

A WEAK CASE

War against the Weak:

Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race

Edwin Black

New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003

\$27.00

550 pp.

Reviewed by Richard Lynn

Edwin Black's book is an ill-informed and intemperate attack on eugenics. It follows in the tradition of two previous attacks, the first by Kenneth Ludmerer (*Genetics and American Society*, 1972), and the second by Daniel Kevles (*In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, 1985). The Ludmerer and Kevles books are, up to a point, scholarly, despite the authors' failures to understand the main arguments of the eugenicists. Black's book is a hyped-up version of these two earlier accounts and adds little of substance to them.

Black has found himself a niche as a muckraker specializing in attacking American firms and institutions for assisting the Nazis in their program for the extermination of the Jews and inspiring the Holocaust. His previous book *IBM and the Holocaust* accused IBM of aiding Hitler by selling its punch-card machines to Germany. He writes that "I was able to demonstrate that the race-defining punch card used by the SS in Nazi Germany was actually derived from one developed for the Carnegie Institution years before Hitler came to power." Wow! So what we thought was good old American IBM aided and abetted the Holocaust!

The central thesis of Black's *War Against the Weak* is that eugenic theories of the Nordic as the master race and eugenic policies to promote Nordics were first advanced in the United States, financed by American foundations, and that these inspired Hitler, who put them into practice in the Holocaust. What a mishmash of misunderstandings is here!

Black writes, "As I explored the history of eugenics, I soon discovered that the Nazi principle of Nordic superiority was not hatched in the Third Reich but on Long Island decades earlier—and then actively transported to Germany. How did it happen? To uncover the story I did as I have done before and launched an international investigation. This time, a network of dozens of researchers, mostly volunteers, working in the United States, England, Germany and Canada unearthed some 50,000 documents and period publications from more than forty archives, dozens of special collections and other repositories." How strange that none of these documents apparently revealed that the doctrine of Nordic superiority was first put forward by the Frenchman Arthur Comte de Gobineau in his *Essays on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853). How strange that apparently neither Black nor any of his dozens of research assistants should have been aware of this well-known fact. There is no mention of Gobineau in Black's book.

Black writes "Within these pages you will discover the sad truth of how the scientific rationales that drove the killers of Auschwitz were first concocted on Long Island at the Carnegie Institution's eugenic enterprise at Cold Spring Harbor." What nonsense. The idea of eugenics was first put forward about 380 B.C. by Plato in *The Republic*, a eugenic utopia in which people are bred to be superior rulers, soldiers, and artisans by using the same methods of selective breeding from the best individuals that had been successfully used to produce improved strains of domestic animals and varieties of plants. There is no mention of Plato in Black's 550-page book. In modern times the term *eugenics* was proposed by the Englishman Francis Galton in 1883 for the science of finding ways for improving the genetic quality of human populations in respect of health, intelligence, and moral character, a concept that embraced law-abidingness, self-discipline, a strong work ethic, and a sense of social obligation. Over the next twenty-eight years Galton wrote a number of papers on how eugenics could and should be promoted, including "The possible improvement of the human breed under the existing conditions of law and sentiment" published in *Nature* in 1901 (not cited of course by Black). It was not until 1902 that the Carnegie Institution was founded at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island.

Far from being an American idea that was exported to Europe, eugenics was a European concept that was exported to America. Eugenics societies for the promotion of eugenics were established in Germany in 1906 and in Britain in 1907. In the United States the American Breeders Association was set up in 1906 and renamed the Genetics Association in 1913, but the American Eugenics Society was not founded until 1923. So much for Black's thesis that eugenics began in the United States.

Black repeats uncritically the familiar canard that eugenics inspired Hitler to set in train the Holocaust. Contrary to this frequently made assertion, Hitler did not regard the Jews as inferior and did not send them to the concentration

camps on these grounds. Everyone in Germany in the 1930s knew that the Jews are a highly talented people. Hitler recognized and believed that there would be a struggle for world domination between its two most talented peoples, the Jews and the Germans. This—and not eugenics, exported from America or not—was the reason for his policies toward the Jews.

Where the United States did take the lead was in the introduction of eugenic programs for the sterilization of the mentally retarded. This was first introduced in Indiana in 1907 and by 1931 had been introduced in 31 states. This provision was challenged in the courts in the case of *Buck v. Bell*. The case concerned a mentally retarded young woman named Carrie Buck who had a mentally retarded syphilitic prostitute mother and an illegitimate child who was backward at school. An appeal against the decision by a hospital in Virginia to sterilize Carrie Buck went to the Supreme Court in 1927. Black continues, "If the Supreme Court would uphold Carrie Buck's sterilization, the floodgates of eugenic cleansing would be opened across the United States for thousands" (p.117). The Supreme Court rejected the appeal and the young woman was duly sterilized. The Supreme Court's verdict was delivered by Oliver Wendell Holmes and concluded, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Black writes, "The words that would reverberate forever...eugenic sterilization was now the law of the land. The floodgates opened wide" (pp.121-2). Evidently it has never occurred to Black to wonder whether the mentally retarded make any contribution to society or are fit to be parents and raise children.

Even Kevles, who shares Black's dislike of eugenics, cannot stomach Black's book. In a review in the *New York Times*, he writes that it "is a muckraking book about a subject incontestably awash in muck. In the vein of the genre, it is a stew rich in facts and spiced with half-truths, exaggerations and distortions." Quite so.

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