Our race is overweighted, and appears likely to be drudged into degeneracy by demands that exceed its powers. . . . We can, in some degree, raise the nature of man to a level with the new conditions imposed upon his existence, and we can also, in some degree, modify the conditions to suit his nature. It is clearly right that both these powers should be exerted, with the view of bringing his nature and the conditions of his existence into as close harmony as possible.

—Francis Galton, Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences (1869)

It is significant that we have reached a point in human history at which further attempts to make the world a better place will have to include not only changes to the world, but also changes to humanity, perhaps with the consequence that we, or our descendants, will cease to be human in the sense in which we now understand that idea.

—John Harris, Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People (2007)

As we probably are only beginning to realize today, in times when genetic screening, testing, and patenting pervade all sectors of social and economic life, and with the synthetic powers of genomics on the horizon, the epistemic space that heredity came to constitute has reconfigured life in its entirety.

—Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Heredity Produced: At the Crossroads of Biology, Politics, and Culture (2007)

This chapter is perhaps overweighted by epigraphs, yet I include all three because they represent the wider discourses that I am attempting to read together here under the heading of “Eugenics.” The first epigraph from Francis Galton—the man who coined the now infamous term in 1883—represents the discourses of the original, Modern-era eugenics movements. Though diverse, these eugenics discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were permeated by the language of race. They were also deeply nationalist discourses, concerned with maintaining or recovering not only biological, but cultural vigor. The cures they offered for the perceived malaises of Modern (Western) civilization were based on an emerging understanding of the scientific principles of heredity.

The second epigraph represents the discourses of contemporary, so-called liberal eugenics. The language of race has no place in these discourses, except as part of a disavowal of the racism of the “bad old” eugenics. They are deeply (neo)liberal, concerned with our personal responsibility for broader societal or global well being as exercised
through our free personal choice. They propose solutions to the perceived threats of global environmental disaster or human extinction based in the contemporary science and technologies of genetics. In other words, liberal eugenicists wish to reclaim the word “eugenics,” protecting its practices from past injustices by ensuring that all eugenic technologies are freely chosen by individuals only for use on themselves and/or their children.

Finally, the third epigraph suggests that, despite the effort of new eugenicists to distance themselves and their aims from the bad reputation of earlier, involuntary eugenic (and genocidal) practices, the two sets of discourses exist in a shared (and dominant) epistemic space centered around the idea of (and obsession with) heredity. An epistemic space is a broadly shared way of knowing and making sense of the world that is so pervasive as to often go unnoticed and/or uninterrogated. As Troy Duster (2003) puts it, we have come to see the world through a “prism of heritability.” This epistemic space, I would argue, is also the home of the race idea and of scientific racism.

Prompted by recent work in liberal eugenics, and in keeping with skeptics of such work, in what follows, I engage in a necessarily brief exploration of the shared epistemic space of heredity, race, and eugenics with the aim of addressing the question: can we have a eugenic project free from or purged of racism? To answer “yes,” I claim, would require definitions of race and racism that are both narrow and ahistorical. By contrast, a broader understanding of the terms and of their historical contexts makes a non-racist and truly just eugenics appear much more elusive. First, I will describe the chief characteristics of eugenic ideologies and programs. I will also show how some proponents of a new, liberal eugenics defend their aims. Next, I will offer a critical account of the relationship between science and technology in the Modern era, focusing on the role that technological advances and ambitions played in the development of race science. I will then point to some of the ways in which power and coercion operate in (neo)liberal reprogenetic contexts. Finally, I will address a few of the ways in which racism, broadly conceived, still haunts (or manifests in new forms within) new eugenic programs.

What Do Eugenicists Have in Common?

The historical manifestation of eugenics that casts the greatest shadow over proponents of a liberal eugenics is not that laid out by Francis Galton (which was primarily concerned with the vitality of the English race). Rather, it is that of Nazi Germany, with its euthanasia and forced sterilizations (first practiced against unfit “Aryans”), medical experimentation, and mass exterminations. However, we ought not let this single most shocking and oft-discussed case prevent us either from recognizing that eugenics was truly “trans-national modernist philosophy” (Turda 2010: 4), or from taking into account the existence of diverse eugenics movements around the globe, often with different goals, beliefs, and proposed policies (Buchanan et al. 2000: 28–29). Far from being a unified movement with a single objective, eugenics before the First World War must be understood as a broad coalition of persons or groups promoting overlapping yet diverse scientific, social, or political agendas, including—in America alone—scientists, socialists, sexual reformers, immigrant radicals, physicians, agriculturalists, and popularizers (Zenderland 1998: 7).

Among the differences to be found between various proponents of eugenics were: (1) whether a eugenicist favored positive eugenics (encouraging the most fit marry among
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themselves and have larger families) or negative eugenics (curbing the fertility of those judged least fit); (2) the extent to which eugenic interests were combined with a focus on race; (3) the specific policies that were recommended; and (4) political orientation (Buchanan et al. 2000: 32–37). Of course, the fact of this diversity also points to the ubiquity of eugenic thinking at the time. Moreover, even where eugenics language appears racially neutral or simply to be referring to the human race, the reality is that most eugenicists had in mind the improvement of the white race (or races), working on the assumption that other, inferior races were likely to degenerate and die off on their own (McWhorter 2009: 202).

In their ambitious, jointly written work on questions of ethics and justice in the application of new genetic technologies to human beings, bioethicists Buchanan, Brock, Daniels and Wikler (2000) identify three core tenets shared by most eugenicists of the early twentieth century. The first was a concern about degeneration, understood either as a consequence of modern social processes interfering with natural selection by rescuing and nurturing the unfit, or as the result of race mixing, the products of which were thought to be inferior to either “pure” race from which they came. The second was a belief in the heritability of a variety of not merely physical, but behavioral traits, like talents, temperaments, proclivities, and dispositions. Therefore, third, was the belief “that social problems had both a biological basis and, to some degree, a potential biological remedy” such that “reproduction was seen by all eugenicists as an act with social consequences rather than a private matter” (Buchanan et al. 2000: 41–42).

Buchanan et al. (2000: 42–43) go on to argue that “concern for human betterment through selection—that is, by taking measures to ensure that the humans who do come into existence will be capable of enjoying better lives and of contributing to the betterment of lives of others” is an “unexceptionable” aim, concluding that “much of the bad reputation of eugenics is traceable to attributes that, at least in theory, might be avoidable in a future eugenic program.” They begin their defense of a future eugenic program by pointing to the “pseudoscience” on which the old eugenics was based and to the bigotry, racism, and class prejudices with which it was infused. On their account, the eugenics movement was, in this respect, simply “a creature of its time” (Buchanan et al. 2000: 45).

They then consider and reject a number of theses about the wrong of eugenics. They defend the right—and indeed the duty—of parents to avoid bringing into the world children with severe disabilities. They argue that most of the values pursued by eugenicists, like intelligence and self-control, are widely shared by the population. They find—making no reference to the rather recent use of welfare policies to discourage or penalize reproduction among poor black women or to disability studies critiques of the ways in which prenatal genetic testing and genetic counseling are performed (Roberts 1999; Shakespeare 2005)—that “reproductive freedoms are sufficiently well-established that we need not entertain serious fears about the return of coercive eugensics in the wake of the Human Genome Project” (Buchanan et al. 2000: 50).

Having thus addressed major critiques of eugenics that might be thought necessarily to persist in any genetic program, Buchanan et al. are left with only the problems of poor science and unjust applications. With respect to the first, they argue that we should probably be glad that the earlier eugenicists didn’t have the genetic knowledge to actually change the human gene pool. By contrast, they claim: “Our powers are much more impressive, and humankind’s future abilities to rewrite our genetic code are apparently limitless” (Buchanan et al. 2000: 56).
Working from the assumption that we now have the scientific and technological means to make a real difference in people’s genetic lives, their question becomes how to do so justly. Likening the “central moral problem of eugenics” to the “perennial ethical quandary of public health,” they suggest that we seek a just balance between public welfare and private freedoms (Buchanan et al. 2000: 52). Such a balance is to be struck through careful attention to the effects of the new genetics on reproductive freedoms, by ensuring the “distribution” of self-respect to all members of the population despite differences in ability and performance that may arise from genetic intervention, and by ensuring that genetic difference does not result in a ghettoizing of those seen to carry higher genetic health risks. If we can do this work and remain vigilant with respect to the return of past abuses of eugenics, their argument goes, then there is no need to avoid pursuing its benefits.

In other words, Buchanan et al. argue for a conceptual and ethical distinction between racist ideology and the idea of improving the health of a population through eugenic measures. They believe there are ways to develop genetic science and deploy genetic technologies to pursue both private and public goods without bringing about the coercion and abuse that the term “eugenics” now connotes. Such arguments can be very compelling and seem to be based in solid reasoning; they operate, however, only on the surface of the issue, failing to utilize key insights from the philosophy of technology or science and technology studies. They seem to see science as a neutral form of knowledge that is merely more or less accurate, and technologies as tools emerging from that knowledge that are also neutral prior to their use by human agents. Thus, science must be improved and technologies mastered and put to good and just use.

Beyond “Poor Science” and “Unjust Applications”

When we seek to understand and evaluate the broader epistemic space of heredity rather than specific eugenic practices, however, we find that the notion of mastering technology is as much a part of the problem as it is a solution. In his philosophical exploration of the essence of technology, Martin Heidegger points out that prior to both the actual manufacture of technological artifacts and the science that enables them is the identification of the things around us in nature as materials for the production of those artifacts. “Modern science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces,” he writes, and, as such, it “will never be able to renounce this one thing: that nature report itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remain orderable as a system of information” (Heidegger 1993: 326–328). Furthermore, for Heidegger, one of the fundamental characteristics of modern technology (as opposed to prior technology) is the belief that the energy concealed in nature is something to be unlocked, transformed, stored, distributed, and switched about, ultimately ordered into interlocking systems to be regulated and secured. Heredity is such a system of information—one which pursues and entraps humanity as a calculable coherence of biogenetic forces, asking those forces to explain more and more about our lives. Modern technology thus seeks to improve our human situation by regulating and securing these biogenetic forces.

Heidegger’s description of the relation between technology and science in the modern era helps us to think critically about the relation between race science and the technological practices of eugenics because it suggests that the two are more fundamentally
related than some scholars would like to believe. Rather than seeing eugenics as the political misapplication of a conceptually prior and flawed racial science, Heidegger’s view invites us see an essential human drive to master nature as that which underlies the epistemic space of heredity, which includes not only eugenics, but both the concept of race and the subsequent attempts to justify race scientifically. Eric Voegelin (1997: 177n14) makes a similar point about this conceptual relationship between (race) science and modern technology when he writes that: “Modern race theories give the impression of an aggressive optimism because, like technology, they are eager to put to use the lawful course of nature in order to arrive at a specific objective they consider desirable.” In Heideggerian terms, when race came to be seen as a force or cause in nature, it became part of nature’s concealed energy and thus something to be unlocked and transformed—something to be mastered for optimal societal efficiency and yield.

What is particularly important here in thinking about the relationship between race (as science) and eugenics (as technology) is Heidegger’s assertion that technology does not simply follow after science, but rather offers the conceptual framework within which science is produced in the first place. In other words, human goals (and research biases) are to be found in the science itself, not merely its technological applications. This relationship can be seen in the way that animal breeding as a technology provided the conceptual framework within which the scientific race concept emerged and developed, a fact which shows that eugenic thinking was much more essential to the race concept itself than is typically recognized.

In Kant’s essay on race, arguably the first articulation of a scientific race concept, we find definitions of species, race and variety that all rest on rules of reproduction. Two animals belong to the same species if they can meet “Buffon’s rule” by mating and producing fertile offspring. Racial deviations between two animals of the same species are those deviations that are consistently preserved in reproduction through many generations. Two animals of the same species belong to different races if, when they mate, they produce half-breed offspring (that is, the enduring racial deviations belonging to the two parents are mixed in the offspring). Deviations belonging to mere varieties are those that may or may not be preserved in reproduction. These rules of reproduction, which shape the first scientific concept of race, and which remain important in accounts of race-mixing as driving history (as in Klemm and Gobineau), have clear origins in the study of mating and breeding possibilities in non-human animals, which study, I would argue, is based in the technology of animal breeding (Voegelin 1997: 167–168; Gobineau 1970: 175). Indeed, one account of the origin of the term “race” (in its current use as a way of describing human groups or lineages) traces its first emergence to the Spanish language, where raza was extended to human beings from a more primary definition referring to the “caste or quality of authentic horses” (Smedley 1993: 38). In the French context, Buffon, of whom Kant made use in his attempts to divide animals according to laws, claimed “one of the most salient distinctions between human tribes was that between civilization and the savage state.” Comparing this directly to the difference between domesticated and wild animals, Buffon concluded, “all the insights of professional livestock breeders could be exploited to explain mankind.” Buffon’s theories, then, heavily relied on presumed parallels between human and non-human animal physiology—what was called the “analogical method” (Augstein 1996: xv). The analogical method was useful because the practice or technology of animal (and plant) breeding operated
successfully well in advance of any scientific theories that could effectively explain breeders’ results, with breeders establishing practice-based axioms and breeding rules that yielded significant power to mold organisms for specific features from the mid-eighteenth century on (Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 2007: 12). Indeed, Müller-Wille and Rheinberger point to the erosion in the early nineteenth century of institutional barriers like those between naturalists and breeders as paving the way for the discourse of heredity. In some cases, like that of Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (writing before Buffon in the first half of the eighteenth century), no erosion of barriers was necessary. Maupertuis both bred his own pets looking for hereditary patterns and recorded the genealogy of a human family in Berlin, some members of which were born with extra fingers and toes (polydactyly) (Terral 2007: 255). This is clearly visible in the work of Charles Darwin, and even earlier in that of his grandfather, physician Erasmus Darwin (who was also the grandfather of Francis Galton). For the elder Darwin, analogies to animal breeding served not only to generate theories about the heredity nature of human disease, but also suggested that human progress could be pursued biologically by learning the laws of nature and then exerting power over them. Indeed, for a number of physicians in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, comparisons to animal breeding pointed not only to the possibility of human improvement through control of reproductive practices, but also to its desirability and wisdom (Gregory 1774: 29–30; Vandermonde 1756: 91–92).

These views suggesting the possible benefits of technological control of human reproduction using analogies to animal breeding practices (which though effective in improving livestock could not yet be explained scientifically) form the background against which Kant attempted to elaborate a scientific race concept using rules of reproduction. And, indeed, Kant felt the need to address (and reject) this technological possibility in his essay on race. Though Kant does not adopt a policy of human intervention in reproduction, the fact that he is aware of such proposals and addresses them in his essay is significant. It not only challenges a view of eugenics as the (immoral) technological application of an already developed racial science, but also suggests that thoughts on human reproductive control understood by analogy to animal breeding framed Kant’s purposive view of nature in terms of races. In other words, it offers further evidence in favor of Heidegger’s claim that human projects (technology) shape the human view of nature (science), even where explicit pursuit of technological control of nature is rejected.

As animal breeding became increasingly elaborate and fashionable in eighteenth-century England, it came to represent and perpetuate a particular Modern view of the world. The English gentlemen-farmers who sought systemically to improve breeds of cattle and sheep during this period also established new institutions for the comparison and improvement of animal types, such as the country fair. According to Da Cal (1992), while fairs for selling animals were nothing new, “the cult of types” was. Stud services for “improving” types and “bettering” stocks not only made money, but were viewed as “a patriotic service to the ‘National Herd.’” Similarly, a new world of thoroughbred horses sprung up, with a more simple admiration for fine animals being overlain by systematization and officialized codes concerning the horses’ genealogical “blood” and “temperament.” From about 1791 on, “thoroughbreds” were listed by parentage in an official stud-book, “an equine equivalent of the human ‘blue-blood’s’ family tree.” By the 1850s, the obsession with animal pedigree even led to a domestic “poultry craze.” “Scarcely surprising, then,” writes Da Cal (1992: 718–719), “that this same period
would see the highpoint of scientific and literary fascination with human types, from the physiognomic treatises of Lavater or F.X. Messerschmidt or the comparative anatomy of Negroes and apes, to the extensive Romantic literature describing ‘customs’ by national or social ‘character.’” Charles Darwin’s interest in and analogical use of animal breeding is also well documented in the Transmutation Notebooks he kept while constructing his theory of natural selection between 1837 and 1839. By the time of Darwin’s major publications on natural selection (1859–1871), breeding was very much present in the public imagination. In this context (as compared to earlier animal husbandry), moral character has taken on greater significance. As Paul White (2007: 376) notes: “In Victorian discourses of breeding, natural historical and moral character were considerably intertwined.”

Innovations in the management of animal populations can also be seen as paving the conceptual way for similar interventions on the human level. Many sanitation, hygiene, and vaccination practices in human populations (whether seen now as progressive or repressive) have animal analogs. For example, the Pasteur anti-rabies vaccine (1885) as “the image of effective social prophylaxis”; the dog pound as a way to gather and contain potential hazards (Da Cal 1992: 722); or the “lethal chamber” patented in the UK in the 1880s and first used on stray dogs (McWhorter 2009: 220). Though Da Cal (1992: 724) recognizes a number of other social factors and institutional backgrounds that contributed to the events of the Holocaust, he concludes, in what I see as a largely technological argument, that “the handling of animals is the only real social model, i.e. existing in industrial society, for the kind of segregation and elimination that the Nazis tried to carry out.”

Without attempting to make any extreme, simplifying or totalizing claims, Da Cal (1992: 724–725) simply suggests that “the animal breeding sub-culture [was] a sort of ‘lower common denominator’ of biological information in the late XIXth and XXth century European societies,” which was “key to transmitting ‘highbrow’ racist ideas to ‘lowbrow’ audiences” in that it “created a visual vocabulary and a living representation of race theory that was equally powerful on peasant farms or urban settings.” So, too, in early twentieth-century American society, especially during the interwar period. There, county and state fairs included not only exhibitions on animals and farming, but also those designed to popularize the ideas of the American Eugenics Society. Such exhibitions also featured the highly popular “Fitter Families for Future Firesides” contests. Eventually, eugenics exhibitions in the United States found their way into national museums and larger world fairs as well (Bruinius 2006; Rydell 1993; Schneider 2009).

When we consider these ways in which the technologies of animal (and plant) breeding carved out and continued to shape the epistemic space of heredity, it becomes much more difficult to see the scientific thinking and discoveries that emerged within that space as merely neutral knowledge, whether that knowledge continues to be understood as true or (as in race science) has since been rejected as false. Beliefs in the power of human heredity to shape society and to be shaped in service of society (engendered by success in animal husbandry) are essential both to the race idea and to the support of any eugenic project.

**Power and Coercion in Liberal Society**

As discussed, it is important for proponents of a new, liberal eugenics that such a project has been understood as non-racial or non-racist. For them, this seems to mean that
racial categorizations as currently understood ought not to be used in eugenic decisions. Thus far, I have used the notion of an epistemic space shared by race, heredity, and eugenics to trouble that understanding of racism. Yet it is also important for such proponents that their project be understood as non-coercive and respectful of individual liberty. It is to this concern that I now turn.

In his body of work, Michel Foucault uses notions of technologies, techniques, and practices to carry out genealogies and critiques of power, of subject formation, and of the variety of ideas and institutions through which power can be exercised. When uncovering and critiquing a particular regime of truth, he points not only to the ideas and assumptions that characterize the regime, but also the concrete means, instruments, rules, and practices through which that regime of truth emerges, is instantiated, and is maintained. Crucial to the instantiation and maintenance of neoliberalism in general—and of liberal eugenics in particular—are what Foucault calls technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection and immortality.

(Foucault 1988: 18)

(Note that such practices of self are “nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself” but rather “patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group” (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 122).)

As Nikolas Rose describes, in “advanced” liberal democracies, the governing of individuals and the population is in large part achieved through means and in arenas that are deliberately designated as non-political. Strategies of rule must seek to govern not “through ‘society,’ but through the regulated choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfillment” (Rose 1996: 41). Sites of reproductive and reprogenetic intervention are thus part of “a complex apparatus of health and therapeutics” that consists of “techniques of advice and guidance, medics, clinics, guides and counselors,” which have as their focus “the management of the individual and social body as a vital national resource” (Rose 1996: 37). Insofar as national or social prosperity is thought to be achieved through individual prosperity, and insofar as individual prosperity is thought to require personal freedom, the State is believed to be taking a backseat while individuals are not simply left, but rather exhorted to govern themselves.

Thus, in (most defenses of) liberal eugenics, reproductive and reprogenetic technologies must be chosen and used without State intervention so as to appear free from obvious forms of power and domination. Yet these “private” interactions involve the exercise of great deals of power. To offer just three examples, I will consider Rose’s discussion of the intrinsic relation of liberal rule to the authority of expertise, Sandel’s discussion of compliance and hyper-responsibility in human enhancement, and Roberts’ discussion of the link between privatization and punishment in reprogenetics.

As Rose points out, public distaste for State intervention does not necessarily lead to the banishment of authorities from our “private” lives. Rather, “authority is accorded
to formally autonomous expert authorities” (Rose 1996: 46). For example, the parent who seeks to employ reprodogenetic technologies as an investment in his/her child (or, increasingly, any parent at all), finds him/herself very much dependent on the expertise of doctors or other fertility experts to carry out his/her project. Indeed, most parents rely on medical experts even to understand what it is possible to desire and pursue in the field of reproduction through reprodogenetics.

Practices around prenatal genetic testing demonstrate the major role of authority in one technology of the self. As disabilities theorists point out, many doctors simply expect women to undergo prenatal genetic testing and do not take time to discuss what it is, why it is being done, or what the potential consequences of an “abnormal” result would be. It is only after an “abnormal” result has already appeared that women or couples speak to a physician or genetic counselor about their “options.” Studies indicate, however, that the presentation of these options favors therapeutic abortion of fetuses who will be born with disabilities and that these experts do not provide prospective parents with important forms of information that might make continuing the pregnancy feel more viable—for example, information about the wide range of severity in certain conditions or information from parents currently raising children with disabilities about their experiences (Parens and Asch 2000; Shakespeare 2005).

In his discussion about the ethics of all forms of human enhancement, including so-called designer children, Michael Sandel argues that the language of autonomy, fairness, and individual rights that permeates discussion of the issue fails to capture much of our deep uneasiness about the “pursuit of perfection.” Where some opponents fear that genetic enhancements will “undermine our humanity by threatening our capacity to act freely, to succeed by our own efforts, and to consider ourselves responsible—worthy of praise or blame—for the things we do and for the way we are” (as in athletes who succeed via biotechnological enhancement of their skill), Sandel (2009: 78) argues that the “deeper danger” enhancements represent is a kind of hyperagency. Far from simply allowing people to do as they like or to freely pursue their individual projects, the availability of enhancements and biotechnological fixes appears as “a bid for compliance—a way of answering a competitive society's demand to improve our performance and perfect our nature” (Sandel 2009: 82).

Where we believe we fully control our or our children’s traits and abilities, we lack an appreciation for the role of luck in our lives, in the fact that we may succeed where others fail. Rather than acknowledging what Sartre called our facticity even as we recognize that we have freedom in how we take up those givens in life, the availability of genetic enhancement suggests that there are no givens with which one must contend. This leads to an over-heightened sense of responsibility according to which, though we may also be praised for our skills and successes, we must be blamed for any lacks or failures. Socio-historical factors shaping one’s life possibilities and outcomes fade into the background, and in the face of this dogmatic belief in individual responsibility, social solidarity is diminished. After all, if everyone is personally responsible for his or her own lot, there is little reason to respond with sympathy to those who are suffering or in need.

In a similar vein, Dorothy Roberts argues that there are crucial similarities between the reprodogenetic technologies aimed at middle- and upper-class women whose reproduction is generally encouraged and those contraceptive technologies aimed at poor and non-white women, which she understands as privatization and punishment, respectively. “Both population control programs and genetic selection technologies,” she
suggests, “reinforce biological explanations for social problems and place reproductive duties on women that shift responsibility for improving social conditions away from the state” (Roberts 2005: 1344). Ultimately, insofar as they retain control over their own reproductive decisions, women become “gatekeepers of new social order” (Roberts 2005: 1357).

The many real problems plaguing poor and minority communities have long been blamed on “irresponsible” reproductive decisions within those communities, rather than on an extensive and continuing history of marginalization, exploitation, and discriminatory social policy. The contemporary focus on genetic correction and enhancement seems to exacerbate rather than reverse this trend. A focus on individually accessed technological solutions renders social and political solutions aimed at structural inequalities misguided or unnecessary. A privatization of the sources of inequality thus depoliticizes them.

What Do Eugenicists Have in Common? (Revisited)

My suggestion, then, is that eugenicists past and present share with each other (and with race scientists and animal breeders) a particular modern sensibility—a sensibility which Heidegger has described as technological in the way that it presents the natural world to human beings as something that challenges them to intervene in “natural” processes in the name of industry, efficiency, productivity, and ultimately perfectibility. With the modern period, we find science developing precisely as the interpretation of the natural world through technological metaphors. Nature is expected to exhibit a form of rationality and to reveal to man its essential laws. Following the discovery of such laws in the physical sciences, natural or biological scientists are tasked with uncovering the laws, mechanisms, and final causes of biological life (and indeed human history and culture).

In this context (and today), eugenicists emerge as those believers in the power of science and technology who perceive clear and present dangers to humanity on the horizon, and are thus driven to convince others that taking control of human nature (mental and physical) is an invaluable social good necessary to ensure human survival. Unfortunately, with a great deal of scientific knowledge and technological resources concentrated in the hands of authorities and expert practitioners, even to the extent that eugenicists convince the general public of the truth of their convictions, various forms (and degrees) of coercion (like those described above) will be inevitable.

But what of one major difference? What of the fact that (most) old eugenicists believed in biological race, while (most) new ones do not? Even if we continue to debate the merits and dangers of eugenics, ought we cease to debate them as racial issues? By way of conclusion, I will offer three reasons to continue to consider race and racism when evaluating contemporary eugenics.

First, we must recognize that the racist projects of the old eugenics did not simply disappear when the term fell out of favor after World War II. In fact, by 1940, family planning/population control had become “the banner or umbrella framework for an amalgam of birth control, eugenics, neo-Malthusian, and population/demographic interests” in the United States, developing into a fully articulated ideology by 1950. This term helped give the projects a veneer of scientific objectivity and “allowed racism to be expressed apparently neutrally concerning whole populations” (Clarke 1998: 184).
Subsequently, in the 1960s, this racism, framed as the threat of a “population explosion” in the Third World, was leveraged to obtain federal government involvement in contraceptive development and distribution (Clarke 1998: 202).

Compromises between the various groups united under this banner also shifted focus away from birth control as “a means of enhancing reproductive and sexual autonomy for women” and toward contraception, understood within “an economic ethic of child-bearing—economic planning, eugenics, and population control, often with racialized agendas.” This led to the development of contraception methods that were considered more “scientific” and that could remain under expert control while being “done to the people” (rather than being offered as resources to people in pursuit of their own life goals) (Clarke 1998: 201, my emphasis). The continuing racialized effects of this eugenic influence were clearly visible in the 1990s when proposals were made to distribute Norplant in black communities as a means of addressing poverty, while welfare reform measures penalized welfare mothers for having additional children, suggesting that the “key to solving America’s social problems [was] to curtail Black women’s birth rates” (Roberts 1999: 7). These ideas persist today in state-funded programs where women with low incomes can qualify for a free or low-cost annual gynecological exams on the condition that they also be seeking some form of birth control.

Second, it would be idealistic to the point of naïveté to imagine that current racialized inequalities will have no effect on access to eugenic technologies or the benefits of eugenic projects. If the aim is to use biotechnology to help human beings forestall or survive global environmental disaster, then particular attention ought to be paid to two specific forms of racialized inequality: race-based health disparities and environmental racism. Currently, there are well-documented, significant, and ongoing racial and ethnic disparities in American health, healthcare, and health outcomes. As compared to white Americans, African Americans in particular experience poorer health, earlier death, reduced access to health care, inferior treatment when accessing health care, and a decreased likelihood of recovery from various illnesses (LaVeist 2005). This gives us good reason to wonder whether racial and ethnic minorities (or populations of the global South) will have access to medical facilities offering biotechnologies. Even if some basic level of eugenics is made universally available, current capitalist structures suggest that certain forms of “designer” genetics may be set apart and made available for purchase by the economic elite. Moreover, a lower baseline level of health could mean that, even if racial and ethnic minorities enjoy equal access to biotechnology, they may not experience equal outcomes.

Current research in epigenetics supports this concern over equal outcomes since it suggests that environmental factors (both inside and outside of the human body) have significant and ongoing impacts on gene expression (Watters 2006). This means that the proven disparities between racial/ethnic groups both in mental and physical health and in exposure to environmental hazards and toxins could translate directly into biogenetic disparities, even where everyone had access to the “best” genetic makeup biotechnology could achieve. Indeed, environmental racism—the idea that non-whites are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, whether as a result of malicious, individual acts or larger processes of urban development, including white flight (Pulido 2000)—cuts more than one way as far as the dream of a just eugenics is concerned. Non-white and socioeconomically disadvantaged people in the United States and around the world are most likely to populate those areas and regions under greatest threat from
the environmental risks that eugenicists seek to combat; yet their very inhabitation of high-risk areas means that the solutions eugenicists offer will be least effective for them. Not incidentally, those same non-white and socioeconomically disadvantaged people will be among the least likely to be involved with or empowered by biotechnological research, development, implementation, and distribution, meaning that even if biotechnologies are made available to their communities, those biotechnologies may not address the local problems as defined by those communities or solve those problems in ways that the communities find acceptable. In short, long histories of injustice and current inequalities give us every reason to expect that—even if eugenicists have the best of intentions for preserving the human race—poor, non-white humans will be the first endangered and the last saved.

Finally, even if all eugenic technologies were fully accessible and their use fully voluntary, the creation of two (or more) groups of human beings understood to have distinct biogenetic characteristics, capacities, and incapacities runs the risk creating all new races and accompanying racisms. That is, assuming that some people will choose to avail themselves of eugenic technologies and that some people will strictly avoid such measures, a perceived division may develop between the genetically modified and the genetically “natural.” Such a division, especially if it is understood in terms of personal choice/responsibility, could serve as an instrument of social exclusion, oppression, and exploitation—just as with traditional racial divisions. For example, given the current lack of social solidarity already represented by resistance to government provision of universal healthcare in the United States, one can well imagine the creation of policies that would force the genetically “natural” to pay more for health care as a consequence of their “refusal” to pursue biogenetic perfection.

There will always be serious dangers to eugenic programs, especially where a reliance on biogenetic solutions to human or environmental problems leaves social solutions to those same problems untried, unappreciated, underfunded, or underdeveloped. If, however, such dangers truly pale in comparison to the global dangers eugenicists believe they can combat, they will need to pursue justice in their eugenic programs, not by denying issues of race and racism, but by confronting them head-on, acknowledging both the complex racialized history of their drive to human mastery and its significant present-day legacy.

References

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