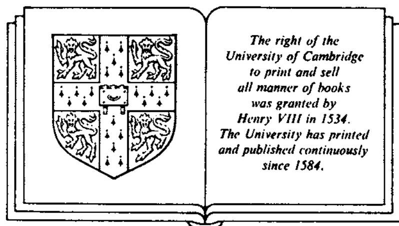
Quality and Quantity

THE QUEST FOR BIOLOGICAL REGENERATION
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRANCE

William H. Schneider



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1

Introduction

In December 1941, Eugen Fischer, a leading anthropologist of the Nazi Reich, visited the occupied city of Paris. As founder of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, Fischer delivered a lecture entitled "Problems of race and racial legislation in Germany" at the Maison de la chimie, a noted center of collaborationist propaganda.[1] Fischer was not the first who had come to spread the word to the French about the National Socialist revolution in applied human biology. Earlier in the year, Otmar von Verscheurer, the Frankfurt geneticist whose pupils included the notorious Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, spoke on human heredity and Nazi marriage laws, and others during the year lectured on "Public health in the reich" and "Biology and the organization of the state."[2]

Fischer admitted at the beginning of his talk that he had chosen his topic because "racial problems and German racial legislation are often the subjects of the greatest incomprehension by foreigners."[3] His aim was not only to explain the laws but also to persuade the French to join the Germans in their campaign to preserve the "hereditary health" of the population. He did this in part by flattery, telling his audience of the superiority of "the race called 'Nordic,' to which a great proportion of the French population also belongs." Fischer also played on racial fears, warning that

> French laws and institutions permit black blood to infiltrate the organism of the French people . . . [producing] a regression of the intellectual and cultural capacity of France that will have absolutely unavoidable consequences if the mixing continues to spread on a vast scale.

He did not fail to mention another common enemy, the Jews, declaring that their "moral tendencies and all the activities of Jew-

ish Bolsheviks reveal a mentality so monstrous that one can only speak of inferiority and beings of a different species than ours."[4]

Although the talk contained the usual Nazi race propaganda the French had heard before, Fischer's conclusions addressed a specific problem that the French themselves had recognized for decades – their low birthrate. The German racial legislation, said Fischer, did not focus solely on the undesirables. It would do little good to eliminate them, he declared, "if the people no longer had the will to survive." Hence, the people had to do their part by "the procreation of large numbers of healthy children in all families." Fischer did not, however, support the blind natalist policy that had been attempted in previous decades in countries such as France, because the result would be the "reproduction of inferior individuals, of those at the lowest social level." Fischer's conclusion, therefore, stressed that "it is not only the number of births that plays a decisive role but the quality and the health of the race, without which a people cannot perpetuate itself."[5]

Fischer and the other Germans spoke as if they were bringing the first words of eugenics and biological regeneration to the French, whom they had long considered decadent because of their low birthrate and high incidence of disease and alcohol. Fischer was correct in his assumption that for eugenics to work in France, it had to address the natalists' concerns; but he ignored the fact that for thirty years there had been an organized movement that advocated the necessity of improving both the quantity *and* the quality of the population: the French Eugenics Society. In fact, attending the Fischer lecture was Henri Briand of the Ecole d'anthropologie who reported on the talk for the society in the *Revue anthropologique*.[6] It was to be the last official act of the society, because the war had disrupted its organization, and the new Vichy and occupation regimes had absorbed many of the interests it represented. So, rather than heralding the beginning of eugenics in France, the Fischer talk signaled the capstone of an era of French eugenic thought and activity that had its own indigenous roots and development.

This incident is very telling about perceptions of France and the history of eugenics that persist to this day. For example, if one mentions the word "eugenics" to a Frenchman, he will shake his head either in ignorance or with a knowing disdain. "Yes," he will

agree, if he knows the word at all, "those Germans and Anglo-Saxons certainly did some nasty things in the name of eugenics. Fortunately in France we did not succumb to such folly." This view has been reinforced in recent years by scholars and those in the scientific community who had taken a keen interest in the history of eugenics. Their conclusions generally support this popular attitude.[7] By and large, so the story goes, it was the English who invented eugenics, but the Americans and Germans who were most enthusiastic in giving it practical application, which in the case of the Nazis was carried to the ultimate and horrible extreme of the death camps.

France, in fact, enjoys a reputation for having been strongly anti-eugenic in its history. Observers within the country and outside have boasted or complained (depending on whether they opposed or favored eugenics) that the strong egalitarian tradition of the Third Republic, coupled with the tradition of Gallic opposition to things Anglo-Saxon, provided a strong opposition to the English-inspired and German-perfected science of improving the human race. Writing in 1933 for the English *Eugenics review,* C. B. S. Hodson, secretary of the English Eugenics Society, noted that "France has the reputation of showing little concern for questions of human biology and has an antagonistic outlook on eugenics."[8]

Yet the record of French views on the subject (both scholarly and popular) shows almost no evidence of opposition to eugenics. There were occasional complaints about the Americans or Germans going to extremes. And some French proponents of eugenics complained of resistance to their ideas. Otherwise, the single organized attack came from the Catholic church, and then only after the papal encyclical of 1930 forced French Catholics to abandon a decade-long attempt to define a Christian eugenics. The reknowned French Ligue des droits de l'homme, established to protect individual rights during the Dreyfus affair, supported proposals by eugenicists in the name of protecting "the rights of unborn generations." And although this may have been for non-eugenic reasons, the league certainly never attacked eugenics. Even the French Communist party aligned itself with several eugenic causes by the end of the 1930s.

On one level the characterization of eugenics as being Anglo-Saxon is understandable. The United States and Germany were,

by all accounts, the countries where the most extensive eugenic legislation was passed and applied.[9] Although England, as will be seen, is improperly considered to be the sole fount and inspiration for all eugenics movements, the Englishman Francis Galton does deserve credit (or blame) for first setting forth the new ideas and coining the term that has come to be applied to the movements and practices everywhere.[10] But closer analysis simply of the question of the naming of the new science suggests problems with this common view of the history of eugenics. Ideas comparable to Galton's were developed simultaneously and independently both in Germany and France, as reflected in their indigenous names, which persisted well into the twentieth century: in Germany, "race hygiene," and in France, "puericulture."[11]

A major purpose of this book is to show that what the English and Americans called eugenics was only one manifestation of a far more pervasive trend at the time, and that there is a serious risk of distorting the record by defining eugenics narrowly, based on peculiar English or American circumstances. This broader view considers eugenics as a widespread phenomenon found at the turn of the nineteenth century in most industrial societies. Its roots lay in the social class differentiation and conflict that was endemic to those societies, as well as in the economic cycles, growth of government, and increasingly scientific view of the world. Eugenics was a reaction to the perception that society was in a state of decline and degeneration.[12] Its novelty was in the self-proclaimed scientific means it proposed to resolve this decline, but this reaction was common to a long list of countries in the world of 1900. This book examines in detail how eugenics in France provided a broad cover for a variety of movements that aimed at the biological regeneration of the population, such as natalism, neo-Malthusianism, social hygiene, and racist immigration restrictions. Hence, it provides a thorough examination of eugenics beyond the Anglo-Saxon context, and lends further evidence to the increasing number of studies on other countries from Russia to Brazil and Norway to Japan.[13]

The larger view of eugenics as a biologically based movement for social reform also permits a better appreciation of the many social and cultural cross-currents in each of the countries where eugenics developed. The book demonstrates that if scholars take this broader perspective, they can better discern the common fea-

tures that defined eugenics. In addition, they can see eugenics as much more of a worldwide phenomenon than is currently thought. The early and regular international meetings of eugenicists have long been a clue to this fact, which has yet to be thoroughly examined.[14]

One can immediately see both the need and value of this broader perspective on the history of eugenics by considering the question of its origins. The most common explanation for the beginning of eugenics is that once humans were seen as part of the evolutionary process, proposals were made to try to control it. According to this view, Darwin's theory of evolution was the inspiration for his cousin Francis Galton to propose a new science of eugenics. Galton's goals, as stated in an 1883 definition of eugenics, essentially fit this explanation. He called eugenics

> the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have.[15]

As with the naming of eugenics, this oft-repeated account of its origins requires modification if it is to apply to the broader development of the movement. For example, there was a delay of over twenty years between Galton's definition of eugenics and the creation of the first eugenics organizations after the turn of the century in England (1907), Germany (1905), and the United States (1910). It has been argued that the reason for the delay was the need for a better theoretical understanding of how hereditary traits were passed on to subsequent generations; and the rediscovery of Mendel's work in 1900 offered just such an understanding.[16] His laws, based on the assumption that discrete inherited traits were *not* modified by the environment, represented an improvement on Galton's and Darwin's idea of "blending" or averaging of inherited qualities from each parent, opening up eugenics research to the vast empirical experience of plant and animal breeders who had developed many rule-of-thumb ideas similar to Mendel's.

This explanation of the delay is correct in its assumption that there were important theoretical and practical problems in the initial attempt to follow Galton's dictum, but it goes too far in claiming they were all resolved by Mendel's discoveries. Eugenicists,

whether Mendelian or not, continually had trouble producing the results they promised from their theories. It is therefore difficult to claim that problems in hereditary theory alone were responsible for the delay. More important, the French experience shows that a Mendelian hereditary theory was not a necessary condition for the development of eugenic thought. Mendelism did not come to France until the 1930s, yet from the beginning of the century Lamarckian hereditary theory, which maintained that acquired characteristics *could* be inherited, was the basis of a eugenics movement with similar goals and some of the same programs as those in Anglo-Saxon countries. Thus, although the spread of Mendel's ideas may have been an important part of the beginning of eugenics in England and the United States, Mendelism was by no means a prerequisite.[17]

There are other equally plausible reasons why eugenics organizations were not immediately established in the 1880s that look at broader social and intellectual developments at the time. Support for this view comes from the fact that the delays transcended significant local differences from country to country. Nowhere in Europe or the United States was a eugenics organization created before 1900; and thereafter, such organizations were established both in places where Mendelism was accepted and where it was rejected. In fact, one feature of eugenics movements showing the most consistency was the timing of the establishment of formal eugenics societies. Only a few years lapsed between the founding of the German Race Hygiene Society in 1905 and the French Eugenics Society in 1912. And in between, more than a dozen such organizations came into existence across Europe, the United States, and eventually Japan. It might be argued that the simultaneity was simply the result of imitation and the spread of English ideas to other countries. But although it is true that in France the immediate impetus for the creation of the French Eugenics Society was the First International Eugenics Congress held in London in 1912, as I will show, the deeper inspiration came from developments in French science and society that began at the same time as in England and the United States. A closer examination of the delay in establishing a eugenics organization in France shows that it came not just from theoretical problems in explaining hereditary causes, but for more mundane reasons such as the personalities of individ-

uals and the difficulty in drawing together the people working in the diverse fields that comprised eugenics.

It is very curious that until recently the French have virtually ignored the history and impact of eugenic thought in their own country. Despite the understandable desire to allow the Anglo-Saxons and Germans to have the dubious distinction of excelling in eugenics, lack of interest in France is all the more striking because French scholars have been among the pioneers during the last twenty years in recognizing the relationship between biological and medical thought on the one hand, and society and politics on the other. The work of Michel Foucault in particular has inspired a whole generation of researchers to see the ever-increasing social and political power of the state during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as having extended to physical control over individuals, with a justification in biomedical terms.[18]

Foucault's work offers an even broader perspective on the history of eugenics, because it views Darwin's theory as just another tool with which the state and society could order human biological resources. Already by the end of the eighteenth century, according to Foucault, humans were seen as a species whose reproduction was to be measured and assessed to determine the "bio-power" of the state. Another aspect of this development was the state's need to "discipline" the population physically for military, economic, and political purposes. Sexuality, which had previously been a private matter, now became a tool of the state and society. Procreative behavior was thus considered to be a legitimate area of state concern, to be protected from pathogenic influences, and to be increased, limited, or regenerated according to the needs of the state.[19]

The eugenic thought that tied together the movements for the biological regeneration of France and elsewhere beginning at the end of the nineteenth century can clearly be seen as manifestations of Foucault's bio-power. Eugenicists may not have been overtly motivated by power and control as ends in themselves, but their goals involved the state more broadly and deeply in matters previously left to the individual, going beyond a concern for individual or collective health to the quality of future generations. Studies of this phenomenon in France have usually focused on particular biologically based reform movements, such as those against alco-

hol and prostitution or in favor of birth control. Despite the fact that Foucault considered eugenics along with female hysteria, childhood masturbation, and sexual perversion as central examples (or "strategies") of the exercise of bio-power, his countrymen have yet to produce a full history of eugenics in France.[20] This book examines the specific reform movements in the context of broader eugenic thought, thus taking a position midway between Foucault's sweeping overview and the more limited case-study perspectives. At the same time, the book will show the relevance of the biosocial writings of the French school to the extensive research on Anglo-Saxon eugenics.

The thesis of this book is that eugenics in France provided a theoretical framework linking together several different movements for the biological reform of society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eugenicists were able to do this because of their promise to improve the hereditary quality of the population. Moreover, because of the widespread belief in France in the Lamarckian theory of the inheritability of acquired characteristics, many would-be reformers saw great advantages in a theory maintaining that any physical improvements in the population would be passed to subsequent generations. If eugenicists in other countries were critical of French neo-Lamarckism, they hid it well. For, as will be seen, the French were always prominent at international conferences, including some at which they served as hosts.

A greater difficulty for eugenics in France was the problem of declining birthrate that Eugen Fischer mentioned in his 1941 talk. The fear of depopulation made it difficult for French eugenicists to propose negative measures to eliminate undesirable elements in the population. Natalist organizations, among others, opposed any action that might restrict procreation. Yet French eugenicists were able to maintain a coalition with these groups for a surprisingly long time by stressing positive eugenics and the need to improve both the quality *and* quantity of the population. This position was in direct contrast to the neo-Malthusian eugenicists of the English Malthusian League who in the early twentieth century adopted as their slogan, *Non quantitas sed qualitas*.[21] The strikingly different French position was possible in part because of neo-Lamarckian hereditary theory, which assumed that if one could improve the undesirable conditions of one generation, it would make the next

generation better. Toward the end of the 1920s, however, French eugenicists found it impossible to continue the alliance with the natalists, and the result was a greater emphasis on negative eugenic measures in the 1930s and 1940s, much like their Anglo-Saxon and German counterparts.

This book is not meant to be the last word on French eugenics. On the contrary, it is a first attempt to set forth the major components of French eugenics, both for comparison with other countries and to show the interaction of the various movements that comprised it. Some of these, such as the neo-Malthusian and anti-venereal disease movements, have already been examined in detail, whereas others, such as the history of statistics or French anthropology, are just beginning to be studied.[22] For virtually all of these the twentieth century has received the least attention.

The first two chapters give an overview of French perceptions of decline and proposals for regeneration that were typical of turn-of-the-century Europe. In many ways the decline was seen as more pronounced in France than elsewhere, not only because of French political instability and economic stagnation in the nineteenth century, but also because of the fear of demographic decline stemming from recognition of the slowing French birthrate. Among the proposals for reversing the situation were ideas for biological regeneration out of which the French eugenics movement sprang. The most important of these were the natalist, birth control, and social hygiene movements, the latter of which aimed at eliminating the so-called social plagues of alcoholism, tuberculosis, and venereal disease.

Chapter 3 examines the immediate precursors of the French Eugenics Society – that is, proposals stemming from the eugenic thought of the late nineteenth century that failed to produce an organized eugenics movement. This includes an examination of why it took over thirty years before an organization was created that embodied these eugenic ideas. And because there was also a delay in other countries, the answers for France help to shed light on the experience elsewhere. Chapter 4 examines the people and existing organizations that came together to form the French Eugenics Society in 1912. It analyzes the background of the principal leaders, the goals and institutional framework of the organization, and compares the society with organizations in other countries before the First World War. The impact of the war on French

eugenics is covered in Chapter 5, which also looks at related natalist and social hygiene programs during the 1920s. When eugenicists lost control of the social hygiene movement, they began a campaign for a premarital medical examination law, which is the subject of Chapter 6. That was not only a turning point as a move toward negative eugenics, but also a tactic that tested the influence of eugenics in the country.

Chapter 7 presents an overview of eugenics during the 1930s, a period of change in France as in other countries.[23] It produced, for example, the first organized opposition to eugenics by natalists and the Catholic church, and at the same time brought new support, at least for some eugenic ideas, from the French left. The most dramatic development, however, was an increasing call for harsher, negative measures – birth control, sterilization, and immigration restriction. These were only partly the reaction to the new circumstances of the Depression, because they also coincided with a change in the way the French Eugenics Society was organized. The result was that by the end of the decade a significant body of writing and ideas existed in France to support such measures, with a seemingly scientific justification offered by eugenics. Chapters 8 and 9 provide a more detailed consideration of the questions of race and immigration that grew in importance during the 1930s and have continued up to the present.

Chapter 10 looks at the Vichy period from the standpoint of the changes Vichy brought to eugenics as part of its new call for the biological regeneration of France. The regime provided opportunities to carry out some of the older racist and social hygiene proposals, and in addition established the Foundation of Alexis Carrel, which set forth some new ones. Many of these developments survived the end of the Second World War, despite the abrupt change in the French government in 1944. Hence, the book concludes in Chapter 11 with some observations on the continuity of eugenics up to the present.