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The Progressive History of Eugenics

The trouble with reformers: They are so sure, and so wrong.

By **AMITY SHLAES**

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How did reformers ever manage to extract American schoolchildren from the clutches of superstitious Bible thumpers? Through a Progressive-era textbook called “Civic Biology,” of course.

That’s “of course,” because many may remember hearing about “Civic Biology” in their own high-school history class. Back in the 1920s, Tennessee’s state legislature banned the teaching of evolution. A 24-year-old science teacher chose nonetheless to give his pupils an evolutionist text that featured Charles Darwin, orchids, recessive genes and, yes, primates: It was “Civic Biology.” State prosecutors indicted the teacher, John Thomas Scopes, and Scopes lost his first trial.

The journalist H.L. Mencken excoriated the typical backwater creationist who blocked the light of science as “Neanderthal man.” But thanks to allies in the Progressive movement and the then-young American Civil Liberties Union, Scopes and “Civic Biology” got off on appeal and prevailed in the court of public opinion. The hour of scientific precision had arrived.

Or maybe not. The lesser known part of this story is that “Civic Biology” itself was far

IMBECILES

By Adam Cohen

Penguin Press, 402 pages, \$28

from precise—or even scientific. With no trace of evidence, for example, the book flatly rated what it called the “negro type” beneath “the highest type of all,” the Caucasian.

ILLIBERAL REFORMERS

By Thomas C. Leonard

Princeton, 250 pages, \$35

“Civic Biology” advocated eugenics on the basis of race and flirted with the fallacy that acquired traits such as “shiftlessness” might be passed down the generations. Of the so-called shiftless the text’s author, George Hunter, wrote: “If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from

spreading.”

And that’s the trouble with reformers. They are so sure, and so wrong. How often comes clear in two new books. The first, Adam Cohen’s compelling “Imbeciles,” focuses on *Buck v. Bell*, the 1927 case in which the Supreme Court upheld Virginia’s right to sterilize citizens it deemed mentally ill, somehow deficient or, indeed, shiftless. In the second book, “Illiberal Reformers,” Thomas C. Leonard also treats the horrifying rise of compulsory sterilization and, in a deft analysis, goes on to compare the thinking behind eugenics to other forms of supposedly enlightened policy.

Nowadays eugenics is portrayed as an unfortunate detail in the story of an otherwise glowing movement, Progressivism. What these two volumes, especially “Illiberal Reformers,” reveal is that eugenics served as a key tool of the Progressive policy makers of the 1920s. “Darwin’s ambiguity on the question of whether evolution resulted in progress or merely change left enough leeway for progressives to claim society must take charge of its own evolution,” Mr. Leonard notes. The consequences of Progressive Darwinism were policies as imprecise, superstitious and inhumane as any they superseded.

The perversity commenced in the asylums, to which state officials packed off the infirm, the old, repeat criminals and anyone whom they judged somehow physically or mentally challenged. So great was the faith of state officials in their own diagnoses that the officials assumed even radical measures, such as forced sterilization, to be justified. Tens of thousands of inmates were duly sterilized, and state officials, far from hiding their work, trumpeted the news, so loud that they got the attention of Europeans, especially the Germans.

U.S. courts upheld the states’ sterilization policies, concluding that the states’ power

indeed ranged broadly enough “to cover cutting the fallopian tubes.” As Mr. Cohen reminds us, a Supreme Court bench that included Louis Brandeis, William Howard Taft and Oliver Wendell Holmes found constitutional the sterilization of Carrie Buck, the supposedly feeble-minded daughter in a mother-daughter pair who had both spent time as inmates of Virginia’s State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded. In her teenage years Carrie had been raped; the baby that resulted was now in foster care. Authorities ordered the procedure to prevent further children. Commented Justice Holmes, writing for the majority: “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

The lesser known detail in this picture is the importance that Holmes attached to *Buck v. Bell*. In a letter to the socialist Harold Laski, Holmes gushily confessed that, with Carrie Buck’s case, he finally “was getting near to the first principle of real reform.”

Only later did health authorities realize that they were sterilizing many healthy citizens. Only later did they reconsider whether a criminal mind could be inherited. And only far later did officials acknowledge that Vivian, Buck’s daughter conceived before her sterilization, had proved perfectly normal. In the case of the unfortunate Bucks, as Mr. Cohen shows in his meticulously researched study, there were not three generations of imbeciles, nor perhaps even two, or one.

The same faith in the value of eugenics that buoyed doctors and jurists inspired experts in a then-young field, economics. After all, or so the argument ran, the human race might well be bred to become more productive. Perhaps there ought to be more “Boston Brahmins,” a caste whose name had been coined by Holmes’s father, one of the most respected minds of the 19th century.

Yale’s Henry Farnam wondered aloud whether aid to the poor might be counterproductive, since it risked “setting forces in operation which tend to multiply the unfit.” Farnam assured colleagues that economists could now operate on the economy with all the dexterity of surgeons at the table, rendering economic reform “more effective and less dangerous.”

In fact, eugenic economics—and there was such a thing—proved devastating to more vulnerable Americans. In the early part of the 20th century unions were collecting members and sought to win them by delivering higher wages: “More! More today, and more tomorrow,” as the American Federation of Labor’s Samuel Gompers put it. Desperate to earn the devotion of the new militant worker, politicians too called for increased pay. Eugenics provided a pseudo-justification for the push: “High quality” (read: skilled Northern European) workers were well worth the price. Nobody would

want to hire non-European, non-skilled workers anyhow These marginal workers were “parasites,” or “unemployables,” as England’s Sidney and Beatrice Webb called them.

Such eugeno-logic did not hold in reality. Employers often did want to hire cheaper, less-skilled workers, including noncitizen immigrants or blacks. Darwin-befuddled politicians ignored the social benefits of hiring such workers and the possibility that lower wages might yield lower prices for all. Instead they retaliated by passing legislation that made it illegal to pay wages below a mandated level. Pressed for cash, employers turned to the skilled (read: white) workers who could get them the most for their remaining money. The bitter effect was the creation of the very “unemployables” who had heretofore existed only in theory.

Unfortunately the damage of American eugenics did not halt at U.S. borders. Mr. Cohen spotlights the very real influence that American eugenicists, especially a nonprofit, the Eugenics Records Office, exerted over Europe’s Nazis. Hard as it is to imagine, the Third Reich’s Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring, which led to the sterilization of hundreds of thousands, was crafted from a blueprint issued by a lab in Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y. It was only when the Nazis took eugenics to the extreme of genocide that the eugenic fervor in the United States began to abate.

What explains the chain of error that was Progressive eugenics? In a time before antibiotics and incubators, few citizens were spared close encounters with untimely death. The year before the Scopes trial, 16-year-old Calvin Coolidge Jr. got a blister playing tennis on the White House court. The president’s son died of sepsis within the week. If producing healthier children reduced suffering all around, then “breeding” humans like Merino sheep might be worth a try.

Messrs. Cohen and Leonard focus on more fundamental forces. To Mr. Cohen, eugenics is all about civil rights and race. He notes that the categories of supposed inferiority nearly always paralleled the race rankings that “scientists” had established. In Justice Holmes Mr. Cohen sees (accurately enough) a bigot for whom *Buck v. Bell* was only the latest in a train of white-supremacist cases dating back to cases such as the 1903 *Giles v. Harris*, in which Holmes led the majority on the Supreme Court in upholding the right of Alabama to enforce regulations that kept blacks from voting. The great failing of the United States, writes Mr. Cohen, is its violation of “the ancient principle of justice that teaches that the purpose of law is to ensure that the strong do not harm the weak.”

Mr. Leonard blames the arrogance of reform itself for the horror of eugenics. Even more than they sought blond children, Mr. Leonard argues, Progressives sought power over

their fellow men. The “imprimatur of science,” he says, gave them that power. Theories such as eugenics were useful because they appeased the intellectual and physical vanity of the (then-Caucasian) scientific class. One can easily imagine scientists beating their breasts in pride. Who were the Neanderthals now?

When one reformist theory failed, Mr. Leonard notes, authorities simply shifted theories or agencies. Eugenics and, for that matter, another Progressive campaign, Prohibition, gave way to campaigns to exert control over business: the “scientific” New Deal. Just as, early on, eugenics served to justify power-mongering in the health sector, the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, in their turn, served as window dressing for power-mongering in the economic sector and government expansion from the 1930s onward.

Mr. Leonard’s insightful work underscores the conclusion of the midcentury Chase Bank executive Benjamin Anderson. He wrote that many of the troubles of the 1920s and 1930s were due to authorities’ impulse to “play god.” Or, at least, top ape. The Progressive push for power has only gained momentum down the decades. This evolution would not surprise a thinker who wrote that “the very essence of an instinct is, that it is followed independently of reason.” His name was Charles Darwin.

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