

In and out of the Shadow of the Holocaust

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Dieter Kuntz and Susan Bachrach (eds.), *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race*. Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004. 226 pp.

Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 347 pp.

HERE ARE TWO IMPORTANT BOOKS ABOUT EUGENICS: *DEADLY MEDICINE* TAKES THE Nazi regime as its starting point, while *Eugenic Nation* attempts to escape “the looming presence of the Holocaust” (Stern, 2005: 2). It is not so much an irreconcilable argument as different vantage points.

The scientific field of eugenics was based on Victorian assumptions about the biological basis of social standing and the hope that a regimen of proper breeding would improve the human race. In its heyday between the world wars, eugenics was widely and variously practiced in many countries, with followers all over the political map, from socialists to fascists. Eugenics became intertwined with nationalist demagoguery in the 1920s, especially in Germany and the United States, and was used to bolster arguments against the dangers of “miscegenation,” women’s equality, welfare rights, and immigration from outside the West. The Nazis gave eugenics an honored place in its repertoire of “racial science,” while it became the darling of American reformers in search of a scientific rationale for holding back the tide of social equality.

Today, there is wide agreement among historians that eugenics was used to design and justify state-sanctioned atrocities, from the involuntary sterilization of thousands of working-class women in California and 32 other states (*Ibid.*), to the murder of 200,000 disabled children and adults during the Hitler regime. *Deadly Medicine* and *Eugenic Nation* help us to understand why two 20th-century democracies participated so enthusiastically and broadly in the eugenics movement, and how seemingly crackpot ideas took root as professional dogma and populist wisdom.

Both books validate sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000: 105) insight that, while it takes visionaries to imagine a racially purified society—such as Hitler’s dream of a Europe purged of Jews, or the Pasadena-based Human Betterment Foundation’s quest to maintain California as a bastion of Aryan civilization—it

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requires a massive bureaucracy of administrators, professionals, and practitioners working in the trenches to transform the fear of degeneration and racial contamination into everyday commonsense. How did good Germans and good Californians become gung-ho agents of inhumanity?

Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race, produced as a catalogue to accompany an exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., takes on this question by focusing on Nazi Germany. *Deadly Medicine* was five years in the making, says Susan Bachrach, the museum's curator of special exhibitions. Bachrach and fellow European historian Dieter Kuntz—together with a large staff of researchers, curators, designers, and academic consultants—delve into "The Science of Race," which is treated cursorily in the museum's permanent exhibition. The result is an impressive display featuring hundreds of artifacts, photographs, and survivor testimonies.¹ *Deadly Medicine* powerfully illuminates the "intersection of scientific racism and the Holocaust" by showing how Nazi racial policies were "explicitly expressed in biological and medical terms and developed as public health measures" that culminated in genocide (Kuntz and Bachrach, 2004: 1).

The exhibition, which opened in April 2004, will run through May 30, 2006. If you are unable to visit Washington, D.C., you will have another opportunity to see a modified version when it travels the country, beginning in the fall of 2006, on a yet-to-be-determined itinerary. Meanwhile, you can viscerally experience the exhibition from afar if you buy or borrow *Deadly Medicine*, a coffee-table book produced on thick, creamy paper, its graph-lined background echoing the museum's exposé of scientific abuses. Here the exhibition is so gorgeously replicated with careful attention to detail and texture that it feels prurient to look too closely at some of its subject matter: a gynecological chair used for medical experiments in Auschwitz; plaster molds of racial types destined for segregation and worse; gypsies at roll call in Dachau; and psychiatric patients stripped ready for gassing (*Ibid.*: 81, 99, 109, 163, 176–177). (I experience a similar sense of unease when looking at the Twin Palms 2004 publication of lynching postcards, *Without Sanctuary*, another exquisite display of barbarism.)

Deadly Medicine engages the senses, but the approach is not sensational. At the heart of the book are seven essays, written by leading scholars in a style that is accessible without sacrificing complexity. Well-respected historians—Sheila Faith Weiss, Daniel Kevles, Gisela Bock, Benoit Massin, Michael Burleigh, Henry Friedlander, and Benno Müller-Hill—thoughtfully cover a range of topics, including the historical and international contexts of eugenics, German sterilization and "euthanasia" policies, and the collaboration between academics and Nazi ideologues. *Deadly Medicine* provides a sobering portrait of the legion of dedicated doctors, public health experts, lawyers, family researchers, and professionals who enthusiastically helped the fascist government to document the purity and impurity of Aryan blood. Most of the German racial scientists who did their best to sever

Jew from German, we are told, continued their careers after the war, “wearing the new mantle of human geneticists.” The United States and its allies made “too few attempts to bring the guilty to justice” (*Ibid.*: 198–199).

Unlike Edwin Black’s recent book, *War Against the Weak*, which melodramatically asserts that American eugenicists first “infected our society and then reached across the world and right into Nazi Germany,”² the authors of *Deadly Medicine* devote only a few pages to eugenics in the United States and minimize the influence of American scientists on their Nazi counterparts. “We did not want to take an American-centric approach,” Susan Bachrach told me in a phone interview. “We wanted to frame the exhibition in an international context.”

I appreciate this sensitivity to the dangers of American chauvinism, but if Alexandra Stern is correct—and I think she is—in arguing that the United States was home to “one of the most activist eugenics movements” in the world (Stern, 2005: 24), then the Holocaust Memorial Museum might want to rethink its decision before it takes the exhibition on the road. One does not have to accept Black’s relentlessly one-dimensional argument to realize that Nazi racial science and American eugenics shared similar views about human nature, science, reproduction, and the fixed nature of racial difference. The Holocaust Museum has a unique opportunity to teach its predominantly American audience that right-wing eugenicists peddled their reactionary visions over here as well as over there.

While the authors and curators of *Deadly Medicine* are careful to distance Nazi eugenics from its trans-Atlantic supporters, historian Alexandra Stern (2005: 2) sets herself the task of focusing on the American eugenics movement and extracting “eugenics from the shadow of Nazism.” Stern, who is an assistant professor and associate director of the Center for the History of Medicine at the University of Michigan, has turned her University of Chicago dissertation into a first-rate book, a required read for anybody seriously interested in the scientific and medical underpinnings of American racism and sexism. (I have drawn upon Stern’s research in my own work.)

Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America, is meticulously documented, cogently argued, and—surprise, surprise in an academic book—written with passion as well as precision. In addition to providing an elegant synthesis of the growing literature on the history of eugenics, *Eugenic Nation* stretches our minds and gets us to think in new ways about a complicated and “elusive” scientific and cultural movement that Stern compares to an “interventionist religion” (*Ibid.*: 10, 11). In this compact but far-ranging journey through the 20th century, we learn about the roots of eugenics in the United State’s early colonial ventures in the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico; how public health campaigns bolstered racial fears of cultural contamination; the ties between advocates of nativist immigration policies and patriarchal family values; and the hitherto unexplored role of leading eugenicists in campaigns to “save the redwoods” and shape “the mythology of the American West” (*Ibid.*: 25).

Stern's book pays close attention to the eugenics movement in California, which surprisingly has been neglected in previous studies. Eugenics enthusiasts in the Golden State included such well-known leaders as psychologist Lewis Terman, businessmen Ezra Gosney and Charles Goethe, family counseling pioneer Paul Popenoe, and physicist Robert Millikan. These men of distinction and their colleagues were active in the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, the Institute of Family Relations in Los Angeles, the Human Betterment Foundation in Pasadena, the Huntington Library in San Marino, and the Eugenics Society of Northern California in Sacramento. Moreover, the California wing of the eugenics movement used its money and clout to promote its deeply conservative views nationally and internationally.

Eugenic Nation does not end in the 1940s with the demise of eugenics. Stern argues that "hereditarianism" (*Ibid.*: 114) was repackaged in the 1950s in the form of population control and neoconservative gender politics. She also worries that recent developments in stem cell research and cloning might lead to a new "high-tech eugenics." This country's "profound health disparities," Stern concludes, "provide fertile soil for a dangerous combination of the medical neglect of some and the physical and aesthetic enhancement of the few" (*Ibid.*: 214, 215). *Deadly Medicine* ends on a similarly vigilant note by drawing attention to continuities between the old eugenics and new genetics. "It must be made absolutely clear," declares German biologist Müller-Hill, "that science should never become the reason to justify injustices to a genetically defined group of humans" (Kuntz and Bachrach, 2004: 198).

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NOTES

1. Phone interview with Susan Bachrach, July 12, 2005; USHMM, U.S. Holocaust Museum opens "Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race," News release, April 7, 2004.
2. Quoted in Platt (2003: 13).

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