

# In the Name of Anti-Eugenics:

## History as a Political Resource in Struggles over Abortion

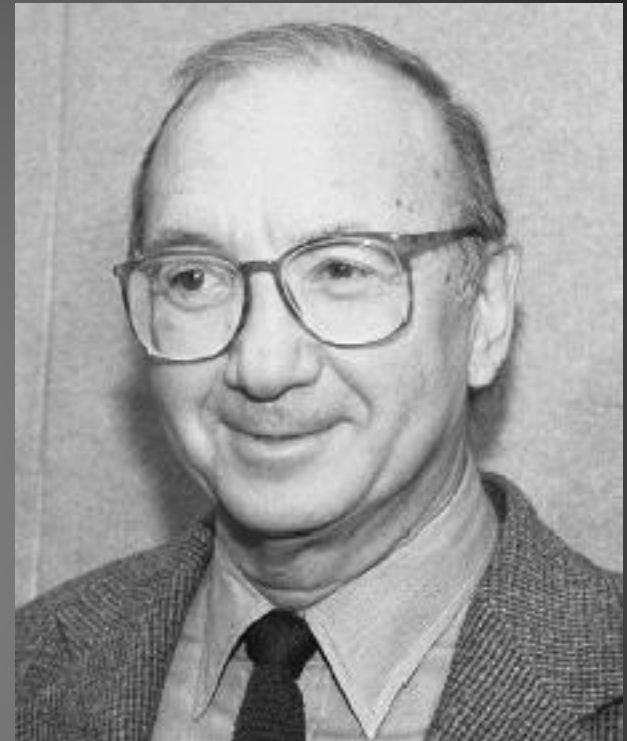
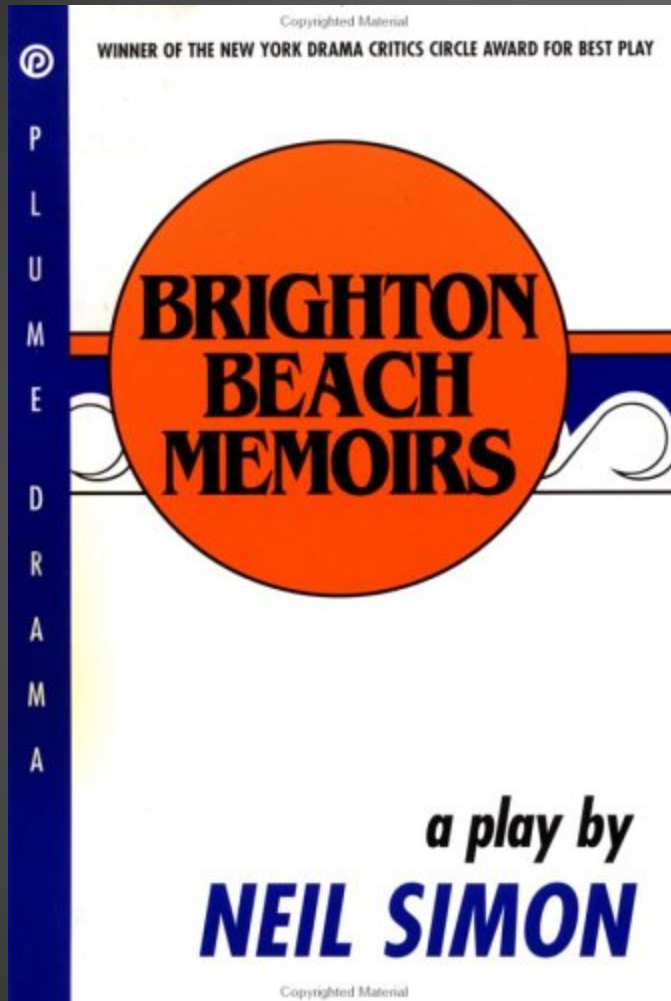


Diane B. Paul

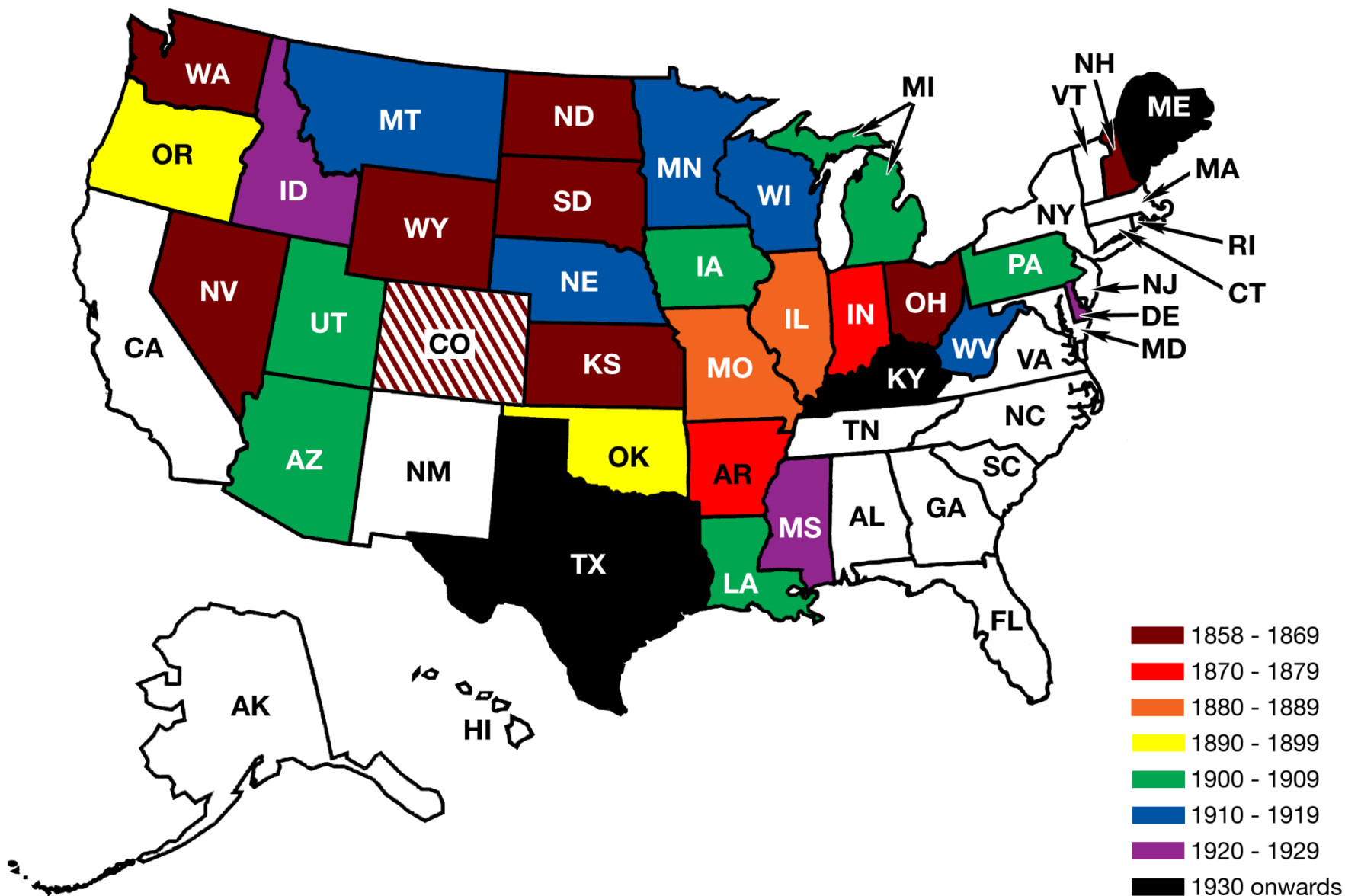
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# Some scientific critics of eugenics

“The attempt to suppress those defective classes whose deficiencies can be proved by rigid methods to be due to hereditary causes, and to prevent unions that will unavoidably lead to the birth of disease stricken progeny, is the proper field of eugenics.”

Franz Boas (1916) “Eugenics,” *Scientific Monthly* 3: 471-478, on p. 478

“To stop the propagation of the feeble-minded, by thoroughly effective measures, is a procedure for the welfare of future generations that should be supported by all enlightened persons.”

H.S. Jennings (1930), *The Biological Basis of Human Nature*, p. 238

“As a precautionary measure, there do not seem to be any strong arguments against the Californian laws on administrative or clinical grounds.”

Lancelot Hogben (1931), *Genetic Principles in Medicine and Social Science*, p. 207

“There need be no hesitation in recommending sterilization in the case of feeble-mindedness” (except where it is definitely of environmental origin).

Abraham Myerson, et. al. (1936), *Eugenical Sterilization: A Reorientation of the Problem*, p. 180

# Decision of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

## *Buck v. Bell* (1927)

it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It 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. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, 197 U. S. 11. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.

But, it is said, however it might be if this reasoning were applied generally, it fails when it is confined to the small number who are in the institutions named and is not applied to the multitudes outside. It is the usual last resort of constitutional arguments to point out shortcomings of this sort. But the answer is that the law does all that is needed when it does all that it can, indicates a policy, applies it to all within the lines, and seeks to bring within the lines all similarly situated so far and so fast as its means allow. Of

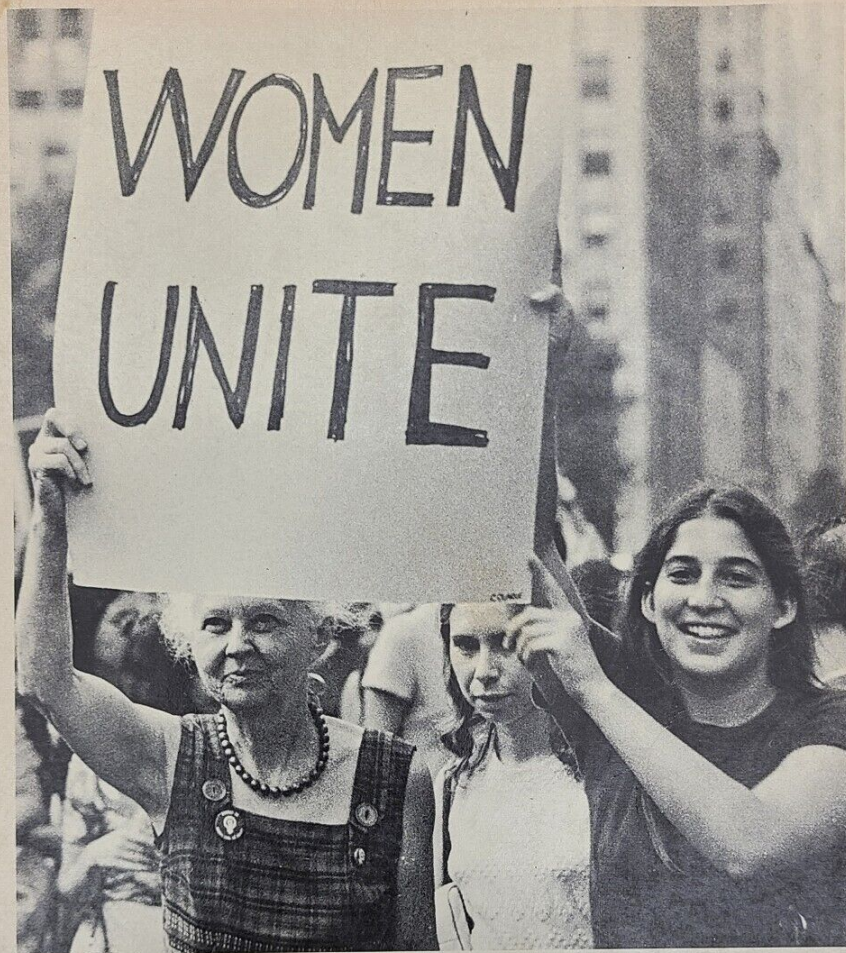


“Persons known to carry serious hereditary defects ought to be educated to realize the significance of this fact, if they are likely to be persuaded to refrain from reproducing their kind. Or, if they are not mentally competent to reach a decision, their segregation or sterilization is justified. We need not accept a Brave New World to introduce this much of eugenics”

Theodosius Dobzhansky (1962) *Mankind Evolving*, p. 333.

“There can be no question that infantile amaurotic family idiocy is a disorder that no one has a right to visit upon a small infant. Persons carrying this gene, if they marry, should never have children, and should, if they desire children, adopt them.”

Ashley Montagu (1959) *Human Heredity*, pp. 305-306.



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# Eugenics implies state control

- “the essence of eugenics was compulsion: it was the state deciding who should be allowed to breed, or to survive, for the supposed good of the race. As long as we prevent coercion, we will not have eugenics.”
- Matt Ridley (2016). *Gene Editing Isn't a Slippery Slope to Eugenics*, *The Times*, May 16.
- “*eugenics is about state control of reproduction*, not about internalized standards of normality. Opponents of prenatal diagnosis who refer to it as the new eugenics are deliberately using that language in order conflate the one with the other.”
- Ruth S Cowan (2009). *Moving up the slippery slope: Mandated genetic screening on Cyprus*. *Am J Med Genet Part C Semin Med Genet* 151C:95–103.
- “Eugenics was about state control of human breeding ... Today, it's very different. We leave the decision to parents and medical professionals, and that makes all the difference.”
- Thomas Leonard, quoted in Rosenberg (2019). *Clarence Thomas tried to link abortion to eugenics. Seven historians told The Post he's wrong*. *Washington Post*, May 30.

# A variant: State involvement is what makes eugenics offensive

“What was objectionable about the eugenics movement, besides its shoddy scientific basis, was that it involved the imposition of a state vision for a healthy population and aimed to achieve this through coercion. ... Modern eugenics in the form of testing for disorders, such as Down’s syndrome, occurs very commonly but is considered acceptable because it is voluntary, gives couples a choice over what kind of child to have and enables them to have a child with the greatest opportunity for a good life.”

Julian Savulescu (2005) “New breeds of humans: The moral obligation to enhance,” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 10 (Supp 1), 36-39, on p. 38).



# The lesson

“The important thing to learn from history is that society should not meddle with our reproductive decisions. This does not only imply that no one should be compelled to have an abortion or become sterilised. It implies too that no one should be stopped from becoming a parent in the way he or she sees fit. The use of techniques for assisted reproduction should not be regulated by political authorities (nor by doctors). The decisions about prenatal diagnosis, in vitro fertilization, egg donation, preimplantatory diagnosis, and so forth, should be placed in the hands of prospective parents. The doctors should serve the needs of those prospective parents. The politicians should allow the doctors to do so.”

Torbjorn Tännsjö, “Compulsory Sterilisation in Sweden,”  
*Bioethics* 12 (1998), 236-249.

# Or state involvement *not* the issue

- “why is the existence of a governmental policy the critical element for raising moral concerns about the eugenic implications of prenatal genetic testing? Is the lesson of the previous eugenics atrocities that viewing others as burdensome defectives ripe for elimination is wrong *only* when a governmental policy says so? Or, is not the lesson that it is wrong to view another human life as defective, as a burden, regardless of whether there is a governmental policy?”

Mark Leach (2007) *A Eugenics Common Sense*.

- “This is the eugenics that happens when the state is specifically excluded from reproductive decisions. It is the eugenics of the free market, and results inevitably from a combination of the current quasireligious faith in the absolute virtues of unfettered markets and the rapid growth of genetic knowledge. The whole point is that we are about to be deluged with offers of choice.”

Bryan Appleyard (1999) *Brave New Worlds*, p. 86.

- “Science and technology, medical professionals, and parents meet in the doctor’s office. This privatized setting is the site for individual decisions whether to keep a pregnancy or terminate it, and for which diagnosed ‘defect.’ Each decision becomes another judgment as to which conditions, and which children, are acceptable or not. As they aggregate over time, individual decisions add up to a selection process, marking the imperfect, those who may be dispensed with, while certifying those worthy to be born.”

Joan Rothschild (2005) *The Dream of the Perfect Child*, pp. 3-4.



# **“Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing for Down’s Syndrome Just Another Pathway to Abortion” (Sept. 14, 2016)**



- NIPT constitutes “an enhanced ‘search and destroy’ diagnostic tool that exponentially expands the genetic information available on unborn babies.” Celeste McGovern, “New Prenatal Testing Could Drastically Increase Abortion Rate,” *National Catholic Register*, June 25, 2012.
- “While there might be some legitimate purpose to do this test simply for parents to be prepared for their special-needs children, for the most part, this is just a further slide down the eugenics slope. It’s simply another reason for selecting against young human beings and ending their lives prematurely.” David Prentice, Family Research Council (2012)
- “here is artificial selection or eugenics, pure and simple. Is the infernal term ‘life unworthy of life’ going to become reality again?” Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, on PrenaTest; quoted in Johannes Bucher, “New Prenatal Test Will Bring Eugenics Back to Germany,” *Human Life International* (2012)
- “We argue that prenatal screening (and specifically NIPT) for Down syndrome can be considered a form of contemporary eugenics, in that it effaces, devalues, and possibly prevents the births of people with the condition.” Gareth M. Thomas and Barbara Katz Rothman, *AMA Journal of Ethics* (2016)



# Family Research Council issue analysis

Abortion Laws

## Prenatal Nondiscrimination Acts: Why They Are Essential



Katherine Johnson



Laura Grossberndt

Eugenics and abortion have a long shared history in the United States. Unfortunately, this connection is not a mere footnote of a bygone century. With modern scientific developments that can detect genetic characteristics and diagnose many disabilities in the womb, the potential for discriminatory abortions has only increased. To prevent such injustices from happening, many state legislatures have passed prenatal nondiscrimination acts (PRENDA). Such legislation has also been introduced at the federal level but has yet to pass. PRENDA laws are essential for ensuring unborn children are not aborted on account of an inherent characteristic or disability. They are a commonsense means of promoting a culture in which all human life is valued.



<https://frc.org/prenda>

**THE  
NUMBER ONE KILLER  
IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY IS NOT**

**3,591**  
HIV DEATHS

**4,861**  
DRUG-INDUCED DEATHS

**7,903**  
HOMICIDES

**13,435**  
DIABETES DEATHS

**14,135**  
ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

**69,090**  
CANCER DEATHS

**73,095**  
HEART DISEASE DEATHS

**OR ANY OF THE 246,122**  
DEATHS FROM THE TOP 15 LEADING CAUSES, COMBINED.

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# Margaret Sanger: “Card Carrying Member” of the AES





# *Kristina Box, Indiana v Planned Parenthood*

- “this law and other laws like it promote a State’s compelling interest in preventing abortion from becoming a tool of modern-day eugenics.”
- “It is true that Sanger was not referring to abortion when she made these [eugenic] statements, at least not directly. She recognized a moral difference between ‘contraceptives’ and other, more ‘extreme’ ways for ‘women to limit their families,’ such as ‘the horrors of abortion and infanticide.’ M. Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* 25, 5 (1920) .... But Sanger’s arguments about the eugenic value of birth control in securing ‘the elimination of the unfit,’ *Racial Betterment* 11, apply with even greater force to abortion, making it significantly more effective as a tool of eugenics.”

Justice Clarence Thomas, concurring opinion, May 28, 2019

# Eugenicists on abortion

“To each group [of Jewish and Italian mothers visiting the first birth control clinic] we explained simply what contraception was; that abortion was the wrong way—no matter how early it was performed it was taking life; that contraception was the better way, the safer way—it took a little time, a little trouble, but was well worth while in the long run, because life had not yet begun.”

Sanger, Margaret (1938). *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography*, p. 217.

“It [eugenics] does not imply destruction of the unfit either before or after birth.”

Charles B. Davenport (1911). *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*. NY: Henry Holt, p. 4.

“Preventing the procreation of defectives rather than destroying them before birth, or in infancy, or in the later periods of life, must be the aim of modern eugenics.

Laughlin, Harry A. (1914). Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population, ERO, Bul 10A, p. 55).

# A Eugenics Catechism

*issued by the*

American Eugenics Society, Inc.  
185 Church Street, New Haven, Conn.

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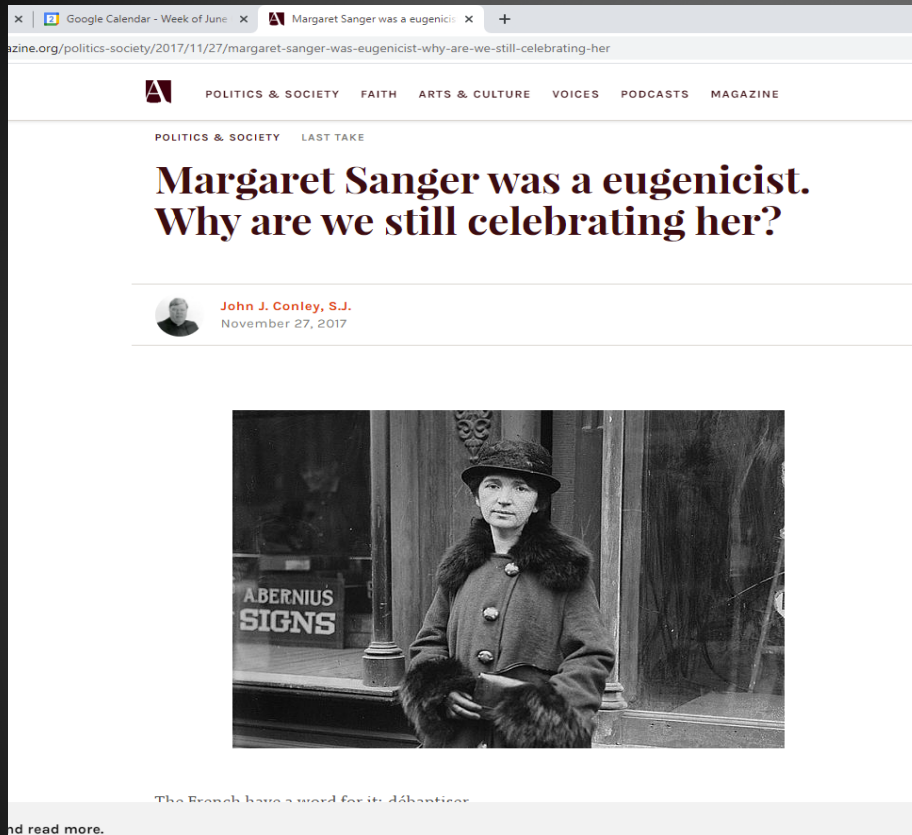
Committee on Cooperation with Clergyman  
Rev. HENRY S. HUNTINGTON, Chairman

“Why is Eugenics Interested in Birth Control?”:

“Abortion is murder and no eugenicist advocates it except to save the life of the mother”

American Eugenics Society, 1926, p. 8





“As we purify our national memory, I would like to nominate my own candidate for debaptism: Sanger Square in Manhattan. Named after Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), the founder of the Birth Control League (the future Planned Parenthood), the square honors an improbable feminist icon who championed a coercive brand of eugenics.”

John J. Conley, SJ, *America*, Nov. 27, 2017

# I'm the Head of Planned Parenthood. We're Done Making Excuses for Our Founder.

We must reckon with Margaret Sanger's association with white supremacist groups and eugenics.

April 17, 2021



“even though she eventually distanced herself from the eugenics movement because of its hard turn to explicit racism, she endorsed the Supreme Court’s 1927 decision in *Buck v. Bell*, which allowed states to sterilize people deemed “unfit” without their consent and sometimes without their knowledge — a ruling that led to the sterilization of tens of thousands of people in the 20th century.”

# Helen Keller (1880 – 1968)



*He's Going to Let Her Baby Die;  
This Woman Says "It's for Best."*



DR. H. F. HAISELDEN

MRS. ANNA POLLINGER

## THE BLACK STORK

EOGENICS AND  
THE DEATH OF  
"DEFECTIVE" BABIES  
IN AMERICAN  
MEDICINE AND  
MOTION PICTURES  
SINCE 1918

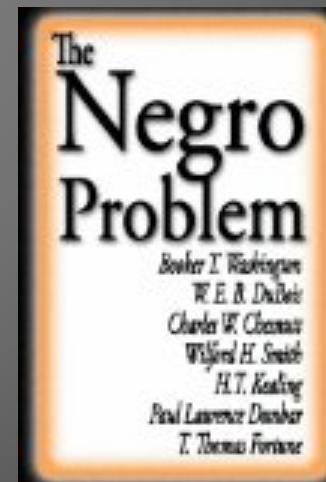
Martin S. Pernick



“The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”

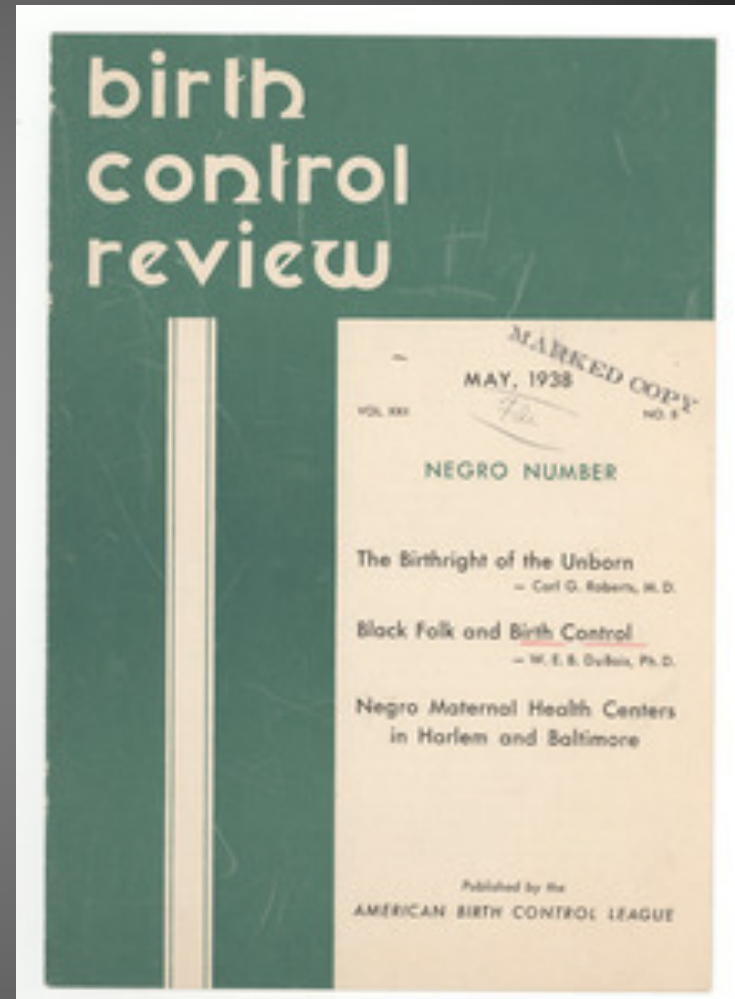


W.E. B. Dubois, “The Talented Tenth,” *The Negro Problem* (1903)



“the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly,” and that rather than cheering Census returns showing a high rate of increase, Negroes “must learn that among human races and groups, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity really counts.”

W.E.B. Du Bois, “Black Folk and Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review* (1938)





**“Bacow Says Removing Sackler Name from Harvard Buildings Would Be 'Inappropriate'”** Alexandra Chaidez and Aidan Ryan, *Harvard Crimson*, May 6, 2019





