Review Essay

Social Engineering in the United States: Eugenics and Euthanasis

Rebecca M. Kluchin

EUGENIC DESIGN: Streamlining America in the 1930s. By Christine Cogdell. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2004.

UNNATURAL SELECTIONS: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. By Daylanne K. English. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2004.

A MERCIFUL END: The Euthanasia Movement in Modern America. By Ian Dowbiggin. New York: Oxford University Press. 2003.

Recently scholars have demonstrated the depth and longevity of American social engineering projects begun at the turn of the twentieth century. The three books under review here add to this expanding literature in their investigations of eugenics and euthanasia. Christine Cogdell's *Eugenic Design*, Daylanne K. English's *Unnatural Selections*, and Ian Dowbiggin's *A Merciful End* provoke readers to examine Americans' faith in science and technology, as well as social and evolutionary progress, and to evaluate the extent to which our culture has applied notions of reproductive fitness to racial politics, public policies, medical practices, consumption patterns, and popular culture over the course of the twentieth century. Cogdell and English's texts compliment each other well.

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Locating eugenics ideas and language in unexpected places, both authors emphasize the breadth and influence of the eugenics movement. English reveals that eugenic ideologies in the 1920s were not contained within the white community; they also appealed to "race men" like W.E.B. Du Bois, who employed ideas about reproductive fitness and social progress in his calls for racial uplift. Cogdell links eugenics to streamline design, showing the extent to which eugenic ideas about hygiene, efficiency, and perfection shaped material culture of the 1930s and continued to influence American consumerism in the 1940s and 1950s. Dowbiggin's study on euthanasia, while significant for tracing the movement back to the Progressive era, is less unique than the other two books. A fairly linear institutional history of the Euthanasia Society of America, *A Merciful End* chronicles in detail the group's evolution over the last hundred years.

A historian, Dowbiggin traces the euthanasia movement back to the turn of the twentieth century, and his emphasis on the early decades represents a significant contribution to this history. He locates euthanasia alongside eugenics, birth control, social Darwinism, and positivism as part of a larger Progressive movement that debated individual versus collective rights and the "responsibility" of citizens to preserve the health and resources of their society. In the decades before WWI some physicians helped their terminal and suffering patients to achieve an "easy death," and a majority of Americans privately endorsed this practice. This support, however, did not lead to the development of a "mercy-killing" movement until Progressive reformers began to apply scientific principles to social problems and to privilege scientific over religious faith. Changing attitudes about euthanasia were not caused by changes in medical technologies (of which there were few), Dowbiggin shows, but instead by changes in popular ideas and attitudes. In 1938 Charles Frances Potter and Ann Mitchell founded the Euthanasia Society of America (ESA). Many eugenicists and birth control activists, including Margaret Sanger and H.H. Goddard, joined the ESA, and Dowbiggin dedicates numerous pages to explaining the multiple overlaps between these movements in terms of membership, philosophy, and strategy. The ESA's efforts to legalize active euthanasia were stymied by the international exposure of Nazi medical abuses in the 1940s, and for decades the ESA struggled but failed to differentiate its agenda from that of the Nazis. Ironically, the ESA's main opponent, the Catholic Church, transformed the discourse of euthanasia to one that could be more broadly accepted by the public. In 1957 Pope Pius XII declared that Catholics could refuse extraordinary medical treatment without violating Church doctrine. Consequently, the right to refuse treatment became considered a legitimate issue of individual rights and individual choice. The idea that one has the right to choose when to die gained ground in the 1960s and 1970s, and again Dowbiggin argues that the cause of this shift was more the result of changes in social attitudes than the introduction of new medical technologies (of which there were many). Yet just as social views shifted to

meet the goals of the ESA, the group itself, hampered for decades by internal divisions, split apart and divided into two factions. The first supported public education, living wills, and death with dignity; the second looked at euthanasia as a social responsibility, as a means by which to control overpopulation and reduce social expenditures, a continuation of many eugenic ideas about the economic and cultural cost of social "drag." This latter group supported physician-assisted suicide and the legalization of active euthanasia. In the 1970s ESA changed its name to the Society for the Right-to-Die (SRD) and after a decade of dissent within its ranks, finally split, only to reunite once again, on shaky terms, in the early 1990s. Supporters of physician-assisted suicide won a victory in Oregon, which legalized this phenomenon in 1997, but activists failed to win similar campaigns in states like California because they could not combat a growing pro-life movement.

Dowbiggin offers a comprehensive institutional history of the ESA and his careful mining of the untapped records of this group is evident in the details he provides. His efforts to demonstrate the evolution of the ESA over time, however, sometimes feel incomplete because he over-simplifies the social trends and cultural norms of the eras under investigation. This is most evident in his treatment of the 1960s. Identifying this decade as a period of "rights movements," he fails to recognize the diversity of the social movements of this era, nor does he explain why these movements developed when they did and how their development both shaped and reflected the social attitudes to which he points. Dowbiggin focuses primarily on the feminist movement, but more specifically, on the abortion rights movement. This narrow focus causes the author to ignore the way that race, class, gender, and ethnicity shaped prominent ideas about individual rights and freedom of choice. Dowbiggin argues "as social activists toppled age-old barriers between women and sexual and reproductive freedom, people began to demand that the taboo of silence surrounding death be similarly lifted." (115) This is a compelling claim, but he stops here. While the relationship between the right to choose abortion and the right to choose to death seems very conceivable, Dowbiggin fails to actually explain how abortion rights activists' calls for the right to reproductive self determination and privacy led to increasing public acceptance of the right to die. The process of this evolution is missing. Further, his discussion of the feminist movement is both reductionist and confusing. As many scholars have shown, no single women's movement existed and some feminists were against the legalization of abortion. Yet Dowbiggin lumps all feminists into the abortion rights campaign and represents this movement as dedicated primarily to the right to reproductive privacy. "Women struggled to take back death from the (largely male) medical profession, much as they had sought to do for sex, birth, and reproduction," he claims. (115) But it is unclear exactly who these women were; women are not a monolithic group. The women who struggled to change norms and policies regulating sex and sexuality tended to be feminists, but Dowbiggin holds that most female euthanasia

activists were not "fire-breathing radicals"—implying that all feminists were, which of course they were not—but instead they were, in the words of a long-time activist, "affluent white women with gray hair . . . the sort of community-minded grandmothers who never littered . . ." (115) He then returns to an earlier theme: individuals who watched loved ones die long, agonizing deaths frequently joined the euthanasia movement as a reaction to their experiences, and because women tend to be caretakers for their families, they experienced these moments more than men. Thus, personal experience provoked many women to support euthanasia. But again, who were the women involved in this movement? What exactly is the relationship between feminism, abortion, and euthanasia?

Finally, although this institutional history stands complete on its own, I wonder why Dowbiggin chose to exclude the social aspect of this story. The general public appears most often in the form of opinion polls, and a review of the footnotes and bibliography reveals that the author barely studied the popular literature. Yet, he indicates that a rich literature might exist. For example, he credits Abigail Van Buren (Dear Abby) with promoting the living will, three million of which had been created by 1978. (121) Why did Dowbiggin choose not to look at the letters readers wrote this advice columnist who he credits with popularizing the legal document? What might scholars learn about the way that the general public conceptualized euthanasia from these letters and other popular periodicals? How might these views compare with those of the euthanasia advocates described in *A Merciful End*?

Cogdell leaves her reader with fewer questions. A cultural historian and design scholar, she has written an articulate, accessible, and carefully researched account of the influence of eugenics on streamline design in the 1930s. *Eugenic Design* both reinforces recent lines of inquiry and offers a new and inventive lens through which to view the cultural implications and legacies of eugenic thought and practices. Streamline designers were not scientists and many were not active eugenicists, but eugenic thought so permeated American culture that it was promoted and reflected in the designs they produced during this decade. "Streamline design served as a material embodiment of eugenic ideology," Cogdell declares. (4) Both streamline designers and eugenicists considered themselves to be "agents of reform," who labored to reduce "drag" and "defectiveness" in their pursuit of evolutionary progress and perfection. (4) Cogdell uses a wide range of sources, including exhibits displayed at World Fairs and in museums, sculptures of "perfect" bodies, advertisements for cars, toasters, and trains, Department of Agriculture flyers promoting better breeding campaigns, as well as archival records from six major designers and popular literature of the era. She also advances a recent trend within eugenic scholarship put forth by historians like Wendy Kline that seeks to revise the chronology of the eugenics movement and show that although attacked by geneticists and social scientists in the 1930s, eugenics did not dissolve in this decade; instead the movement re-organized and continued to exert its influence on American culture

and institutions for decades thereafter. Like Kline, Cogdell contends that eugenicists shifted their focus from the collective to the individual during the Depression years. Consequently, attaining "perfection" became an individual pursuit, and for this reason, consuming streamline goods that embodied eugenic ideas became a critical aspect of middle class culture in the 1930s.

Cogdell cleverly highlights the analogies between bodies and material goods, and in one chapter she shows how designers created products meant to support "fit" bodies. Fears abound among the middle class that "fit" bodies subjected to the rigors of modern commerce would become "stopped up" and lose their "natural" flows. In a humorous discussion of the development of streamlined toilets, Cogdell links the regulation of "fit" bodies to the development of products meant to return these bodies to a more comfortable state, one that progressed forward efficiently, quickly, and regularly. Following this argument, Cogdell connects eugenics and streamline design through their shared emphasis on hygiene. During the 1930s racial hygiene was translated into personal hygiene as streamline designers created products that could be sterilized, rendering germs and contagions impotent, exactly as surgical sterilization promised to do for "defectives." Cogdell then relates these themes to similar ones in urban planning by showing how eugenic ideas about hygiene were reflected in urban planners' strategies for managing "slums" and "blighted" areas.

Cogdell's claims are well documented and quite persuasive, but her scholarship becomes less rigorous in the conclusion when she warns about the dangers of the "new eugenics," which she identifies as genetic engineering, cloning, IVF and other new reproductive technologies. She is not wrong to highlight continuities between eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century and genetics in the second half; her argument falls short because she fails to define the "new eugenics." To label the issues and movements listed above as eugenic is to ignore the complex histories of these technologies as well as the cultural context in which they were disseminated. Cogdell also ignores significant differences between eugenics in the past and genetics in the present, most noticeably, the role of the state in legitimizing and regulating eugenic practices. Previously, policymakers and judges sanctioned sterilization laws and immigration restrictions that targeted specific groups of people and in the instance of sterilization, forced hundreds of thousands of citizens to submit to surgery without their informed consent. But most of the contemporary projects Cogdell highlights are funded by private groups and used by a self-selecting, elite group of Americans. This raises two points. First positive eugenics has historically been non-coercive and voluntary, albeit sometimes manipulative. Second, throughout the first half of the twentieth century most "fit" women rejected calls to increase their reproduction. What is to say that their legacy will not continue in a new form in the second half of the century in the context of new reproductive technologies—especially given the immense amount of scholarship on eugenics, the development of the field of bioethics, and the protective

mechanisms enshrined in contemporary medical practice and legal policy? Finally, the voices of the men and women consuming the new reproductive technologies are noticeably absent, obscuring both their agency and their motivations. Cogdell deserves credit, however, for her recognition that when scientists portray the use of reproductive technologies as acts of individual choice they are drawing upon an earlier tradition that used consumption to promote social progress and that ultimately mass consumption of products like prefabricated houses and now "perfect" genes will lead to conformity. Ironically, she notes, such conformity will create homogeneity, and this lack of variation will stop the very progress that eugenicists, streamline designers, and, in her view, some modern scientists seek to attain.

Approaching eugenics from a literary perspective, English begins her study two decades before Cogdell's, during the Harlem Renaissance and the birth of the modern literary movement. By examining the personal and public writings of individuals like T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, W.E.B. DuBois, Angelina Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and Nella Larson among others, she shows the extent to which eugenic vocabularies and ideas influenced modern writers, black and white. She demonstrates the presence of eugenic language and concepts in the publications of "race men," and compares these to the eugenic references and ideas employed by white writers like Eliot and Stein; the former of whom she shows to have been less eugenic in his ideas than previously assumed, and the latter who endorsed certain aspects of eugenics within a distinctively feminist framework. Although much of *Unnatural Selections* attends to the shared use of eugenic language among writers in the 1910s and 1920s, English cautions readers not to subsume the Harlem Renaissance within the rubric of modern American literature; eugenics may have entered the racial politics of white and black writers, she contends, but it did not erase the inequalities and violence perpetuated by white racism. For this reason, eugenic rhetoric employed by African American writers maintained a distinctive racial politics that separated it from the language used by white writers of the same era.

English also identifies eugenic ideas in the writings of New Negro Women. Studying plays like Grimke's *Rachel* and Mary Burrill's *Aftermath*, English finds that the lynching narratives these writers created included a eugenic subtext that declared lynching to cause "unnatural selection" within the African American community. "Lynching leads to unnatural selection," English explains, "not only through its direct annihilation of the best African Americans by whites, but also through the reaction of self-annihilation by the best African Americans," who refused to bear children as a protest against the perpetuation of racial violence. (127) These plays highlight the distinctively female way that lynching was interpreted within the African American community. Some mothers struggled to cope with the fear that they bore and raised children destined to become targets of racial violence. Other mothers refused to bear this burden, either by rejecting pregnancy, as in the case of Larson's novel *Quicksand*, or by committing

infanticide, as in the instance of Georgia Douglas Johnson's play *Safe*. English also contributes to the literature on positive eugenics by identifying a unique conflict that this phenomenon brought upon middle-class African American women. At the same time that some race leaders encouraged "fit" women to bear children who could advance the race, they also associated repeated childbearing with poor, rural people, whose "excessive" reproduction signaled a lack of social and evolutionary progress. This placed middle-class African American women in a double bind. Encouraged to bear many children on the one hand, on the other, by complying with this decree, "fit" women risked having their reproduction read as evidence of lack of modern values and low levels of reproductive fitness.

In her final chapter, English examines the writings of white female fieldworkers employed by the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), a group of social reformers who she argues produced and reproduced eugenic ideas through the family histories they generated. Here again, English finds women in a double bind: allowed to develop themselves as professionals while single, eugenic ideas about the necessary reproduction of "fit" women consigned fieldworkers to short careers and a lack of professional mobility. English constructs this as a loss, but perhaps the situation is more complex. She presents evidence to suggest that some fieldworkers wished to continue in their careers; however, dedicated to eugenic "solutions" to social problems, might it be possible that other fieldworkers wanted to withdraw from the workplace and do their part to manufacture a "healthy" white society? Finally, English claims that "with nature favored over nurture in explanations of human behavior, fathers attain a (genetic) status equal to that of mothers." (146) She argues that fieldworkers' regulated the reproduction of men and women equally and cites a 1963 study to support her assertion. Although the rates of sterilization were fairly equal between men and women between 1909-1930 (the period she cites), more recent research, notably Alison Carey's article on gender and sterilization in the 1920s and 1930s, reveals that men and women were not actually equals in the minds of eugenicists. Instead, eugenicists sterilized men and women for different reasons; men were sterilized as punishment for criminal behavior, women were sterilized for violating social and sexual norms. Further, because of their ability to become pregnant, women have historically been the targets of reproductive controls, as the history of contraception, abortion, and eugenics shows. English ignores this long history as well as policymakers', medical practitioners', and social reformers' preoccupation with women's reproduction and their anxiety about women's changing social roles in the first decades of the twentieth century.

All three scholars make important contributions to the study of American culture and the history of America's commitment to social engineering initiatives. Dowbiggin shows how eugenic beliefs and Progressive era debates surrounding the relationship between individuals and society and the responsibility of citizens to the state and the state to its citizens shaped the development of the euthanasia

movement. His analysis also exposes the fluidity between social engineering projects of the era. Cogdell demonstrates the immense influence that eugenic principles had on the development and promotion of streamline design, and the analogies she finds between bodies and products open up a new field of scholarly exploration. Finally, English complicates popular notions of who used eugenic vocabulary and how shared reference to eugenics both linked and distinguished modern African American and white writers. She breaks new ground when she shows that New Negro Women used eugenic concepts to protest racial violence. When read together, these books provoke us to explore the reaches of social engineering impulses and to search for eugenic influences in places and times we might not expect to find them.

Notes

The author thanks Lee Simpson for reading drafts of this essay.