

The English scientist Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics” in 1883. He took the word from a Greek root meaning “good in birth” or “noble in heredity.” Galton wanted eugenics to become a branch of science dedicated to the improvement of human stock by giving “the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable.” Before long, American scientists were jumping on the bandwagon. English and American eugenicists both recognized that, before a eugenics revolution could occur, the public would have to be taught to be “eugenic-minded.” From the outset, eugenic aims merged seamlessly with longstanding race and class prejudice.

By 1935, thirty-five states had enacted laws that compelled the sexual segregation and sterilization of persons viewed as eugenically unfit, particularly the mentally ill and retarded, habitual criminals, and epileptics. A 1938 Gallup poll showed broad American support for eugenic sterilization. To the question, “Do you favor sterilization of habitual criminals and the hopelessly insane?” 84 percent answered “yes.” Between 1907 and 1963, over 64,000 individuals were forcibly sterilized under eugenic legislation in the United States. The laws and programs fostered by American eugenicists had also supplied a model for the Nazis, who had then gone on to greater extremes and sterilized several hundred thousand people.

Clarence Darrow is one of the most famous trial lawyers in American history, in no small part because of his starring role in the Scopes Monkey Trial. Darrow is also known for defending the least defensible clients, such as the thrill killers Leopold and Loeb. Moving arguments that thwarted the imposition of the death penalty were motivated by his strong belief in determinism. In other words, he did not believe humans were free to make their own decisions, even when it came to murder, but that they were controlled by both their heredity and their environment. Darrow felt great sympathy for the cause of labor and leaned well to the left politically. He wanted society to support human betterment and opposed forces that, in his view, held people back—forces such as capitalist exploitation, governmental intrusion, and social movements like prohibition, Christian fundamentalism, and eugenics. In the article below, Darrow lashes out against eugenics.

Clarence Darrow on Eugenics

(“The Eugenics Cult,” an article by Clarence Darrow, found in *The American Mercury*, Volume VIII, Number 30, June 1926.)

In the last ten years the reading public has been bombarded by books and articles on eugenics. In the main these articles have set forth a single thesis: that doom hangs over the human race. Of course, we have all known for a long time that each individual of the human race is doomed. Though we seldom speak of it and try not to think about it, every man inevitably comes to the realization that in time his own life must pass. The eugenicists' concern, however, is not over the fact that we die one by one. What alarms them is that the race is apparently bent upon committing a wholesale biological *harikari*. So there has been much beating of drums, blowing of trumpets and hubbub on the street-corners; there have been cries in the night of “race suicide,” “the rising tide of color,” “the race is dying out at the top,” and “torrents of degenerate and defective protoplasm.” It is vain to ask the question, What, of it? That does not stop the clamor. Neither will the remarks that I am

about to make on the subject.

The evidence with which the eugenicists support their contentions is simple and overwhelming. Are not the weak and unfit breeding much faster than the strong and the fit? College professors, lawyers, doctors, and the like average not more than two children to the family. On the other hand, carpenters, bricklayers, bootblacks and the other unfit average at least twice as many. Everybody knows that dagoes, hunkies, wops, Bolsheviks and all the other undesirables are begetting children at an indecent rate. These children are surely bound to overrun the earth, along with the morons, the insane and the criminal. Inevitably the superior stocks will be submerged. The only wonder is that with the persistent and senseless breeding of the unfit this hasn't happened long ago. Right here in our own country, which was settled by the Nordics after the Indians were driven out, the superior race is fast going down before the misfits of inferior races. In the face of the promiscuous breeding of these latter such noble strains as the Edwards and the Adams will be swamped by mere force of numbers. The good old *Mayflower* stock is suffering the same unhappy fate as the good old pre-Prohibition liquor. It is being mixed with all sorts of alien and debilitating substances.

Semi-cultured citizens read the eugenicist books, and, sitting on hard Chautauqua benches, listen to the speakers. Then they shudder with horror at the thought of the rising tide of undesirables. They believe it all, of course, for they assume that they themselves are the intelligent and the well-born. The professors, the preachers, the lawyers, the bankers, all the good solid citizens, are worried. Something, obviously, must be done to save the world, and the eugenicists are ready and even importunate with their remedy. *Organized society, they say, must in some way control mating and birth.* True, most of them seem to pause purposely just before they draw the logical conclusion that the state should interfere with the production of humans, as man already does with the production of hogs. When they come to this point, they falter and quibble, raise doubts and get cold feet. They take refuge in vague generalizations and leave the intelligent reader and the more intelligent politician to do the rest. But that rest will evidently be a plenty.

However, some of the eugenicists are not so shy. Mr. Albert Wiggam, for instance, speaking with his wonted clearness, force and sureness, tells us that society must take stern measures to prevent the unfit from producing their kind. He pleads with us to take heed of the laws of science. If we only knew it, says Mr. Wiggam, "we already have enough science at hand to bring the world into an earthly paradise! It remains only for all men to apply it." Again, there is Mr. Herbert W. Walter, who joins a Mr. [Charles B.] Davenport in sounding a call for race improvement. In his book, *Genetics*, he quite definitely sets forth the necessity for the control of the production of human beings by state agencies. "A negative way," writes Mr. Walter, "to bring out the better blood in the world is to follow the clarion call of Davenport and 'dry up the streams of defective and degenerate protoplasm.' This may be partially accomplished, at least in America, by employing the following agencies: control of immigration, more discriminating marriage laws, a quickened eugenic sentiment, sexual segregation of defectives, and, finally, drastic measures of sterilization when necessary."

Mr. Walter later informs us that already our face is turned toward the light. Eight States

have sterilization laws, and if such laws could be enforced in the whole United States "less than four generations would eliminate nine-tenths of the crime, insanity, and sickness of the present generation in our land. Asylums, prisons, and hospitals would decrease and the problems of the unemployed, the indigent old, and the hopelessly degenerate would cease to trouble civilization." Mr. Wiggam is right: paradise is just around the corner. Amazingly simple, isn't it? Just a law providing for a "minor operation on the male which occupies but a few moments" and in the case of the female "the removal of a portion of each Fallopian tube" and presto! in four generations we are rid of nine-tenths of our criminals, paupers, insane, etc. No wonder the man in the street marvels at the wonders of science!

...[The eugenicists] will say that their real aim is to breed for better intellects. The world, unfortunately, is largely ruled by phrases, and a convenient and fetching slogan for those who think the race may be improved by breeding has been supplied. "A healthy mind in a healthy body" is the new slogan. But are good minds necessarily domiciled in healthy bodies? The history of the race does not prove it. There is something about a healthy body, apparently, that does not lure a good mind. It is probably too healthy. No; you cannot sort out intelligence by physical symmetry. The workings of heredity are obscure enough in the body; they are hopelessly indefinite in the mind. No eugenicist knows anything about breeding for intellect. That the manifestations which we call mind are in some way a product of bodily functioning seems to be fairly well established. But what appears to be the healthiest and most symmetrical body may not produce the best mind. A slight and utterly obscure variance in some part of the structure may make a wide difference in mental strength. It is not unusual to find imbecility in the same family with first-rate intellects. To talk about breeding for intellect, in the present state of scientific knowledge and data, is nothing short of absurd. No scientist has ever pretended to advance any theories for breeding intellect; we do not know what intelligence is, much less how to breed it. Are we even convinced that better minds are desirable? The question of human welfare is not so much a question of more strength as of a better use of such strength as we have. About all that we can say about a good mind is that it adds to the effectiveness of the individual. What will be accomplished with the mind, good or bad, is not a matter of breeding; it is a matter of education.

It is, in fact, in no sense a foregone conclusion that the general welfare of man would be improved by increasing his intellect. It cannot be shown that the intelligent are happier than the ignorant; still less can it be shown that they contribute more to the happiness of their fellows. The great mass who are born and die are not "intellectual"; yet they survive and their tribe increases. Real intelligence is as rare, and perhaps as unnatural, as idiocy. One can imagine a human being so imaginative and sympathetic that he would pity the genius as much as the simple. No idiot knows that he is an idiot. As a rule, those of small intellectual equipment are so sure of themselves that they are eager to make the race over in their own image. This is a controlling reason why they should not be encouraged to exercise their power.

Is there any way to tell what class is the happiest? It cannot be shown that riches or learning or power or intellect have anything to do with happiness. Those who in a measure possess these gifts seem not to be sure of the happiness that they bring. It is not

unreasonable to suppose that the cocksureness of ignorance, the lack of imagination that goes with conceit, and the crude hopes and dreams born of stupidity give more contentment and pleasure, and less pain, than the vision and imagination that are born of intelligence.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that science could furnish us with such exact data on the method of breeding as would permit the elimination of morons, idiots and imbeciles, and at the same time vastly increase the numbers of the intelligent, scholarly and well disposed, I repeat that it is not at all certain that it would be desirable to accomplish that result. The large mass of men and women, the world over, must do manual work, and one of the first indications of intelligence and training is that an individual separates himself from such work. What would happen to the operation of factories, railroads, buildings, and all the various activities of men if everyone became a genius or a scholar? Are not the morons, so-called, also important in the scheme? In the processes of living, are they not even more important than the geniuses? Would not a well-developed system of birth-control leave out the vast number of people who do the manual work of the world? And if so, what would become of the intellectuals who were compelled to take their places? All men must live in houses, wear clothes and consume food. No society would be possible that did not take into account the vast army who must supply these primitive wants, and be more or less directed by the intelligent who do not perform manual work. Where is the assurance that any organized society, such as the state, through the regulations of breeding could produce the proper proportion of laborers and *intelligentsia* to improve the general standard of comfort and welfare of the whole people?

Even if human breeding could be so controlled as to produce a race such as the eugenicists desire, we might still lose much that is worthwhile. It is hardly possible to breed certain qualities in without breeding others out. I, for one, am alarmed at the conceit and sureness of the advocates of this new dream. I shudder at their ruthlessness in meddling with life. I resent their egoistic and stern righteousness. I shrink from their judgment of their fellows. Everyone who passes judgment necessarily assumes that he is right. It seems to me that man can bring comfort and happiness out of life only by tolerance, kindness and sympathy, all of which seem to find no place in the eugenicists' creed. The whole program means the absolute violation of what men instinctively feel to be inherent rights. Organized society shall say who must and must not breed, and establish stern rules for picking out mates.

But of the various ways that the individual has found for attaining to pleasure, one of the greatest is the business of selecting mates. A large and important part of life is made up of the gestures that precede and go with mating. Every Jack pursues his Jill, and every Jill lures her Jack. In this prime occupation of life they want to be free to do their own choosing. The boy and girl resent the proffered advice of even parents. It is safe to say that few fathers or mothers at fifty would approve of their own conquests in early life. It is still safer to say that in such a primitive affair as mating, the young would not give a fig for the opinions and wisdom of the old and seasoned. The youth does not even know why he is specially attracted to some special mate. The urge of life calls him, and he feels that he knows who he wants. No one can imagine a boy or girl going to a committee and asking its members to pick out a mate. Nature does not work that way, and it is not easy to

understand how it ever could work that way.

The normal boy and girl, indeed, do not go a-wooing in order to find mates to improve the race. They are thinking of themselves and their happiness, which is far more vital to them, and probably to the race, than the character of the human beings who will inhabit the earth in the distant future. It is the immediate feeling that preserves life. True, much mating is improvident, and many unions do not bring the anticipated joys, but still their emotions and hopes perpetuate the species, and so the race survives. If the scheme of the eugenicist could be carried out, it is easy to conceive of a thoroughly mechanical human being, preserved for a time by his disappearing emotions, but eventually going down to annihilation. Is there any certainty that the intellectual control of life would bring more pleasure and satisfaction and variety than the seeming haphazard and instinctive mating that has at least produced most of the zeal and interest of living?

The bigoted and the ignorant are very sure of themselves. No business seems to be too important or too personal for them to undertake. One of their chief pastimes is the regulation of other people. They are willing to do anything to others that to them seems important. To compel all others to adopt their own views and ways of living is their aim. In fact, one of their chief sources of comfort and pleasure is making others unhappy. How safe would it be for the human race and the comfort of the individual units if the production of human beings were left in their hands?

...I am not a blind worshipper of Nature. I cannot say whether she is good or bad. Man has no means of knowing. We can say only that, like all life, he is her product, that she is strong, if not invincible, and that she seems to delight in undoing the puny work of those who seek to meddle with her laws. I don't believe we could escape from her power, no matter what we sought to do. Neither do I believe that we could improve her job if we did escape. The history of the race shows endless examples of the pain and suffering that men have inflicted upon each other by their cocksureness and their meddling.

We know something about biology. We know a little about eugenics. We have no knowledge of what kind of man would be better than the one that Nature is evolving to fit into the environment which he cannot escape. We have neither facts nor theories to give us any evidence based on biology or any other branch of science as to how we could breed intelligence, happiness or anything else that would improve the race. We have no idea of the meaning of the word "improvement." We can imagine no human organization that we could trust with the job, even if eugenicists knew what should be done, and the proper way to do it. Yet in the face of all this we have already started on the course, and the uplifters are urging us to go ahead, with no conception of where we are going, or what route we shall take!

In an age of meddling, presumption, and gross denial of all the individual feelings and emotions, the world is urged, not only to forcibly control all conduct, but to remake man himself! Amongst the schemes for remolding society this is the most senseless and impudent that has ever been put forward by irresponsible fanatics to plague a long-suffering race.