

Jo: Hey, guys.

Erik and Jim: Hey, Jo.

Jo: It's been kind of a while. We've had collectively and maybe nationally or even globally, a fairly crazy last few months. And I'm kind of excited that we're back recording after a little bit of a hiatus that we didn't necessarily plan.

Erik: It's been a pandemic.

Jo: Exactly. Okay. So we are going to talk today about eugenics. This is something that I think we've said on this podcast, what, like 15 times we need to do an episode on it at some point or maybe a series. So this is our first of the series.

Jim: Right.

Erik: Yay

Jo: Eugenics. Okay. So this episode, I feel like what we ought to do is sort of just lay the groundwork, define what that term means, talk about the history of the eugenics movement, and then hopefully poke some holes in that received wisdom and learn some new stuff about eugenics and future episodes.

Jim: We definitely need to do this. Yeah.

Jo: I'm Jo.

Erik: and I'm Erik.

Jim: And I'm Jim. And this is speaking of race, and we're going to tell you more than you ever wanted to know about eugenics over the next several episodes.

Jo: Okay. So first, let's define the term. What is eugenics actually mean?

Erik: Why don't you start, Jo, and say what you say in the classroom?

Jo: Eugenics is the sort of practice and movement that was important in the early, late 19th, early 20th century around the attempt to refine the genetic stock of human populations through controlled breeding.

Erik: Jim, what do you say in yours?

Jim: I say it means well born.

Erik: So the word itself just means well born or good birth or something like that.

Jim: Yeah.

Erik: Do you say anything other than that?

Jo: You do, Jim. I've been in your class.

Jim: Sure. Yeah, I give the cannon. I taught the cannon. You know that it started with Galton and the Darwin's cousin had this epiphany after reading On The Origin of Species, so I just, I taught what I read in Gould.

Erik: Stephen Jay Gould's *Mismeasure of Man*, I think, I think was a really important book when it came out in the early eighties and then it was republished again in the mid-nineties (Gould, 1981, 1996). I think a lot of people do use that as kind of the keystone text for even thinking about the whole eugenics movement. I was really surprised because as you guys know, my first set of degrees was in the sciences before moving into doing history and philosophy of science. And when I started taking history classes, I was kind of shocked that all the historians knew all this stuff. But in the sciences, nobody ever spoke the word. And yet, and yet eugenics came from scientists. It was part of science in the early part of the 20th century. I think what historians like to do, because we have to contextualize everything, is to say that eugenics is part of a whole suite of ways of controlling immigrant populations, especially in the United States in the early part of the 20th century, and potentially the most important moment of the eugenics movement in the early 20th century, which we can talk about more later today, was the passage of the Johnson Reed Act in 1924, which almost effectively ended immigration into the United States from any place that wasn't Great Britain or France, and to a certain degree, Mexico, but pretty much everywhere in southern and Eastern Europe, but Russia, they were totally shut out. And yet we don't think of immigration policy as necessarily being part of the mainstream eugenics movement, even though it totally was.

Jo: Okay. So can we bring together these three comments and let's let's reach consensus, get ready. So is it fair to say that eugenics is a term that means well-bred? It's got a long history of being applied to control the influx of what are perceived as sort of outsider genetics into the mostly white United States populations. And that is the, man this is not concise.

Jim: This is this is why we script.

Jo: The attempts to keep racial and international, maybe mixing from happening in order to sort of preserve good genetic stock, which in the sort of worldview of the eugenics folks was good Aryan European stock. Is that fair?

Erik: Yes, but that's really long.

Jo: I know!

Erik: Why don't we just say that eugenics is when the dominant population tries to control the reproduction and of subordinate populations.

Jo: Even better.

Erik: And the sad thing is that the eugenics movement wasn't just American, that, you know, Francis Galton was British, but ironically the UK was one of the few places that didn't have much of a eugenics movement. Instead, it spread to the United States, Brazil, Japan, France, Belgium, Italy and eventually, and most tragically, in Germany, and became the cornerstone of the Holocaust eventually.

Jo: Let's get into the history a little bit now. We keep talking about Galton. Is that a place to start? That's usually where it starts.

Erik: Jim?

Jim: Well, Stephen Jay Gould started with Galton, you know, giving the definition in his 1983 publication (1983). Sometimes other biologists go back to 1869 or the early 1860s publications of Galton as foreshadowing eugenics (Galton, 1865, 1869). But basically grab on to Galton as the founder of the Science of Eugenics and show that as a starting point.

Erik: Yeah, as an example, Adam Rutherford, who is a science writer now and was a geneticist earlier, recently wrote a book and he has this great phrase. He says, all this bad stuff of eugenics started with this Victorian racist, Francis Galton, and then immediately mentions what I think is always mentioned

and every single time that Francis Galton is mentioned, which is that he is the cousin of Charles Darwin, people love that little juicy detail.

Jo: Yeah. What's that about? Why do they like that so much?

Erik: Well, it's true that the Wedgwood family, Wedgwood China and the Darwin family and the Galton family were very much interbred. And so Francis Galton and Charles Darwin shared a grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, who was the first Darwin to write about evolution. And God himself would say years later that reading *The Origin of Species* did put some things into place for him. But if you actually look at his work, it seems like it was a little bit later the 1869 book on *Heredity*, and he wrote just a couple of articles before that that were popularly published where Galton was basically trying to say, *Genius travels in families*. And of course, he like to use his own family.

Jim: My family, right? Me, me, me.

Erik: Exactly. And the Darwin's right. And then in, in 1883 is where he finally does coin that word eugenics. The irony is, and we can talk about this in a later episode, that other people would actually criticize Galton for stealing the idea.

Jo: Okay. So he came up with the term itself, being a cousin of Charles Darwin. There's a delicious irony there, perhaps because Darwin is usually thought of as a sort of like anti racist guy, which is something you need to get into in a future episode.

Erik: We also need to talk about that, yeah.

Jo: And we'll, we'll talk more about how Erik's cool, innovative right now research is finding that these ideas were all over the place long before Galton. But okay. Galton. So if he's the guy who coined the term, who else are sort of important players in this in the development of this movement and what's happening? Post Galton.

Erik: Do you guys talk about anybody in particular in your courses when talking about these guys?

Jim: We don't talk about Karl Pearson, we usually skip to Davenport and Laughlin and Grant.

Erik: So you jump right to the Americans.

Jim: Yeah. So because that gets us to the German-American transition, it's not a semester course, it's a lecture, you know, it's a single lecture. And so you go, bang. Galton Davenport, Eichmann.

Jo: Should we mention Pearson?

Erik: Well, I think that Jim is pointing out something that's really important, which is that the very first historical treatments of the entire eugenics movement started in the 1960s, and the Holocaust overshadows all of them. And so Mark Haller's book and Donald Pickering's book both sort of see the entire eugenics movement through the lens of the Holocaust. And so they really are just trying to race through all the individuals that lead to that moment in the 1940s. And so we do leave out tons and tons, tons of people, all on both sides of the Atlantic. But usually it is after Galton we do get to Karl Pearson in part because Galton makes these statistical innovations, but he himself is not a very accomplished mathematician. Karl Pearson, on the other hand, who really loves Francis Galton is and is a really accomplished statistician, comes up with the chi squared test. And then Carl Pearson's star student is Ronald A. Fisher, who comes up with the p value test that we still use in social sciences to this day. So we like to talk about at least those three English statisticians, but then it really is Charles Davenport in America who makes eugenics like a real movement.

Jo: So tell us, tell us about Davenport.

Erik: So Galton lives in an old age and so has lots of influence simply because of that. Charles Davenport is an American who's interested in horse breeding, among other things, and becomes interested in Galton statistics. Pearson's additional innovations to those statistics and very early on, really before the word eugenics is tossed around, a great deal has already adopted this notion that talent travels through human families and therefore bad things also travels through human families. And so very early on, Davenport, like we're talking 1900, 1901, Davenport is already thinking, Hey, wouldn't it be nice if we could identify the traits that are really great and amplify those in humans and the traits that are not so great and really diminish those in humans? And as part of the American Breeders Association. In the first decade of the 20th century, Davenport gathers like a whole cabal of these people who first call themselves Mendelians, because Mendel's work has just been rediscovered. And then, you know, quite soon after call themselves geneticists and they see their entire job as giving one explanation for how heredity works from plants thru animals thru humans, and that there shouldn't be any break between all those things. Mentality wise, what that means is that they definitely believe that the way that we breed corn and cotton and pigs and horses should also be applied to humans, and that there's no reason why we shouldn't directly apply the methods of agriculture now better understood, because of genetics, to humans. So that's what Davenport sees as the ultimate goal of eugenics. But I think the real reason why he's important is because of all these other people that he knows and the amount of money that he's able to raise from his position in the American Breeders Association.

Jo: Okay. And now, not to be obvious here, but it might be worth at this moment pausing to point out that the reason why we're talking about eugenics at all in a podcast about race and history and science is that these ideas, those seemingly kind of values, neutral on the surface, these ideas about sort of increasing the good things in human genetics and decreasing those that aren't so good, get unfairly applied by the people in power to those in less power, which I think is sort of hinted at in your concise definition of eugenics at the beginning, Erik, but there's all kinds of disastrous consequences that come out of this very, very slippery slope.

Jim: We're going to talk about masturbation in a later episode, right?

Erik: Great. I mean, that's on the table. Come back for more folks. I'll talk about masturbation. No, Jim's right. Jim's right. That's actually an important part of the story and it gets left out of most.

Jim: See, I've done some of my homework.

Erik: Exactly.

Jo: Erik has done amazing research on this topic.

Erik: We shouldn't put that in a podcast. I think, Jo, you're exactly right. The the interlacing of race and eugenics is always a really problematic thing. I've been in conferences where people who are very good scholars will come up and just say, you know, eugenics was just applied to people of color. And that, frankly, is not true at all.

Jim: Yeah.

Erik: In fact, eugenics was only applied to people who are considered to be white at first. So is it appropriate for a podcast about race to be talking about something like eugenics? I think it still is, and I think we could tease future episodes by merely saying that from the very beginning, Francis Galton made it really clear in his early writings that he saw Caucasians and specifically Anglo-Saxons, and he would use that phrase as being the holders of all good traits and some bad ones too, but definitely the good traits. And so if we're going to have anybody reproduce more, it should be Anglo-Saxons. And if we're going to have anybody reproduce less, it should be anyone who's not Anglo-Saxon. And I think in the major canonical retellings of the eugenics story, I think people do pick up on another really important feature, which is that it really accelerates after World War One. And one of the reasons why it accelerates so much is because of the work of a guy named Lothrop Stoddard, who is a historian at Harvard, and another guy named Madison Grant, who was kind of a gadfly but had been trained at Yale.

So if you look at the broader context, the years right before World War One, so in 1912, 1913, 1914, what you get is this otherwise inexplicable increase in things like lynchings and the rise of Confederate monuments, which is weird because it's, you know, 30 years after the end of the Civil War, the Daughters of the Confederacy racing around the country, throwing up monuments to everybody and even in northern cities that fought against the Confederacy. Right. It's in that backdrop that Madison Grant writes his book, *The Passing of the Great Race* (Grant, 1916). Now, every idea in that entire book is stolen from at least two other historians before him. But his book gets a lot of attention because he basically says there isn't one thing called the white race, there's really three things. There's the Nordics, and those are the most superior. Those are where all the good ideas in world history have come from. And then there's the Alpine Group, which is a kind of transitional group that's hearty and works really hard. But then there's the Mediterranean group, people that live around the Mediterranean Greeks, Italians, Southern, French, Spanish, and there are basically barely any better than non-whites in that book. It's translated and translated and translated and translated. All the ideas already appear in the work of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau now (Gobineau, 1853-1855), who we've mentioned a couple of times in this podcast, back in the 1830s, but Grant is repackaging them for a 20th century audience, and he drops a little bit of Mendelism in there. But for the most part, it's just a hundred year old book that gets republished. But it's such an influential book, it inspires this other guy, Lothrop Stoddard, who is a member of the KKK secretly, who is also is Harvard trained. He has a huge audience. In 1920, he writes this book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (Stoddard, 1920). I mean, it's a pretty telling title, right?

Jo: Is that subtle?

Erik: And then in 1922, he writes, *The Menace of the the Untermensch, the underman* (Stoddard, 1922).

Jo: Also subtle.

Erik: Those two books right there fall directly into the hands of people like Goebbels and Goering and even Hitler in Germany. So those the three books together are signals of this huge attitudinal change. Actually, maybe it wasn't that big of a change, but at least it was making its way into the public consciousness. So important were those two authors that if you read *The Great Gatsby*, Tom, one of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* keeps mentioning this Goddard fellow. Goddard is just a portmanteau of Stoddard and Grant. And so it's that smushing together of this real white supremacist stuff that is gaining intellectual currency in the teens and the early twenties, at the very same moment that people like Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin are getting support for eugenics. So the race stuff and the eugenics stuff get twisted together right there in world War One.

Jim: And of course, the IQ stuff is coming up, right then.

Erik: Absolutely. Which we've talked about extensively, right? Yeah. So the IQ tests, the notion that heredity is this really powerful force that really governs everything and it should govern society, not just scientific understandings of the world. All of those things are really coming about in that right after World War One period. And then what you see is the rise of the Eugenic Records Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York.

Jo: Yes, let's talk about that. That always makes its way into the canonical story as well.

Jim: The funding for Cold Spring Harbor comes in 1913, right?

Erik: Yeah. So the first funding is...

Jim: Harriman.

Erik: Yep, the Harriman Railroad money.

Jim: Yeah.

Erik: Davenport and Laughlin convince Harriman's wife for whose first name. I can't remember, but this massive, massive railroad fortune, a good chunk of it is given to them to build a whole office in Long Island, just outside New York City. And then they get the bright idea of basically collecting statistical measures on everything that you could possibly measure from this broad of the population, as you could measure. But of course, IQ is the thing that they're really after. They do facial measurements and all the craniometric stuff that we've talked about on this podcast before. But they're really interested in IQ and they help develop not by themselves, but they help develop a standardized test, standardized aptitude test, ...

Jo: What, you mean the SAT?

Erik: I MEAN THE SAT! Which they hope to give to every graduating high school student in America in order to get a baseline of intelligence to see whether the population is getting smarter or dumber, is degenerating or progressing. That gives them a baseline to work their eugenic principles on.

Jo: And it's also a matter of intergroup comparison, is it not?

Erik: Absolutely. Although for them they're committed to already a kind of white supremacy. So by intergroup, all they're really trying to sort out are the best whites from the not quite as good whites. They've already believed that only whites are worth really measuring. So they've that's already built in to the whole system, which is why it's so hard in the the metric of college admissions in the 1930s and forties to begin to figure out how do you measure people that are coming from other populations? Because everything has been oriented toward just this implicit white supremacy. They're not alone. Although the Eugenics Records Office is probably the biggest and most influential organization in the entire United States, they're definitely not alone. I like to talk sometimes about a eugenic triangle in the northern part of the United States Cold Spring Harbor in New York is one point of the triangle, the opposite coast, the Human Betterment Foundation, run by a guy named Paul Popenoe in Stanford, California, is the other point of that triangle. David Starr Jordan, who's the president of Stanford University, is Friends of Pope Now gives him all kinds of power and stature to measure stuff on the West Coast. And when the eugenics movement really takes off, California is the leading eugenics state. It's sterilizes more than any other state in the country by a long margin. The top point of the triangle is an idiosyncratic one, and it's a group that often doesn't get mentioned at all. But it's the point at Battle Creek, Michigan, run by John Harvey Kellogg of of Corn Fame, the Kellogg's Cereal Family. So, again, massive amounts of money because of all that cereal money. So Kellogg's idiosyncratic because he's just trying to make a sort of better living country. But in the beginning of the 20th century, this his foundation, which has already existed for almost 20 years at that point, really switches to, again, what he calls race hygiene, the cleaning of the white race. And so for Kellogg, it's again, really important to identify the high performing whites from the lower performing whites and to figure out how to make the high performing whites have more babies and the low performing whites have less babies. And of course, the non-whites forget about them. From Kellogg's point of view, one of the reasons why Kellogg is so important is because he's a loved individual. His company is so influential, and there's just this steady strip... there's like a steady drip of funding coming from cereal money, coming from railroad money. The Rockefellers get involved. So oil money, the Carnegies get involved. So steel money, just constant, constant, constant money from some of the most wealthy families in the entire country is being poured into this eugenics movement. And in that little eugenics triangle, which covers basically the northern half of the United States before World War two, they count about 33,000 individuals sterilized.

Jo: Which is something that students almost never know. Right. There's this shock and horror that always comes about when I teach students about especially the sterilization, involuntary sterilization campaign in California. We're talking over ten or 12,000 people sterilized in this period involuntarily. And my students have no idea. And it gets them talking and thinking about how close the US might have actually come to its own form of holocaust, which is again something that tends to sort of blow their minds.

Erik: That's a great point. It's it's true. California will sterilize the most people. Virginia is second most. Indiana is third most.

Jo: My home state.

Erik: Exactly. Indiana is the first state to pass eugenic legislation in 1907, which just means that if two doctors sign off on it, I don't know, no one else has to give consent as long as the doctors are okay with it.

Jo: So who are the people being sterilized under these laws? Like what are the criteria? So two doctors have to sign off. Okay, but what kind of populations are we looking at here?

Erik: So for them, it's really hard to answer that question, in part because of the way that statistics are kept. What we know is that the vast majority of the populations that are sterilized are already institutionalized there. Most of them are at mental institutions, though not all. Some are just at regular prisons or jails, sometimes just county jails. Most of the people who are sterilized at first are men who are suspected of somehow being involved in crime. But over time, more and more women are sterilized. And the reason for women being sterilized, especially in California, is just for promiscuity. But promiscuity sometimes will be labeled under the heading of feeble mindedness. So the feeble minded and there is no definition for what we mean by feeble minded. The feeble minded are the primary targets of being sterilized.

Jo: Okay. So the feeble minded could be people who are deemed to be sort of morally deviant, promiscuous, criminal. It could be people who are deemed to be intellectually deficient in some way.

Erik: And there's no real way to separate those two things. I mean, this is the really confounding thing about the eugenics movement is that one label, feeble minded, might be applied to a person because they do bad things, even though intellectually they're fine. But that same label, Feebleminded, might be applied to somebody who is mentally a little slow but has done nothing else wrong. It's a catch all term.

Jo: Yeah. Again, it's a very slippery slope that is perhaps conveniently extremely ill defined.

Erik: Exactly. So it is challenged a lot and the slipperiness of the term is challenged in court a lot and very often in fact more than half the time the courts strike down early eugenics legislation until the mid 1920s and in the mid 1920s, the eugenicists again spearheaded by Davenport, but also Harry Laughlin, who we should talk more about in just a second, Paul Popenoe, David Starr Jordan and a few other folks, they realize if you want this stuff to stay on the books, these laws will stay on the books, you have to have a kind of medical board that is approving these things and you have to get at least tacit permission from the patient or the patient's caregivers. And so they very often will ask the parents of people, can we sterilize your kid? It's going to be for society's best, but it's also going to be therapeutic for them. They're not going to be mentally handicapped anymore. They're not going to cause you any more pain. If we can just do this small surgery that won't really hurt them very much. And it is just a small surgery for men, especially. So by and large, you get consent. But of course the consent isn't what we would consider informed consent because it just doesn't they don't give them all the details. So again, it's challenged and challenge and challenge. And then finally, a guy named Albert Priddy in Virginia decides he wants to get a test case through the Supreme Court, which will stop the individual case by case nitpicking of the eugenics laws. So he engineers a case essentially where he picks a girl named Carrie Buck. Carrie Buck is pregnant at the time. Her mother is already in the Virginia home for the Feebleminded, and they recommend that Carrie also be put there. Why? Well, because she's pregnant. Doesn't have a husband. Yeah, she hasn't shown any other characteristics to make it, so she should be singled out. But that's the one that they use. Now, Priddy dies in the middle of the court case after it gets to the state level, but it does eventually make it up to the national level and the person that takes over for Priddy is a man named Bell, another physician named Bell. And so that case gets called Buck versus Bell. Carrie Buck versus Bell.

Jo: And that's something that probably most people who've done any study of eugenics will have heard of, because it's another one of these things that becomes part of the canonical story, typically.

Erik: Totally. That's the most famous of all of the cases because it does make it to the Supreme Court, even though both of the sides are engineered by the same team of medical men who want to see the eugenics laws passed. I don't know whether the Supreme Court knew that, but when it does get to the Supreme Court, there's frankly not a lot of deliberation and in an 8 to 1 decision. So an overwhelming decision, they famously say, according to Oliver Wendell Holmes, the supposedly left leaning justice, although I don't think he was really left leaning. The famous line, three generations of imbeciles is enough, which is the three generations to be Emma Buck. That's Carrie's mom, Carrie Buck. And then Vivian, who is the baby who's just been born and couldn't have had any tests to figure out whether she's feeble minded. Sadly, Vivian, who doesn't really ever get to know her mom, only lives till about eight years old and then dies of an infection. But she was actually on the honor roll in school before that moment, so not really showing any signs of mental feeble mindedness or anything like that. So still, after that case makes it through the Supreme Court in 1927, it's really open season in the United States and the eugenics stuff just really takes off after 1927. What do you guys talk about in your classes when you periodize it? Do you talk about what happens in the 1930s or do you just jump to the Second World War?

Jo: I typically jump, right? I do mention Buck v. Bell. So I didn't say that earlier when I was talking about my my sort of way of teaching this. But that's it. Up until World War Two, pretty much I talk about the California sterilizations, I talk about the model eugenics sterilization law, and I talk about Buck v. Bell. And then I go right into boom World War Two. Basically.

Erik: That makes a lot of sense what ends up happening, according to Dan Kevles, who wrote *In the Name of Eugenics*, is that eugenics kind of switches form (Kevles, 1995). And the stuff that we were talking about before where it's tightly connected with white supremacists and it's about race, according to Dan Kevles, it switches in the 1930s where it's mostly medical men pursuing these eugenic operations, and it's mostly women who are getting the eugenics operations. And it's almost 100% of the people are in mental institutions. And they're put there again, theoretically anyway, because of some sort of. Yeah. Some sort of mental something. Right. Yeah. That feeble mindedness or any anything really by that point. So that's the way that it changes. It's seen very much more as therapeutic and less punitive and certainly less oriented toward race than it was before.

Jo: It's even sometimes described as a humane option, isn't it?

Erik: Absolutely. But but but that's because we're just worried about the eugenics triangle. We're so enamored with that notion of these three major facilities that we're spending all this money and driving eugenic legislation that we forget about what happens in the rest of the United States, in the rest of the world,

Jo: like in the South.

Erik: like in the South and the rest of the United States. There was almost no eugenics before 1935. There's almost no reason for it, because there were these kind of penal colonies, farms in some cases where African-Americans primarily were used as basically slave labor all over again for 50 years after the Civil War.

Jo: Okay. So before we get to World War two, one thing that I often teach the model eugenics sterilization law as a key piece of legislation that had that was related to all of these U.S. based forced sterilization kind of legal issues we've been talking about. But that also was a really clear example of a way in which the eugenics movement in the United States got picked up and used in this case, this piece of legislation, I believe, was translated and implemented in the early parts of the Holocaust. Is that right?

Erik: Exactly. Harry Laughlin, I have mentioned a couple of times was kind of the right hand man of Charles Davenport. Laughlin had all of these connections, even on Capitol Hill. And so both the anti immigrant stuff and the model sterilization law were both the brain children of Harry Laughlin, who, because of his connections, again, was able to get the anti-immigration bill passed in 1921 and then again in 1924, that the Johnson Reed Act again, it was such an incredible staunching of immigration into the United States. It changed the entire idea of what the United States is like. And himself wrote an article basically talking about the fallacy of the melting pot and how the United States isn't a melting pot. We don't want to be a melting pot. It's supposed to be for whites, you know. But then from there, he kind of offhandedly almost wrote this model sterilization bill that he he gave to Walter Priddy that kind of started the Buckley bill thing going. But then also using his connections, Laughlin travels to Germany. And in Germany there was already eugenics movement that had been going on since the early part of the 20th century. But it was pretty flimsy. It was primarily led by people like Eugen Fisher and Alfred Plotz, who are both anthropologists at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin and when they meet Laughlin, Laughlin just sort of hands over everything and says, Here's what we're doing. And the Germans are blown away and they're like, Wow, we have a problem with the unfit in our country too. And so they just sort of pick up all of this stuff. And of course the most direct place where you see it is in the Nuremberg Code, that infamous document that tries to identify the ranking of people based on their degree of Jewishness, which is based on their heredity, that becomes that sort of key thing that gets the Holocaust really off the ground. But less talked about is what happens before all of that in 1938 in Austria, really, but also in Berlin and in Munich, the action T4 Tiergarten starts of four, which is the name of an asylum where physicians take their unfit and they bring them down into the basement and they try all kinds of ways to euthanize them. One of the early attempts is that they back up the bus and they just put a pipe coming out of the exhaust of the bus into the basement until it fills up with carbon monoxide. But it's very slow, very brutal. People scream,

Jo: oh, god.

Erik: And so then they try out different kinds of pesticides and herbicide gases finally landing on infamously Zyklon, which is the gas is then used in the showers and all the death camps across Europe and during the Holocaust proper. So action T4, T4 just being an abbreviation of the place where it started was signed in 1939, but had already been going on for a couple of years before that point. And that was not just sterilization that just we're going to out now kill the unfit the most gruesome part of that beginning part of the Holocaust was actually what they called the mercy killings that happened on busses themselves. So they would send school busses to neighborhoods and parents could just take their children who were mentally disabled or physically handicapped or even their own parents who were aged and mentally handicapped or senile and put them on these busses. And at first the busses took them to the facility, but so many people gave up their own children and parents that they began to essentially armor the sides of the busses. They began to cover the windows up so you couldn't see what was going on. And they actually began to euthanize people on the busses themselves.

Jo: Oh, my God.

Erik: And then throw their bodies, mass graves. I know, right? We don't talk about this stuff at all.

Jo: We don't talk. Okay. How does that relate to the model eugenics sterilization law, though? And yes, that is freaking horrible. Oh, my God.

Erik: So this was in Germany anyway. It was a kind of ad hoc adaptation from what they were already doing, where they were sort of after the fact saying, we'll use this justification of trying to clean the race for Rassenhygiene in order to say that we need to do these sterilizations. But sterilization is not enough. We need to, in fact, do euthanasia. We need to actually eliminate the unfit. And they weirdly adopted language that appeared much earlier in the United States for Nazi propaganda in the late thirties, where they would take an image of a mentally handicapped man and basically, say, 40,000 reichsmarks is what it costs you, oh, faithful German citizen to keep this this mentally disabled man alive. Isn't your gold worth more than that or something like that, right? Or are you sure you want to spend your tax dollars keeping this mentally handicapped person alive?

Jo: Okay.

Erik: Again, the United States has already done versions of that in the early 20th century, but it kind of passed out of use in the 1920s and thirties. It was the Nazis who brought that kind of thinking back to justify first sterilizing and then eventually euthanizing the mentally handicapped. And so all of that stuff is the really the lead in to what we consider the Holocaust proper, even though the death has already started before even World War Two itself begins.

Jo: Okay. And this is the point where I think we usually sort of call the end of eugenics, right? Like with the revelation of what's going on with the Holocaust and the multinational, multilateral rejection of that horrifying set of laws and murders. That's it, right? Is eugenics done now?

Erik: Yeah. Have you guys seen the Spencer Tracy movie Judgment at Nuremberg in 1961? No. Black and white, but it was shot in 61.

Jim: I don't remember it.

Erik: Mostly it's a you know, it's it's Hollywood, but it's it's a relatively faithful version of what's called the doctor's trial. The doctor's trial is the 1946 Nuremberg trial, not the big one with Goebbels and the other dudes there, the political trial. This is just the physicians, most prominently Carl Brandt, who is Hitler's personal physician and famously on the stand, Brandt basically reads from the model sterilization law by Laughlin, saying, Hey, we're just doing what you're doing better.

Jim: We're doing it better.

Erik: We learned it from watching you. Traditionally, what we say is that people are so shocked with the liberation of the camps and to learn about eugenics, to attach this word eugenics to what happened in the death camps that there's such a revulsion to it that in 48, 49, 50, the number of sterilizations in the United States really drops off and you really get a death of that old eugenics movement that we buried in the first half of the 20th century, and then it doesn't really continue. That's the story that we most often tell. Is that also what you guys talk about in your courses?

Jim: Yeah, and of course, that's that's what happens. I mean, I was going to school shortly after that time period and nothing was ever mentioned of anything except the Holocaust. And that was bad, but nothing about how it was tied to eugenics or or American science and scientists.

Jo: Yeah.

Erik: Yeah. So it's true. A lot is left out. But traditionally that's when we say the world came to its senses: the Declaration of Human Rights, the notion that we need IRBs, all those sorts of things. We're not going to go back to that. We conveniently neglect to add all the way through the 1960s and into the 1970s there's plenty of lawsuits about continued sterilization of people in mental asylums in the United States, but we sort of read that out of the record. And so it's really not until the 1970s and the 1980s and even up to 2000s that we get states repealing their old eugenics laws and the beginning of the 20th century that have just kind of been forgotten. And the assumption is that they were forgotten because they were not used, they weren't part of the story. But hopefully what we'll get to talk about in a future episode is that, in fact, we say that 66 roughly thousand people were sterilized in the United States. But what we don't account for is that at least half of that number was before World War Two, which means the other half was after World War Two.

Jo: Yeah. I think there's a lot to be said that we'll hopefully get to and a number of arguments to be made that would suggest that eugenics actually never really went away. Much like racism, right? That it is kind of built in to the way that people think about their own genetic profiles as compared with other groups, and that there are policies and laws that are still being put in place or have been put in place

that have effects similar to outright eugenic laws, even if they are not themselves on the surface of it, eugenic. Is that fair?

Erik: Maybe we need to that question on a future episode.

Jo: Okay.

Erik: Okay.

Jim: Do a wrap up.

Jo: Okay, wrap up. Okay. So if we were going to tell the canonical story again, we're going to poke holes in this later on. Right. But eugenics begins. The term was coined by Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin. It means good breeding and the idea is to apply principles that have been developed in agriculture to improve stock of plants and livestock to human populations, with an explicit focus on white supremacy and like a particular upper crust of white supremacy. In other words, with a goal to improve the white race. Okay.

Erik: Yes.

Jo: Great. Okay. Some statisticians get involved. Then we come over to the United States. Galton is British and there's people like Laughlin.

Jim: Davenport.

Jo: Davenport, Laughlin, Grant, who are working around the Eugenics Records Office and this eugenic triangle that you outlined for us, Erik, right? Along with others like Popenoe in the West, then forced sterilization of thousands upon thousands of Americans. Buck v. Bell is a key landmark case. All of that legislation and practice percolates its way over to Germany. We get the Holocaust, then we assume that it all went away, but actually it didn't. Is that a fair wrap up?

Erik: Very good. Yes.

Jo: All right. Stay tuned, folks, for more in the future. In the meantime, I am Jo, the cultural anthropologist.

Jim: I'm Jim, the physical anthropologist.

Erik: And I'm Erik, the historian of science. And you've been listening to Speaking of Race, thank you so much for listening.

Jo: Find us on Facebook, speaking of race, on Twitter and Instagram as SORpodcast, and wherever you get your podcasts.

Jo: Where'd Erik go? He's chasing cats. Oh, look at the kitties. They're so cute.

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