

Elite Progressive Academics and Politicians Fostered “Scientific” Eugenics Movement

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Progressives were convinced of their own infallibility in truly understanding the human condition and what was necessary to enhance society — *as they saw fit* — for the betterment of humankind. As I do not subscribe to the notion of a superior group due to class, gender, heritage, academic pedigree, or whatever elite status is taken on by the oligarches, it seems useful to look at an experience of “herd intellectuals” or “elite movement advocates.” These nouns with adjectives do not preclude the existence of *individuals* who are smarter, have superior talent, can achieve more, or are otherwise a personal standout. Herd intellectual cabals go beyond [groupthink](#) in that they are either witting or unwitting participants in a mass social movement. Politicians and scholars conform, at least in their public views, with their constituent’s or their party’s or their academy’s parochial Zeitgeist, with some as true believers. For either, their objective is to institute mass conformity. Herein, the extent and expanse of contagion of “brilliance” will be discussed with regard to eugenics.

The Eugenics Movement in America

Eugenics was a movement favored by many of US’s distinguished leaders from the 19th century until World War II and the Nazi holocaust pushed it beyond tolerated limits. Since the war, eugenics has been largely rejected, but it is humbling to consider the great extent to which it was embraced and advocated by elite academics for over a half-century. It shows the universality and conviction of erudite purveyors willing to limit the freedom of others, whom *they* considered inferior. The descriptive language of that day included idiot, insane, imbecile, and other names for “defectives” they felt unsuitable in US society.

It does not require a laborious literature search with the term “eugenics” on either the Internet or academic databases to find extensive histories of the movement. Un-editorialized sources show widespread acceptance and participation by academics from the most prestigious colleges and universities. Professors from high ranked schools worked hand in hand with politicians in limiting personal freedoms of many “inferior” Americans and immigrants. In the political arena, more than half the states passed eugenical sterilization laws.

My purpose is not to delve into the moral and ethical issues of eugenics — others have adequately done that. The purpose here is to show how scholars at notable schools, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and Stamford marched in lockstep support of eugenics until it was declared a crime against humanity after WWII.

Us, Herd Intellectuals and the Zeitgeist

Every era has its Zeitgeist to which we must be aware as we often need to comply with surroundings to survive. So, professionals need to decide when to go with the flow and when to resist conformity. I have no better quote for this than from the Kenny Rogers song, *The Gambler*: “*You got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them; know when to walk away, and know when to run.*” To make sound judgement requires seeking information beyond what is touted by those already on a bandwagon.

Ergo, literature searches need to be continued post graduation. Keeping up through a couple of journals and following the intellectual herd or funding sources is no longer an excuse for myopia. Fortunately, access to information in this first half of the 21st century is so much more available than it was during the early 20th century’s eugenics period, because of the availability of the Internet and full-text academic databases. Researchers must seek more than fanfare from bandwagons or funding sources.

Eugenics was supported economically by Carnegie’s and Rockefeller’s foundations and Harriman’s railroad fortune, among many grantors. Fencing sources need to be weighed against alternative information and an ethical decision made whether to hold, fold, walk away, or run.

Dealing with Fallible Academic Hubris

It is against the backdrop of the bandwagon that I tentatively question intellectual and political hubris toward movements in the present day. Contrast the [Salem Witch Trials](#), a classic case of mass hysteria in the 17th century, that falsely emanated from a belief in the supernatural. In the 19th century, eugenics stemmed from a belief in the infallibility of “science.” Thus, from the later 1890s into the 20th century, progressives advocated “professional” government to direct society for its own betterment, based on propositions of social sciences. In the case of eugenics, they improved society by restricting, excluding, and eliminating those considered undesirable. The movement lasted over a half-century, supported by top academics, major foundations, and state legislatures.

Examples from the past serve to illustrate how the so called “best and the brightest” (title of Halberstam’s book criticizing McNamara and his “Whiz Kids” management of the Viet Nam war) made grievous errors, as seen in retrospect. Issues that we are dealing with today might be better handled if the lesson from history is to *question with humility* popular beliefs about present day issues.

The Internet and full-text academic databases with their search engines can keep us from following lockstep the beliefs of the day, or *certainty de jour*. I wrote about [modern day searches](#) with regard to mental health rages and the methods are applicable to social movements.