

Black, Edwin. *War Against the Weak*. New York/London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003. 592 pp. \$27.00 hardcover.

The word *eugenics* generally conjures up images of the death camps at Auschwitz, Josef Mengele's ruthless experiments on human subjects, and Nazi prisoners at the Nuremberg War trials. What is less commonly known is the part played by the United States and Great Britain, whose eugenic programs preceded Germany's, and in fact, inspired them. Edwin Black covers all these issues in his ambitious 500-page work.

Heading a team of 50 researchers, Black has compiled an extensive history of the *eugenics* movement from its philosophical underpinnings in the work of 19th century agnostic English philosopher Herbert Spencer, who coined the term "survival of the fittest," and of statistician Francis Galton, who invented the word *eugenics*. Galton's utopian dream was an improved race achieved through voluntary and legally, mandated good marriages. It took 20th century Americans and Germans to take Spencer and Galton's ideas to their logical end: draconian measures like forced sterilization, euthanasia, and genocide to eliminate the "unfit."

According to Black, America's "radical human engineering program would spring not from the medical schools and health clinics of America, but from the pastures, barns, and chicken coops, because the advocates of *eugenics* were primarily plant and animal breeders [who] believed humans could be spawned and spayed like trout and horses." The American Breeders Association was the catalyst for the new movement, fueled by the zeal of Harvard zoologist Charles Davenport, who gave a veneer of respectability to the pseudo science. It was Davenport who joined efficient organization to American money at the Carnegie Institute's Cold Spring Harbor facility on Long Island. The financial backers and supporters of Davenport's *eugenics* programs read like a Who's Who of the American elite. Mary Harriman (widow of the railroad magnate), Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, inventor Alexander Graham Bell, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (brother of the cereal giant), and Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

Davenport, his protégé Harry Laughlin, and other eugenicists using the influence of universities, foundations, and government agencies inspired the courts and legislatures to bring about the forced sterilization of thousands of American citizens. Hundreds of field workers interviewed and developed family histories of the poor and

“degenerate,” whom they labeled “feeble minded.” Many were simply illiterate and unsophisticated. The famous *Buck v. Bell* case is covered in detail, as well as a number of lesser known but equally shameful incidents. Davenport and Laughlin maintained records and took surveys of countless Americans, even using state agencies in some cases to collect data. They made alliances with anyone who could advance the cause. Ultimately, 23 states passed *eugenics* legislation and over 60,000 Americans were forcibly sterilized.

Black outlines the development and growth of Germany’s *eugenics* program which preceded Hitler by three decades and was heavily influenced by American ideas and supported by massive funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. Hitler embraced the eugenicists’ creed. He and his philosophical brothers carried it to its inevitable end at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. The hundred pages covering the German experience are among the hardest to read in the book and emphasize the evil that comes when men play God.

The chapter on Margaret Sanger, founder of The American Birth Control League, later Planned Parenthood, will be of particular interest to pro-lifers. But be aware that Black is clearly biased in favor of abortion, or, as he calls it, “a woman’s right to choose.” In the introduction, he laments the possibility that “special interests” will “misuse” the information on Sanger’s eugenicist views to “discredit the admirable work of Planned Parenthood today.” He calls the birth control movement “one of the world’s most overdue and needed campaigns.” Black treats Sanger’s ideas as if they are independent from the movement she founded.

Failing to acknowledge the *eugenics* connection to birth control and abortion is a serious blind spot in this comprehensive work. Seventy-eight percent of Planned Parenthood facilities are located in or near minority areas, and blacks, who represent 12-14% of the population, have 35-40% of the abortions. Erma Clardy Craven, the black sociologist, called it black genocide. But that particular scandal couldn’t make it past Black’s pro-abortion bias.

In the last section of the book on genetics and “newgenics” Black completely misses the mark. The tiger has changed its stripes, he claims, and the “new breed” are “dedicated genetic scientists devoted to helping improve all mankind.” He mentions the co-discoverers of DNA, Francis Crick and James Watson, ironic choices. In 1973, Watson advocated withholding legal status from an infant until three days after birth so parents could kill an imperfect child, i.e. eugenic euthanasia. Crick agreed. In the British journal *Nature*, he expressed the opinion, “[If a] child, were considered to be legally born when two days old, it

could be examined to see whether it was an ‘acceptable member of human society.’” Black’s humanitarians advocate eugenic infanticide of babies who are “unfit.”

The War Against the Weak is extensively documented and provides important historical perspective on the history of *eugenics* in the United States. It is, however, a seriously flawed book and readers should beware of Black’s assumptions. Black’s advocacy of abortion links him inexorably with euthanasia, abortion’s twin. And both lead directly to eugenic, killing, i.e. the war against the weak. Readers need to know that in Black’s worldview, a war against some of the weak is no problem.

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