugenics proponents, I was very surprised that they did not use some of the truly shocking and grossly mean-spirited quotations which are readily available in the books whose authors they interviewed. In the quotation they did use from Theodore Roosevelt, the film left out his harshest passages. Quotations I use in my class from President Calvin Coolidge (on immigration) and from Winston Churchill and Helen Keller (on people with intellectual impairments) are much more forceful than quotations used in the film. Most strikingly, while the film did criticize Margaret Sanger (the founder and leader of the birth control movement) for what they called her "strategic" alliance with eugenicists, the quotations I have used from Sanger are amazingly vehement, even rabid, in their truly murderous disdain for the poor. One would think that such dramatic quotations would have been used, to make the story more dramatic in a television documentary; I can only think that they "pulled their punches," softened the picture of the eugenicists, so that the film would not have too strong a moral tone. And specifically for Sanger, such softening might have been chosen so that they would not offend proponents of abortion, of which Sanger was an early, indeed iconic, leader.

I might point out also a seemingly small fact which the film failed to elucidate; this undermined the critique they were making. The immigration restriction laws of 1921 and 1924, which the film showed were largely based on eugenic considerations, were not simply a restriction of how many people could immigrate to the United States. They assigned quotas by nation of origin, and those quotas were carefully decided based on the perceived desirability of people from the various countries. There was little restriction on people coming from Northern Europe, but there were very sharp restrictions on

people coming from Southern and Eastern Europe and from the rest of the world. The motivation was explicitly racist, and was fully understood and justified as such in Congressional testimony and speeches at the time. Restricting immigration just by total numbers admitted would not be a eugenic policy; restriction by differential admission by country of origin was a eugenic policy.

One last reservation, but an important one. Derived also from a reluctance to raise issues at the moral plane, and derived I suspect from a stronger reluctance to challenge the gods worshipped by our current American society, the film sadly declined the great opportunity to offer substantial critique of the current revival of eugenics (without the name). Our late-Western civilization is more and more seeking to perfect humankind through heredity, including by using selective abortion on a huge scale.

To reiterate: I hope every American would watch this documentary. Very illuminating, very good for us all to keep in mind what it teaches. But I regret the ways in which it softened and omitted certain points, driven probably by pro-abortion and anti-religious biases.