

Old Texts and "Felt Necessities": Proceeding With Caution

By: J. David Smith

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Abstract:

In the following article, J. David Smith looks at the eugenics movement of the early 20th century, a movement that used "scientific" research and evidence to assert that undesirable traits were largely hereditary and to create social policy that would eliminate those traits as a way to protect society. Specifically, Smith reads the movement through the personal tragedy of Carrie Buck, the first person to be eugenically sterilized under the authority of a 1924 Virginia law. In this article, he gives us an example of the dangers of social policies that are guided by biological determinism and links the seduction of human genome research for our generation to that of eugenics research for an earlier one.

Article:

I recently began a survey of biology textbooks published during the first half of the 20th century as a way to study the impact of the eugenics movement on the teaching of biology and health literacy. Most textbooks of that era reported the arguments of the eugenicists as if they were established and undisputed scientific facts. The textbook I have found most interesting thus far was first published in 1914. *A Civic Biology* contains a discussion of human evolution that groups humans with monkeys and apes. This was the book John Scopes used in his high school class in Dayton, Tennessee, and was the major piece of evidence in the so-called "Monkey Trial."

Although the brief mention of evolution included in the text was central to one of the most famous court cases in history, other information presented in the book was not considered controversial. Of even greater interest to me is its discussion about eugenics. In the text, the author cautions students to select a mate free of genetic diseases. This warning is furthered by assertions that conditions such as tuberculosis and mental retardation must be eliminated by eugenic measures. Also included are several pages of descriptions of eugenic family pedigree studies to support the validity of these efforts.

I find it ironic that evolution as presented in *A Civic Biology* became a central issue in public education, whereas eugenics as portrayed in the same book is a concept that is still only dimly understood by many teachers and their students. Steven Jay Gould made the following observation in his foreword to my book, *The Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (Smith & Nelson, 1989):

Eugenic sterilization surely had a greater impact on people's lives than creationism ... Yet while books, not to mention television dramas,

about about the Scopes trial, no one has yet properly presented Carrie's story to a mass audience. (p. xv)

Carrie Buck was the first person to be eugenically sterilized under the authority of a 1924 Virginia law. That law allowed the state to sterilize people diagnosed as incompetent and found likely to genetically transmit physical, psychological, or social deficiencies to their offspring. To the physicians, lawyers, and politicians who wished to see the Virginia sterilization law constitutionally validated, Buck seemed to be the perfect person for a test of the law. They argued that her mother was mentally deficient, that Buck was mentally retarded, and that her baby also showed signs of feeble-mindedness. This evidence of the genetic transmission of their inferiority was presented as illustrative of the need for an involuntary sterilization statute. In 1927, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the law in the case that came to be known as *Buck v. Bell*.

In writing the majority opinion in *Buck v. Bell*, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes used the now famous phrase, "three generations of imbeciles are enough." His reasoning and language were consistent with the eugenic view that many socially undesirable traits, including mental retardation, were largely hereditary. Inherent in this view was the idea that even complex human traits could be traced to simple genetic causes. Eugenicists believed, based on Mendel's genetic theory, that most human characteristics could be linked directly to single genes. They held that not only physical traits like eye color and height, but also intelligence and personality attributes were determined by single genes. This confidence in Mendelian genetics also was extended to the determination of occupational preferences, academic interests, talents, and even character strengths and weaknesses. Buck's sterilization established the precedent for suspending the rights of some individuals and classes for the protection of society. These views, with the credibility afforded them by being grounded in what was accepted as "scientific fact," became powerful forces in shaping public opinion and social policy.

The eugenic evidence and predictions in Buck's case have proven, in my own investigations and in those of others, to be grossly inaccurate. Buck's child, Vivian, alleged to represent the "third generation of imbeciles," grew to be an attractive child who was an honor roll student. Buck, charged with being the second generation of imbeciles, was paroled to a mountain village after her sterilization. There she married the deputy sheriff and lived a modest, but productive and respectable life. Following her husband's death, she moved to a larger town where she earned her living caring for elderly and chronically ill people. Friends and employers attested to the fact that Buck was not mentally deficient. Indeed, mental health professionals who observed her late in her life found no evidence of mental retardation.

Buck's story is a tragic saga of one injured life. It is also an important illustration of the allure and dangers of reductionistic and deterministic thought. The lawyers, physicians, and scientists involved with the case were not, I believe, sinister figures intent upon doing harm to this woman or the class of people she represented. They were convinced that their actions served society's best interests. They saw in Buck's life what they expected to see, and they used it to advance a scientific and political position that they felt would lead to the eradication of social problems and the prevention of suffering. They were wrong. The ideas that created the misfortunes of Buck—that human life can be reduced to biology and that human institutions can best be guided by the

realities of biological determinism—have repeatedly produced tragic results. Some families, some nationalities, some races, some ethnic groups, and some social classes have been viewed as naturally, inherently, and unmodifiably inferior and on that basis have been deprived of their dignity and rights. In his book *The Common Law*, published in 1881, Holmes said:

The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience. The felt necessities of the time, the prevalent moral and political theories, intuitions of public policy, avowed or unconscious, even the prejudices which judges share with their fellow-men ... [are the sources of law]. (p. 1)

The Human Genome Project (HGP) will most certainly result in scientific knowledge and medical capabilities that will bring into question the issue of "felt necessities" in relation to individual freedom. The technology of tubal ligation and vasectomy was developed in the 1890s; by 1927, it was a "felt necessity" of society that those deemed defective on the basis of eugenic pseudoscience must be sterilized. The HGP will provide insights into human nature with a scientific validity incomparable to the inaccuracies of the eugenics movement. It will provide for the development of technologies that will eclipse anything that medicine has known before. The potentials for human benefit are obviously enormous. However, the greatest challenge posed by the HGP will be to conduct its work and provide the benefits of its efforts to a world of people who are seen as much more than the sum total of their biological components. To rise above the temptations and dangers of biological determinism, we must continue to see people as agents of freedom and dignity.

The eugenicists looked to evolutionary theory and Mendelian genetics for moral truths. They believed that natural selection and Mendelian gene distributions could provide models for social ethics. The failure of this approach was evidenced in the needless institutionalization of those deemed to be "unfit" for the social "struggle," in the sterilization of people inaccurately assessed to be the carriers of defective genes, and in the moral horrors of the Holocaust.

Moral and ethical agency is an attribute of people, not of medicine or the scientific method. The recognition that we are ethical and moral agents, and that the decisions of what we should do, as opposed to what we can do, rests with us, is intimidating. On the other hand, it is exciting. As the power of science for human benefit grows through the work of the Human Genome Project, so grows the importance of ethical questions about the use and the yield of that power. The great challenge of this age may be to ensure that there are exchanges between people who are motivated by making scientific and medical discoveries and those who seek to understand the ethical impact of those discoveries.

I hope that if the textbooks of the early 21st century are surveyed someday, it will be evident that the genetic revolution was not solely a scientific and medical revolution. I hope that the textbook description of the results of the Human Genome Project will portray it as an ethical revolution as well. I hope that it will be seen as a catalyst for an increased awareness of the critical choices that only individuals and families can make about the character and direction of their lives.

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