

Eugenics: The Responsibility to Improve Society vs the Right to Exist

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical conflict between government responsibility and individual rights during the eugenics movement in the United States. By focusing on cases like *Buck v. Bell* and other forced sterilization examples, it shows how the government misused eugenic ideas to justify discrimination against women, people of color, and those with disabilities. It also examines how eugenics influenced immigration laws and marriage restrictions, promoting the idea of eliminating so-called “bad genes.” The essay argues that the government’s overreach in pursuing societal improvement serves as a warning against sacrificing personal rights for supposed social benefits.

Introduction

The roots of genetics go back to ancient Greece when thinkers first began to wonder how characteristics are passed from generation to generation. Hippocrates believed that “seeds” from the whole body combined in the womb created offspring, while Aristotle believed that male semen carried hereditary features and combined them with the menstrual blood of females to create offspring. (“History of Genetics”). These hypotheses were formed by observing certain things, but little progress was made for hundreds of years without tools like the microscope to aid observation. It wasn’t until the 19th century that scientists such as Gregor Mendel and Charles Darwin finally

discovered how traits were inherited. Mendel’s work on pea plants revealed how specific traits were dominant while others were recessive, founding modern genetics (“The Work of Mendel”). Darwin developed the theory of natural selection, which explained how some traits helped species survive. However, he did not actually know how traits were passed down; this concept was later referred to as “survival of the fittest” (Kevles, Daniel J).

This hypothesis influenced Francis Galton, who founded the concept of eugenics. Galton proposed that humans could control their evolution by encouraging the “fit” to breed and preventing the “unfit” from reproducing (Facing History and Ourselves, “The Origins of

Eugenics”). However, Galton misinterpreted Darwin’s theory of natural selection, applying it in a way that justified discrimination and harmful policies (BBC).

While governments must improve society, when they overstep that responsibility and violate individual rights, as in the eugenics movement, progress is undermined. This essay argues that the eugenics movement in the U.S. violated fundamental human rights under the guise of societal progress, demonstrating how government responsibility must be balanced with the protection of individual freedoms. This tension between rights and responsibilities is at the heart of this historical conflict, revealing how easily the balance can tip when power goes unchecked.

Individual Rights: What Was Taken Away?

Basic rights are the fundamental freedoms that all people should have. They ensure human equality, dignity, and freedom (Ontario Public Service Employees Union). The government must protect these rights. However, forced sterilization ignored individual rights, such as forcing women not to have babies.

An example of ignored rights is bodily autonomy, which guarantees the right to one’s own body. The United Nations Population Fund defines bodily autonomy as “the power and agency to make choices over our bodies and futures, without violence or coercion” (“Bodily Autonomy: A Fundamental Right”). The government ignored this through forced sterilization. While bodily autonomy means that a person’s body belongs to them, forced

sterilization allows the government to control a woman’s body. This violated the right solely because the government decided certain genes did not fit society’s standards (Patel, Priti). By the mid-20th century, over 60,000 people in the U.S. were sterilized under eugenics laws, with many states continuing sterilizations into the 1970s (“Eugenics in America: Laws and Practices”). This shows how governments overstepped their boundaries and treated people as problems to be managed rather than as individuals with rights.

Basic rights are fundamental to allowing people to live as individuals, but eugenics policies deprived people of these basic rights, treating their lives as tools for societal goals. For example, *Buck v. Bell* was a case in which a woman with an intellectual disability was subjected to forced sterilization. This case allowed states to sterilize individuals because the judge ruled it was acceptable, and this decision remained a legal precedent. The Supreme Court in *Buck v. Bell* stated, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough,” upholding the constitutionality of forced sterilizations (Antonios and Raup). Carrie Buck was the person used in the case *Buck v. Bell*, which allowed forced sterilization to continue. She had a lawyer, who was, in fact, a device for the law’s approval. So, he wrote briefs that were not helpful for her case. (Gross) This suggests that the government thoroughly exploited Carrie Buck. This decision not only justified forced sterilizations but also influenced other countries. For example, Nazi Germany cited it when creating their racial hygiene laws (*Buck v. Bell* (1927)). This shows how dangerous it can

be when governments treat certain groups as inferior or unworthy of basic rights.

As Lisa Ko writes for PBS, “coerced sterilization is a shameful part of America’s history,” targeting “immigrants, people of color, poor people, unmarried mothers, the disabled, [and] the mentally ill” (“Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States”). These groups became the main victims due to prejudice that labeled them as unfit. Victims of forced sterilization often reported experiencing deep psychological trauma. The violation of their bodily autonomy left them feeling dehumanized and ostracized, excluded from the society that had already marginalized them. This demonstrates that forced sterilization was not just a blatant infringement on human rights but also a tool used to oppress vulnerable groups further. As the UNAIDS interagency statement explains, “Sterilization without full, free, and informed consent violates numerous human rights, including the health rights, to information, and to freedom from discrimination” (UNAIDS). These policies were deeply entwined with larger systems of injustice and oppression.

Advocates of eugenics argued that society could be improved by controlling the reproduction of so-called “unfit” individuals while promoting procreation among the “fit.” This dehumanizing mindset reduced individuals to societal problems to be managed, giving governments a rationale to violate fundamental rights in ways that caused irreparable harm. The United Nations later condemned forced sterilization as “a grave abuse of authority” and

a violation of sexual and reproductive health rights (UNAIDS). Their condemnation underscores the critical importance of bodily autonomy and personal freedom in the broader fight for reproductive justice.

Societal Responsibilities: Why Did They Think It Was Right?

Supporters of eugenics believed it was necessary to create a better society. They felt responsible for improving social conditions and saw eugenics as a tool for progress. A key part of their beliefs was the idea that limiting births among the “unfit” while encouraging reproduction among the “fit” would benefit society. Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics, emphasized this, stating, “The possibility of improving the race of a nation depends on the power of increasing the productivity of the best stock. This is far more important than repressing the productivity of the worst” (Galton, Francis). Proponents believed this would enhance the population’s overall genetic quality. Theodore Roosevelt shared this view, supporting eugenics to create a healthier, more active society. He even was quoted as saying, “Society has no business to permit degenerates to reproduce their kind. It is really extraordinary that our people refuse to apply to human beings such elementary knowledge as every successful farmer is obliged to apply to his own stock breeding . . .” (Heather). However, these policies caused harm, leaving many people to suffer or die because of the selfish ideologies behind them (Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States). The supposed societal benefits came at the direct

expense of individual freedoms, highlighting the dangerous imbalance when governmental responsibility overreaches.

Charles Davenport, a prominent eugenicist, embodied the racial and class biases driving the movement. He argued that eugenics would elevate society, claiming, "Strains with new and better combinations of traits may arise, and our nation [will] take front rank in culture among the nations of ancient and modern times" ("Charles B. Davenport, William E. Castle, and the International Eugenics Movement"). Davenport also framed eugenics as a way to reduce social costs, stating, "It is a reproach to our intelligence that we as a people...should have to support about half a million insane, feeble-minded, epileptic, blind and deaf, 80,000 prisoners and 100,000 paupers at a cost of over 100 million dollars per year" ("Charles Davenport's Heredity in Relation to Eugenics"). This economic argument further blurred the lines between government responsibility and the protection of individual rights, as it treated people as burdens rather than as citizens deserving of dignity.

The influence of eugenics extended beyond sterilization, shaping marriage and immigration laws to reflect ideals of racial purity. The Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924, for example, banned interracial marriages. Its supporters argued that such unions would "pollute" the gene pool. Walter Plecker, who enforced the law, described "white race purity" as the "cornerstone of our civilization" (Diamond). Plecker even compared his efforts to those of the Nazis, boasting, "Hitler's

genealogical study of the Jews is not more complete." The law's Pocahontas Exception allowed individuals with minimal Native American ancestry to retain their "white" classification, revealing how racial purity laws were also used to protect elite lineages (Facing History). These laws showcase how the government's assumed responsibility to protect societal 'purity' came at the direct cost of marginalized groups' basic rights.

Immigration laws were also heavily influenced by eugenic ideas. The Immigration Act of 1924 introduced strict quotas favoring Northern and Western Europeans while banning immigration from Asia. Senator David Reed praised the Act, declaring it would ensure "the racial composition of America at that time thus is made permanent" (Diamond). Eugenicists like Harry Laughlin supported the law, claiming it would "improve the American bloodstream" by excluding groups deemed genetically inferior (Diamond; Ludmerer). These policies reflected an effort to control the nation's demographics to align with eugenic goals, reinforcing racial hierarchies. Using government power to control who could enter the country further illustrates how societal goals were prioritized over human rights. This idea of using "science" to justify immigration policies also provided a blueprint for similar laws abroad, particularly in Nazi Germany.

The media played a significant role in promoting eugenics, often portraying it in a positive light. Women were encouraged to embrace eugenic principles or participate in sterilization programs through campaigns that

highlighted supposed benefits. For example, *Women's Home Companion* magazine sponsored Better Babies contests, which awarded medals to mothers whose children were deemed genetically superior. By 1925, these contests had attracted over 25.6 million participants, linking public health efforts to eugenics and presenting participation as a social contribution ("Better Babies and Fitter Families: Eugenics and Forced Sterilization"). The medals, designed by acclaimed coin artist Laura Gardin Fraser, gave the events an air of prestige. Through such campaigns, the media normalized eugenics, disguising its oppressive policies as a public good and blurring the lines between societal progress and individual oppression.

These campaigns and policies framed eugenics as a way to improve society, masking the harm they caused. Whether through sterilization, marriage restrictions, or immigration laws, eugenics targeted marginalized groups, violating fundamental rights and reinforcing inequality. Supporters may have viewed it as progress, but the human cost of these actions tells a different story. The failure to balance the government's responsibility with the protection of individual rights serves as a powerful reminder of how easily societal goals can become tools of oppression.

The Conflict: Individual Rights vs. Societal Goals

As mentioned earlier, supporters of eugenics put more importance on the development of society than on the protection of individual freedom and dignity. However, governments

and eugenics supporters' societal goals often overstepped their responsibilities in the name of progress. Forced sterilization is one clear example. Women's basic rights, especially bodily autonomy, were violated. This right, which refers to the control one has over one's body, was ignored by the government through these practices. Moreover, forced sterilization also targeted people based on race, making it a racist policy disguised as social development. Women, people of color, and people with disabilities were labeled 'unfit' for society (Ko).

This raises a key question: Can a government ever take away freedoms to improve society? Is it ever justified? According to John Locke's liberalism, individual rights and freedoms must come first, and state intervention must be minimized. Locke argued, "No one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (Locke, John), meaning that if state intervention expands too much, it violates individual rights. However, according to utilitarianism, individual rights may be sacrificed to maximize overall happiness. This philosophy suggests that if the majority benefits, some personal freedoms might be restricted. However, to ensure the welfare of society without infringing on individual rights, an appropriate balance must be achieved (MacAskill, William, Meissner, D., and Chappell, R. Y).

In addition to the eugenics movement, Japanese American incarceration during World War II is another example of individual rights being violated for so-called social development and safety. In 1941, after the Japanese military

attacked Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government grew suspicious of Japanese Americans. Out of fear, they built internment camps, even though most of the people they incarcerated were born and raised in the U.S. The government's fear and pursuit of safety led them to doubt innocent people, depriving Japanese Americans of their freedom and causing harm (Japanese American Incarceration). This was justified by labeling Japanese Americans as a "public danger." That was the reason the government claimed it could incarcerate them ("Japanese Relocation during World War II"). In this case, the American government blatantly ignored individual rights. For example, the Constitution's Fifth Amendment states, "No person shall be... deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." The government disregarded these constitutional protections and took away people's properties and freedoms (Annenberg Classroom).

This case of Japanese American incarceration and forced sterilization under eugenics share clear similarities. In both instances, innocent people were deprived of their basic rights and harmed by their government. Both were justified in the name of protecting and helping society, but the results were widespread rights violations and suffering. To sum up, balancing rights and responsibilities is crucial, and when governments overstep their responsibilities, the consequences are harmful and long-lasting.

Conclusion

Excessive government responsibility for creating a better society loses its purpose when it violates individual rights. Excessive intervention has

cost innocent lives and led society to infringe on personal freedoms. The history of eugenics in the United States demonstrates this, with cases like *Buck v. Bell*, forced sterilization, and the Immigration Act showing how the government's pursuit of societal improvement came at the expense of marginalized groups. These examples reveal how governments have repeatedly trampled individual rights in the name of progress and highlight the dangers of allowing societal goals to overshadow personal freedoms.

Forced sterilization connects to two key ideologies: liberalism and utilitarianism. Utilitarianism argues that sacrificing the few can be justified for the greater good, while liberalism prioritizes individual rights. This tension illustrates the need to balance societal welfare without compromising human dignity.

History doesn't remain in the past. The history of forced sterilization in the U.S. is not just a tragedy but a warning of how governmental power and fundamental rights can still clash today. This history is important not just to remember past mistakes but to prevent them from happening again. Human dignity should never be compromised. The oppression of the past may take new forms, but its consequences remain the same. How can we ensure these mistakes are never repeated?

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