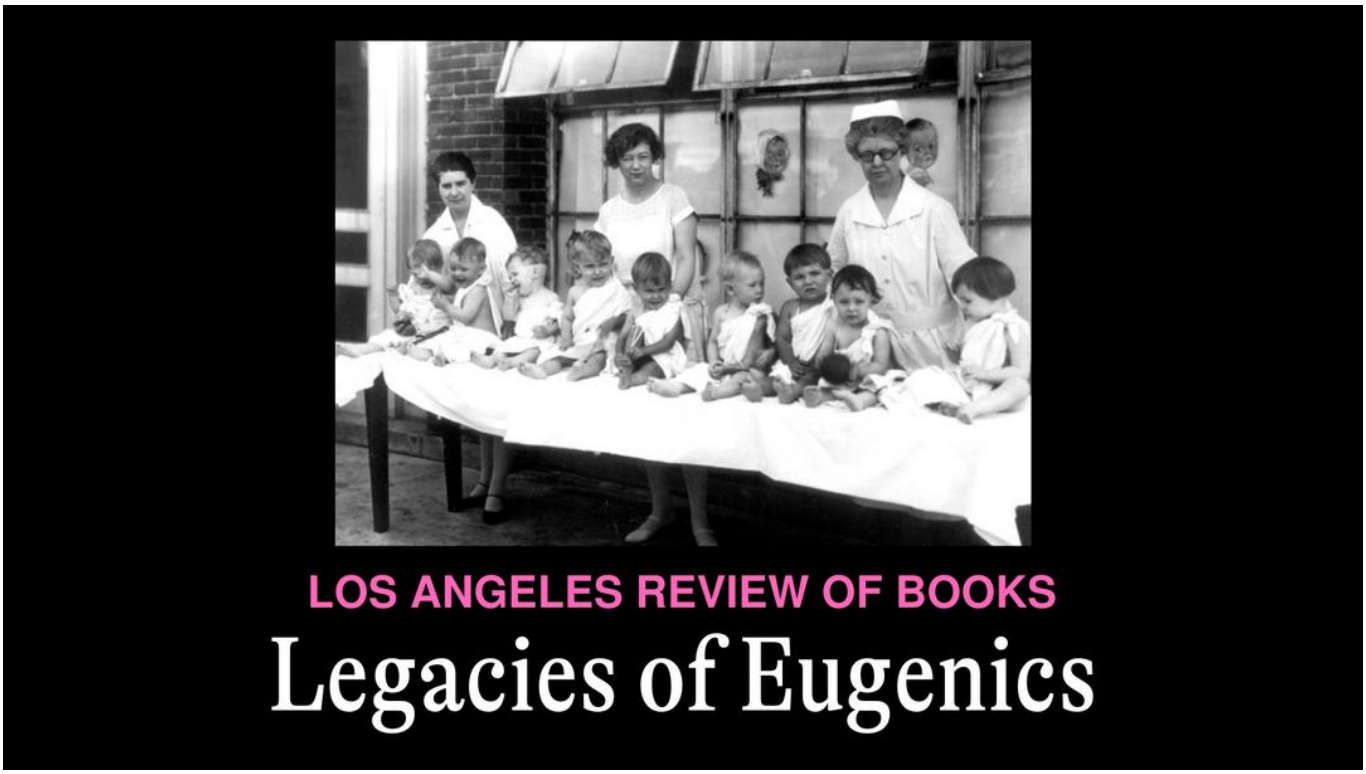
Legacies of Eugenics: An Introduction

By Osagie K. Obasogie • April 17, 2024



This is the introductory essay to Legacies of Eugenics, a series of essays by leading thinkers devoted to exploring the history of eugenics and the ways it shapes our present. The series is organized by Osagie K. Obasogie in collaboration with the Los Angeles Review of Books*, and supported by the Center for Genetics and Society, the Othering & Belonging Institute, and Berkeley Public Health.*

¤

WHEN ROBERT G. EDWARDS won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2010 for developing in vitro fertilization (IVF) decades earlier in 1978, many members of the scientific community sighed in relief. This honor, they felt, was long overdue. A beloved researcher, Edwards was revered for making a profound contribution to humanity. Edwards was 84 years old and suffering from dementia at the time of the announcement, leading some supporters to worry that he might not live long enough to receive the honor. (Nobel Prizes cannot be awarded posthumously, which is why his collaborator, Patrick

Steptoe, who died in 1988, did not share this accolade.) Edwards died three years later, in 2013.

Edwards's creation of the world's first IVF baby, Louise Brown, in Oldham, England, had been anything but unproblematic. An enormous amount of consternation surrounded the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of this scientific breakthrough. The Vatican was up in arms. Pundits warned of a "brave new world" of babies made in test tubes. Critics declared IVF unethical and "against nature" itself. They thought it would turn the most human of activities—creating life—into a coldly detached capitalist endeavor that would objectify women and children and leave humankind soulless. But soon enough, the public came to see IVF as simply another way to help people have families. By the time Edwards died, IVF had been used to conceive over four million children worldwide.

Through the fluctuating public perceptions of his work, Edwards steadfastly advocated for IVF's accessibility to anyone having difficulty with fertility. He soon acquired an almost grandfatherly aura, and his death was marked by a host of laudatory obituaries. Edwards's first graduate student, Martin Johnson, told *The Guardian* upon his mentor's death:

> Bob Edwards was a remarkable man who changed the lives of so many people. He was not only a visionary in his science but also in his communication to the wider public about matters scientific in which he was a great pioneer.
>
> He will be greatly missed by his colleagues, students, his family and all the many people he has helped to have children.

I am a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the School of Law and the School of Public Health, and have worked in the areas of bioethics and reproductive and genetic technologies for nearly two decades. I remember being struck by the announcement of Edwards's Nobel Prize, marveling at how such a wildly controversial procedure at its inception had, by 2010, become rather ordinary medicine that was celebrated for making new kinds of families possible. Shortly after the news broke, I exchanged emails with a colleague in England, where Edwards had worked for most of his life. During our conversation, they told me, rather nonchalantly, that Edwards was a long-standing member of the Eugenics Society in Britain.

I was stunned. The guy who developed IVF was a eugenicist? Part of me couldn't believe it. Yet, the part of me that had studied the eugenics movement knew it was all too possible. Shortly after the email exchange, I reached out to the Eugenics Society of Britain—renamed the Galton Institute in 1989 after the founder of eugenics, Francis Galton (the group is now called the Adelphi Genetics Forum)—and asked one of their staff members if Robert Edwards was a member of the organization. "Yes," they proudly affirmed.

¤

Eugenics is one of those words we don't often hear in everyday conversations. Yet, in many ways, we're immersed in its legacy. It may very well be one of the most impactful—and, indeed, damaging—concepts of the 20th century. The term was developed by Francis Galton in 1883, with a meaning of "good in birth" or "noble in heredity." Galton believed that heredity is the foundation for human behavior and health outcomes. Eugenics stood for the idea that a person's abilities and social position were innate traits determined by their biological and genetic makeup, and the same attributes would be passed on to their children. Everything from intelligence to poverty to criminality to general morality was thought to be inherited. In the late 19th century, when race science was all the rage, eugenics extended the conversation on scientific racism by providing not only a seemingly objective way to understand the achievements of wealthy whites across generations but also an explanation for why poor or disabled people and racial minorities seemed stuck, unable to break what appeared to be inescapable cycles of destitution. In short, biology was thought to be destiny.

Moreover, eugenics provided an action plan for how the state could get involved in human reproduction and public health to promote the propagation of those thought to be of "good stock" while weeding out "undesirables." Applied eugenics, it was thought, would save governments millions of dollars in welfare aid and other forms of social support. It would strengthen human capital in an ever more competitive global market. Conveniently, it also served to complement capitalism's reflexive need to create the perception of a biologically inferior class of workers in post-slavery America. If the American dream was out of their reach, it was because of the limits of their own bodies and minds and not discriminatory social structures.

Policymakers turned to science and medicine for tools to determine which groups and individuals had good endowments and deserved to have their reproduction promoted

individuals had good endowments and deserved to have their reproduction promoted. This is known as *positive eugenics*, which was wildly popular in the United States in the early 20th century. Scholars such as Alexandra Minna Stern at UCLA have described, for example, how public health practitioners in the 1900s drew upon eugenic principles to host events such as "Better Baby" contests to encourage white populations to reproduce. These officials also offered aid to support the maternal and child health of desirable populations while withholding the same support to minority communities thought to be of lower stock and thus undeserving of such assistance.

But there was also a more ruthless side to eugenics that sought to use medical knowledge to limit the reproduction of those labeled unfit. This is known as *negative eugenics*, and it was also broadly practiced throughout the United States in the 20th century. The world's first eugenics law, enacted in Indiana in 1907, required the involuntary sterilization of certain people in state custody. Individuals with developmental disabilities were targeted first. Compulsory sterilization laws were then passed in 32 states including California, Virginia, and North Carolina. When challenged, the United States Supreme Court held, in *Buck v. Bell* (1927), that these statutes and practices were lawful. In this case, the court upheld the sterilization of 18-year-old Carrie Buck, a so-called "feeble-minded" person. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the court's majority opinion that "[i]t is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. […] Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

American eugenics during this early period operated much like a global thought leader. Yale Law professor James Whitman has shown how the Nazi Party in 1930s Germany meticulously studied American law to understand how it might create similar social and political systems that would separate Jewish people from "Aryans" and then disenfranchise them, creating the predicate for mass genocide. Ironically, even as the Nazis deemed American legislative and judicial support for eugenics highly instructive, they also thought that certain practices went too far, like the one-drop rule in the Jim Crow South that defined a person with any so-called Black blood as "Black." Nazis eschewed such rigid classification systems, as many otherwise hardliners would not have passed a comparable racial purity test applied to their own society.

To think that certain aspects of American eugenics were too extreme for Nazis is both sobering and a remarkable statement of American leadership in this arena. American

scientists and physicians were often all too happy to self-identify as forerunners of the eugenics movement. Edwin Black writes:

> In 1934, as Germany's sterilizations were accelerating beyond 5,000 per month, the California eugenics leader C. M. Goethe, upon returning from Germany, ebulliently bragged to a colleague, "You will be interested to know that your work has played a powerful part in shaping the opinions of the group of intellectuals who are behind Hitler in this epoch-making program. Everywhere I sensed that their opinions have been tremendously stimulated by American thought … I want you, my dear friend, to carry this thought with you for the rest of your life, that you have really jolted into action a great government of 60 million people."
>
> That same year, 10 years after Virginia passed its sterilization act, Joseph DeJarnette, superintendent of Virginia's Western State Hospital, observed in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, "The Germans are beating us at our own game."

While there was certainly some pushback, American physicians and public health practitioners largely "owned," as we'd now say, their alleged expertise in being able to shape the physical, cognitive, and moral attributes of the next generation of Americans. Nazi adaptations evoked pride, and sometimes jealousy, in certain professional circles.

Just a few years later, with the end of the war, this public and professional sensibility around eugenics radically changed. The world saw—graphically—how state involvement in promoting the reproduction of some people while restricting that of others made the Holocaust thinkable. One flashpoint was the Nuremberg Doctors Trial, the American-led tribunal that prosecuted medical professionals in the Third Reich who had used their knowledge and training to engage in ghastly acts. Here's an excerpt from field notes written in 1942 by Nazi researcher Dr. Sigmund Rascher regarding high-altitude experiments:

> The third experiment of this type took such an extraordinary course that I called an SS physician of the camp as witness, since I had worked on these experiments all by myself. It was a continuous experiment without oxygen at a height of 12 km. conducted on a 37-year-old Jew in good general condition. Breathing continued up to 30 minutes. After 4 minutes the [experimental subject] began to perspire and to wiggle his head, after 5 minutes cramps occurred, between 6 and 10 minutes

> wiggle his head, after 5 minutes cramps occurred, between 6 and 10 minutes breathing increased in speed and the [experimental subject] became unconscious; from 11 to 30 minutes breathing slowed down to three breaths per minute, finally stopping altogether.
>
> Severest cyanosis developed in between and foam appeared at the mouth.
>
> At 5-minute intervals electrocardiograms from three leads were written. After breathing had stopped the electrocardiogram was continuously written until the action of the heart had come to a complete standstill. About 1/2 hour after breathing had stopped, dissection was started.

Other examples of Nazi "research" included freezing experiments in which subjects were forced outdoors in frigid weather to test methods for warming them, mustard gas experiments that subjected them to the chemical to test treatments for the burns it caused, seawater experiments whereby researchers sought to discover how much salt-laden water subjects could drink before dying, and sterilization experiments used to find cheap and effective ways to limit the reproduction of entire populations.

The point here is that Nazi aspirations were united by a single idea: eugenics, or the notion that undesirable populations were less than human, should not be allowed to reproduce, and could be tortured and killed in order to promote the health and well-being of those deemed more worthy.

The prosecution of these crimes led to the Nuremberg Code, a set of ethical principles that can be construed as a public refutation of eugenics and an affirmation of human dignity. In its wake, a slew of rhetorical adjustments were made within medical and scientific professions. A typical example: The research journal *Annals of Eugenics*, founded in 1925, changed its name and rebranded itself as the *Annals of Human Genetics* in 1954. Like Voldemort, the word eugenics had become verboten. But what about the underlying idea?

¤

During testimony before the British House of Commons Parliamentary Committee on Science and Technology in 2004, Robert Edwards was asked whether it was possible to draw lines between eugenics and new developments in reprogenetic technologies. Here is

Edwards's strange response:

> [I]t depends what we mean by eugenics. Eugenics was started in the 1870s by an English geneticist who had the welfare of mankind in his mind. The work became degraded after 1930 caused by the Nazis but also by various other things where people were found not to be behaving themselves fully correctly in relation to the way they abused their children. So, the word became degraded and it is a word that you have to be very careful about using today for this reason: you cannot use this word in Germany, for example. It is impossible to go there. You have to say exactly what you are trying to do. I think we can define what we want to do without using that term and I think we can make it clear to people what we want to do without using that term.

Edwards's generous description of Galton and his ambitions offers a remarkably peculiar rendition of eugenics' origins and rhetorical demise. He gently glosses over the racism and classism that were entwined with the founding of eugenics as a concept. For example, in 1883, this is how Galton described eugenics:

> the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which … takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had.

In other words, Galton viewed eugenics as the then-most-recent iteration of race science, whereby scientific theories and methods are used to give credence to—and justify social biases that produce—the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that make upper-class, able-bodied whites seem inherently superior and others substandard. It is a turducken of white supremacy, ableism, and classism, served with a side dish of scientific jargon to make otherwise distasteful bigotry and intolerance seem appetizing. Galton conceived of eugenics as using human intervention to accelerate natural selection, with the goal of marginalizing and eventually eliminating inferior groups. Characterizing his agenda as part of a broader concern for humankind's welfare is, then, rather disingenuous; most historians today certainly do not remember Galton in this way.

The point, of course, is that Robert Edwards was an apologist for eugenics as well as an

The point, of course, is that Robert Edwards was an apologist for eugenics as well as an enthusiast. As I have discussed elsewhere, records show that he not only was a member of the Eugenics Society in Britain but also served as a trustee on the organization's leadership council three separate times, including as late as the mid-1990s. Not just an outside professional activity, eugenics also shaped how he conducted his research and clinical work. To be sure, there is nothing about IVF in its basic goal of overcoming infertility that is intrinsically eugenic in orientation. And Edwards did indeed demonstrate a tremendous amount of care for his patients, which is undoubtedly noble. But he also saw IVF as part of a broader strategy: a tool for shifting the traits of a population towards more socially desirable outcomes and limiting the propagation of traits deemed deleterious to society. IVF, which joins egg and sperm in a petri dish prior to implantation, is a platform technology that might, in the future, allow scientists to alter embryos' characteristics according to social preferences. Edwards hinted at this future horizon in 1993 when he said that the advent of IVF "was about more than infertility [...] I wanted to find out exactly who was in charge, whether it was God himself or whether it was scientists in the laboratory." The conclusion that he came to? "It was us."

This is what Edwards had in mind with his awkward response to the Parliamentary Committee's question on whether a line could be drawn. He attempted to extricate the *science* of eugenics from its ideological components, arguing that transparency in "say[ing] exactly what you are trying to do" could skirt the loaded nature of the term "eugenics." This could, he believed, allow researchers to shape population traits without the appearance of becoming entangled in politics and history.

But the notion of scientists controlling human reproduction and eventually our evolution is inherently political. There can be no disentanglement; such attempts only obfuscate what is at stake. It is a Galtonian endeavor, and Galton saw no distinction among eugenics as clinical technique, as politics, and as ideology. Edwards strongly aligned himself with this broader vision, saying in 1999 that "[s]oon it will be a sin of parents to have a child that carries the heavy burden of genetic disease. We are entering a world where we have to consider the quality of our children."

¤

Fast forward eight years to November 2018, and I was stunned for a second time. Administrators in Berkeley's School of Public Health often circulate notices of funding that might be available to support faculty research. Most of these opportunities involve,

for example, announcements of new funding rounds at government agencies or private philanthropies issuing calls for proposals. Among the opportunities listed this time was something entirely different: a call for research that would be funded by the "Genealogical Eugenics Institute Fund," which had a $2.4 million endowment whose payout "support[s] research and education in the field of eugenics at the University of California, Berkeley." To be sure, Berkeley, like many academic institutions, has its own troubled history of dabbling in eugenics during parts of the 20th century. But it seemed bizarre, indeed impossible, that a leading school of public health would continue to host a fund to support eugenics research. Along with a small group of faculty members, I met with administrators to share my astonishment. Shortly after this meeting, the fund was suspended.

I acquired the original documents from university administrators, including an "Endowment Record Sheet" and other files and correspondence that described how this money had come to our campus. It appears that a private trust was created in 1960 by an individual donor and three other trustees. This document stated that the trust was developed "for the primary purpose of improvement of the human race through research and education in the field of eugenics." The trustees were supposed to carry out these activities by creating the "Genealogical Eugenics Institute."

A decade later, there was evidence that the foundation's assets were not being used as intended. The California Attorney General removed the existing trustees and entered an agreement for the Regents of the University of California to assume this role. This new appointment was complete by 1975. Upon assuming this role as successor trustee, the Regents did not modify any of the terms and agreed to continue the fund's original purpose of supporting research and programs that "establish the science of eugenics."

Following the court appointment, it appears that the funds were then transferred from the Regents to the Berkeley campus, and then to the School of Public Health, where they have resided for over 40 years. It's still not clear how this funding was used. Internal correspondence shows that some administrators did voice concerns. Yet the fund remained undisturbed.

After a series of conversations, a public apology was issued and the money has now been repurposed to support various efforts, including this series of essays, that raise awareness about the role of racism, disability discrimination, and other forms of social bias in

science, medicine, public health, and beyond. But it's still difficult to fathom how this fund could sit quietly on the Berkeley campus for decades on end.

And yet, the fund to support eugenics at Berkeley is not an outlier. Other state and institutional commitments to eugenics extended far beyond the end of World War II. For example, California continued to sterilize some disabled and institutionalized people until 1979. And as recently as 2013, incarcerated women were routinely sterilized in California state prisons. Latin American women who gave birth at the Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center in the 1970s were coerced into sterilization, where victims recalled being "bullied by doctors and nurses who declared their children burdens on California taxpayers." There was even a so-called "Nobel Prize sperm bank" in Escondido, created by millionaire Robert Klark Graham in 1979. He hoped to create scores of purported superbabies. Graham convinced four Nobel laureates to contribute their sperm, including Stanford University professor William Shockley—inventor of the transistor—who was also an open racist and eugenicist in his own right. Shockley once said during a televised debate that his "research leads [him] inescapably to the opinion that the major cause of the American Negro's intellectual and social deficits is hereditary and racially genetic in origin and thus not remediable to a major degree by practical improvements in the environment."

From this vantage point, eugenics is as Californian as palm trees, Hollywood, $2 million teardown houses, and $22 burritos. But eugenics is not just about what happened in California after World War II. It's also about the silent rehabilitation of the idea that differences in human ability, moral temperament, and group outcomes are heritable and that science can *and should* promote the reproduction of the fit and sideline all others. What is remarkable about this postwar period is the putative separation of science and politics, or rather the attempt to pretend eugenics could be divested of its ideology and its inherent cruelty. The politics of eugenics is baked into many of the theories and methods of science, medicine, and technology. Rather than being a political commitment residing outside of these professions, it is constitutive of how many people in these fields are taught to think and work.

¤

The twin stories of Nobelist Robert Edwards and Berkeley's research fund highlight how eugenic ideologies did not end with World War II. While the word "eugenics" might still

conjure images of Nazis and the Holocaust, habits of eugenic thought quietly persist today in how medical professionals conduct their work, how institutions encourage innovation in this area, and how some Silicon Valley start-ups run with the "science," hoping to make profits.

Over the past several years, there has been a flurry of apologies and acknowledgments regarding various organizations' past entanglements with eugenics. This includes the New York chapter of Planned Parenthood disavowing Margaret Sanger over her support for eugenics; the Sierra Club distancing itself from John Muir over his white supremacist and eugenic efforts; apologies and, in some cases, reparations from North Carolina, California, and other states for their participation in forced sterilization and other eugenic practices; the University of Southern California, University College London, and other academic institutions apologizing for their past engagements with eugenics; and prominent academic research outlets such as *The New England Journal of Medicine* acknowledging their past platforming and legitimizing of eugenics.

Many of these moments emerged from the racial reckoning following the May 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. While these acknowledgments and apologies are important, they almost all share one thing: a framing of eugenics as an isolated wrong that happened a long time ago with little bearing on our present and future.

I am honored to lead this project, called "Legacies of Eugenics," which is designed to help begin this important conversation about eugenics' ongoing impact. This project gathers eminent scholars and writers who, over the next several months, will explore how eugenics has created a legacy that continues to shape various aspects of science, medicine, and technology. Since the end of World War II, eugenics has simultaneously hidden in the shadows and festered in the sunlight. Despite assumptions about its demise, it is still enmeshed in the foundations of how some professions think about the world.

Contributors will tease out the subtle (and not so subtle) ways that eugenics shapes our tools for sorting one another; how it frames the work of various professionals, from social workers to anthropologists to statisticians; and how it influences the ways we think about fertility and reproduction. These essays are not intended to apportion blame but are designed to help us think about the ways an otherwise discredited idea continues to play

a central role in how we approach our duties to one another. We invite you to join us.

¤

Portions of this essay were previously discussed in an earlier article.

Featured image: Baby Contest at Indiana State Fair, 1929, from Indiana State Archives, Indiana Commission on Public Records.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

Osagie K. Obasogie is the Haas Distinguished Chair and professor of law at the UC Berkeley School of Law with a joint appointment in the Joint Medical Program and School of Public Health. He is the author of Blinded By Sight: Seeing Race Through the Eyes of the Blind *(Stanford University Press, 2013), which was awarded the Herbert Jacob Book Prize by the Law & Society Association, and co-editor (with Marcy Darnovsky) of* Beyond Bioethics: Toward a New Biopolitics *(University of California Press, 2018).*

LARB Staff Recommendations

"I Don't Really Care. Do You?": Scientists in the Grey Zone in 1930s Italy

Massimo Mazzotti reflects on how Italian scientists failed as a bulwark against fascist politics in the 1930s.

MASSIMO MAZZOTTI • JUL 8, 2019

HISTORY | POLITICS AND ECONOMICS | SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY | TRANSLATION

Eugenic Thinking Today

There is more ongoing tension around disability rights and its intersection with the rights of women and the poor than "Intelligent Lives" lets on.

MEGAN MOODIE • OCT 19, 2018

FILM