

Testimony of Dr. Tony Platt To California Senate Judiciary Committee, June 24, 2003, Regarding Senate Resolution No. 20 — Relative to Eugenics

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SINCE THE SPRING OF 2002, STATE GOVERNMENTS IN VIRGINIA, OREGON, and South Carolina have published statements of apology to tens of thousands of patients, mostly poor women, who were sterilized against their will in state hospitals between the 1900s and 1960s. In March 2003, Governor Davis and Attorney General Lockyer added their regrets for the injustices committed in the name of “race betterment.” Now, the California Senate is considering a resolution, authored by Senator Dede Alpert (D-San Diego), that “expresses profound regret over the state’s past role in the eugenics movement” and “urges every citizen of the state to become familiar with the history of the eugenics movement, in the hope that a more educated and tolerant populace will reject any similar abhorrent pseudoscientific movement should it arise in the future.”

What might such a history lesson teach us?

That the eugenics movement, which emerged in Europe and the United States around the turn of the last century, was rooted in assumptions about the existence of distinct biological races, with “Anglo-Saxon” societies as the civilizing bedrock of modernity. Supporters of eugenics advocated policies of segregation and apartheid to protect the “well born” from contamination. Its leaders believed that a variety of social successes (wealth, political leadership, intellectual discoveries) and social problems (poverty, illegitimacy, crime, mental illness, and unemployment) could be traced to inherited, biological attributes associated with “racial temperament.” Is there any other conclusion, asked a popular 1926 textbook (co-authored by a

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leading California eugenicist), that “the Negro lacks in his germ plasm excellence of some qualities which the white race possess, and which are essential for success in competition with the civilizations of the white races at the present day.”¹ Eugenics also targeted poor whites, especially in rural areas, on the grounds that they constituted a distinct and “degenerate” racial typology.

That under the banner of “national regeneration,”² tens of thousands mostly poor women were subjected to involuntary sterilization in the United States between 1907 and 1940.³ And untold thousands of women were sterilized without their informed consent after World War II.⁴ Under California’s 1909 sterilization law, at least 20,000 Californians in state hospitals and prisons had been involuntarily sterilized by 1964. California, according to a recent study, “consistently outdistanced every other state” in terms of the number of eugenic sterilizations.⁵ In the 1910s and 1920s, men were as likely to be sterilized as women were, but by the 1940s restrictions on reproductive choice were aimed at women.

That grounds for sterilization included such vague classifications as “feeble-mindedness,” “idiocy,” “excessive masturbation,” “immorality,” and “hereditary degeneracy.” In 1926, for example, the superintendent of Riverside’s Bureau of Welfare and Relief advocated sterilization of “feeble-minded,” unmarried women as a means to halting the “menace to the race at large.”⁶ At the Sonoma State Home, sexual activity by single women was perceived as evidence of mental defect, irrespective of whether a patient met medical or psychological standards of “feeble-mindedness.”

That under the leadership of F.O. Butler as superintendent of the Sonoma Home for the Care and Training of Feeble-minded Children, typically patients were not paroled to their families unless sterilized prior to their release. “Dr. Butler has always had a strong weapon to use in getting consents for sterilization,” wrote Paul Popenoe of Pasadena’s Human Betterment Foundation to eugenicist John Randolph Haynes in 1930, “by telling the relatives that the patient could not leave without sterilization.”⁷

That sterilization represented only a small part of the eugenic agenda. Eugenics was also a cultural vehicle for expressing anxiety about the “degeneration” of middle-class “Aryans,” perceived as resulting from a declining birthrate and, in the words of a leading California eugenicist, the “evil of crossbreeding.”⁸ For eugenicists, sterilization was not so much a technical, medical procedure to enhance physical and mental health, as it was a way to cleanse the body politic of racial and sexual impurities. Eugenicists strongly supported limits on immigration from non-European countries, a restriction on welfare benefits to poor families, and bans on interracial marriage or “miscegenation.” As Sacramento banker Charles M. Goethe, a founder and sponsor of the Eugenics Society of Northern California and Pasadena’s Human Betterment Foundation, noted in 1929, the Mexican is “eugenically as low-powered as the Negro.... He not only does not understand health rules: being a superstitious savage, he resists them.”⁹ Goethe — for whom

a public park on the Sacramento State University campus is named — tirelessly campaigned to restrict Latin American immigration and to increase sterilization of the “socially unfit.”¹⁰

That proponents of eugenics were not obscure cranks or fringe right-wingers, but the best and brightest civic reformers and professional leaders. In Southern California, the Human Betterment Foundation enjoyed the active support of banker Henry Robinson, as well as of social scientist William Munro and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Robert Millikan, all of whom also served on the board of trustees of San Marino’s Huntington Library, one of the country’s most exclusive archives. Other notables actively involved in eugenic crusades included Stanford’s Chancellor David Starr Jordan, publisher Harry Chandler, Sacramento banker Charles M. Goethe, Rabbi Martin Meyer (a member of the State Board of Charities and Corrections, 1911–1920); Rabbi Rudolph Coffee (a founding member of the Human Betterment Foundation, president of the Travelers’ Aid Society, 1921–1926, and a member of the State Board of Charities and Corrections, 1924–1931), and John Randolph Haynes, M.D. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, a banker and real estate dealer, who served on California’s State Board of Charities and Corrections (1912–1923) and the University of California Board of Regents.¹¹

That California not only led the nation in forced sterilizations, but also in providing scientific and educational support for Hitler’s regime.¹² In 1935, Sacramento’s Charles M. Goethe praised the Human Betterment Foundation for effectively “shaping the opinions of the group of intellectuals who are behind Hitler....”¹³ In 1936, Goethe acknowledged the United States and Germany as leaders in eugenics (“two stupendous forward movements”), but complained that “even California’s quarter century record has, in two years, been outdistanced by Germany.”¹⁴ In 1936, California eugenicist Paul Popenoe was asking one of his Nazi counterparts for information about sterilization policies in Germany to make sure that “conditions in Germany are not misunderstood or misrepresented.”¹⁵

That California’s eugenicists could not claim ignorance that Germany’s sterilization program was motivated primarily by racial politics. For example, in 1935, they published a long defense of Germany’s sterilization policies, in which the author noted that the Nazis “had to resort to the teachings of eugenic science” because Germany had been “deprived of her colonies, blessed with many hundreds of defective racial hybrids as a lasting memory of the colored army of occupation, and dismembered all around.”¹⁶ Not only did California eugenicists know about Nazi efforts to use sterilization as a method of “race hygiene” — targeted primarily at Jews — they also approved efforts to stop “race-mixing” and increase the birth rate of the “Northern European type of family.”¹⁷ The chilling words of Progressive reformer John Randolph Haynes anticipated the Nazi regime’s murder of 100,000 mentally ill patients: “There are thousands of hopelessly insane in California, the condition of those minds is such that death would be a merciful

release. How long will it be before society will see the criminality of using its efforts to keep alive these idiots, hopelessly insane, and murderous degenerates.... Of course the passing of these people should be painless and without warning. They should go to sleep at night without any intimation of what was coming and never awake.”¹⁸

That while much is known about John Randolph Haynes and other supporters of eugenics, we have little information about the actual number of forced sterilizations that took place in California, or how race and gender influenced decision-making in institutions. Moreover, still hidden from history are the voices of the thousands of women and men who were subjected to eugenic experimentation. State agencies should allow researchers to have full access to internal records on condition that confidentiality of identities is protected.

That the eugenics movement — which targeted hundreds of thousands of poor women for sterilization without their consent, blamed poor families for reproducing poverty, and articulated racialized visions of white supremacy — should not be confused with the efforts of feminist organizations to guarantee women’s right to control their own sexuality and reproductive decisions. Or the efforts of science and medicine to explain the complexities of human heredity and understand the relationship of genetics to disease. As we now grapple with public policies pertaining to genetic technologies that promise to solve global problems of disease and malnutrition, it is important to remember the legacy of eugenics: in the name of “human betterment,” scientific ideas and practices can be used to promote and reproduce extraordinary inequalities.

NOTES

1. Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, *Applied Eugenics*. New York: Macmillan, 1926, p. 285.

2. Paul Popenoe, “The German Sterilization Law,” *Journal of Heredity* 25, 7, p. 257.

3. Elof A. Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*. Cold Spring Harbor: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, 2001, p. 215. The number typically used is 60,00 to 65,000. Nancy Ordover (*American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 134) estimates that 70,000 people “are known to have been sterilized” between 1907 and 1945.

4. For example, by the 1980s an estimated one-third of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age was sterilized, many as a result of coercion and trickery by social work and public health agencies. See Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 143.

5. Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003, p. 398.

6. Letter from J.H. Dodge to E.S. Gosney, July 26, 1926, E.S. Gosney Papers, box #16.5, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena.

7. Letter from Paul Popenoe to John Randolph Haynes, March 14, 1930, J.R. Haynes Papers, box #77, Human Betterment Foundation folder, Collection #1241, University of California, Los Angeles.

8. Popenoe and Johnson, p. 301.

9. C.M. Goethe, "The Influx of Mexican Amerinds," *Eugenics* 2, 1, 1929, pp. 6–9.

10. Alexandra Minna Stern, "Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, 1 (1999), pp. 41–81.

11. Haynes came to Southern California in 1887, where he practiced medicine, dabbled in Fabian socialism, and made a fortune in real estate. See Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 123.

12. Black, p. 277.

13. Quoted in Black, p. 277.

14. Quoted in Black, p. 315.

15. Quoted in Black, p. 342.

16. K. Burchardi, "Why Hitler Says: 'Sterilize the Unfit!'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1935.

17. Paul Popenoe, "The Nation's Greatest Asset," unpublished speech, April 1936, Gosney Papers, 1.6.

18. John Randolph Haynes, "Millions of Human Beings...." J.R. Haynes Papers, box #84, insanity folder, c. 1918, University of California, Los Angeles.