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L. Keldorf

Western Civilization: Period 1

27 February 2017

The Escalation of Human Sterilization in the 1900s

EQ: To what extent did Gosney and Popenoe's publications regarding the Californian sterilization laws of the 1920s and 30s spread and generate traction for the eugenics movement nationally and globally?

The sterilizations of approximately 60,000 Americans is an often forgotten part of Western science's not so distant past. Under the guise of pursuing the betterment of the individual, and American society by extension, sterilization laws served as a eugenics solution to societal problems. Although often associated with genocidal Nazi regimes, eugenics was a respected branch of science until the late 20th century. Universities across the United States and Britain adopted eugenics departments, and acclaimed scientific journals were established to progress it. Sterilization laws were introduced to promote a strong human race by preventing individuals with 'hereditary degeneracies' from reproducing. However, sterilization was not regarded as a socially feasible or accepted solution to societal deterioration until eugenics supporters E.S. Gosney and Paul Popenoe initiated the Human Betterment Foundation (HBF) to critique sterilization laws and highlight its merits. The pair published the first thorough, credible, and digestible analyses of California's sterilization laws. As a result, California's practices were adopted and modeled in other states and countries. Gosney and Popenoe's publications, *Sterilization for Human Benefit* and "Human Sterilization Today," propelled widespread

implementation of sterilization as a eugenic solution, nationally and globally, by generating credible and accessible analysis of California's sterilization successes and eugenic propaganda that destigmatized human sterilization.

Eugenics is the science of improving the human race by regulating breeding to eradicate undesirable, 'hereditary' traits. Sir Francis Galton introduced the term in 1883, defining it as "the study of the agencies under social control, that improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally" (Galton). Factors such as alcoholism, pauperism, sexual immorality, mental or physical abnormalities, criminality, and feeble-mindedness were all regarded as hereditary traits that degenerate human progress. Meaghan Watters, a graduate of History of Science and Medicine from Yale, reports that it was held as a scientific truth in the 20th century that "genetics determined physical traits, behavior, and temperament" (Watters 6). Founded on principles of Darwinism and Mendelism (evolution by natural selection and evolution by biological inheritance, respectively), eugenics effectively worked to simulate orchestrated natural selection. Within eugenics are two schools of thought: positive eugenics, which encouraged "fit" individuals to procreate in mass, and negative eugenics, which actively worked to prevent "unfit" citizens from reproducing through methods such as sterilization (Watters 3). Rapidly growing poverty rates, influx of immigrants, increasing criminal activity and persons with "mental diseases" in the U.S. concerned scientists. In accordance with Darwinist principles that supported natural selection and survival of the fittest, eugenicists concluded that pauperism, criminality, and mental disease were hereditary, thus leading to the sterilization of thousands of Americans and the genocide of millions in Germany, in efforts to purify the gene pool and create 'fit' humans through regulated breeding.

Eugenics as a movement launched in Britain and the U.S. in the early 1900s. Before it was dismissed as unethical and counterfactual, eugenics was a department of science offered at multiple universities in the western world. California was the third state to enforce sterilization laws, yet was responsible for the majority of sterilizations in the U.S. totalling 20,000 during the period of legalisation, 1909 to 1960 (Watters). The field was dismissed in the 1950s following the events of the Holocaust, however, “the movement didn’t completely disappear, with sterilization programs continuing in some countries through the 1970s and a small fringe continuing to lobby for eugenics-based policies to this day”, according to Martin Robbins, researcher and science contributor for *The Guardian*.

During the era of eugenics, multiple publications focused on the pursuit of understanding the extent to which genes carried undesirable behaviors. In 1925, the first edition of the *Annals of Eugenics* was published, supported by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Editor and prominent eugenicist Karl Pearson writes in the foreword, “[t]he time seems fully ripe for the issue of a journal which shall devote its pages wholly to the scientific treatment of racial problems in man.” He continues to say “[o]ur journal will differ from existing journals in that [...] the papers published will be the work of trained scientists rather than propagandists” (E.M.E. and K.P.). The journal established an accredited coalition of leading researchers to collaborate, conclude, and publish. Anywhere between two to ten editions were published in a given year, their contents dissected by fellow scientists and university students.

The contributions of the journal to the eugenics are indisputable. Nevertheless, it was not until Paul Popenoe and Ezra Seymour Gosney’s publications that the issues posed were acted upon. E.S. Gosney, a lawyer and philanthropist, founded the Human Betterment Foundation

(HBF) in 1928. The California-based organization aimed to “support the research and publication of the personal and social effects of eugenic sterilizations carried out in California,” as informed by Jill Briggs, professor of History of Science and Medicine at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Gosney served as the lead director of the non-profit group with eugenicist Paul Popenoe as his secretary. Under the authority of Briggs, the HBF collected years of data on the involuntary sterilizations of thousands of Californians between 1928 and 1942, promoting the societal and individual benefits of sterilization (Briggs). The HBF constructed a sterilization policy model, adopted throughout the eugenics community, that emphasized marriage laws and reproductive restrictions placed upon individuals deemed unfit (Briggs). HBF stated, “[i]ts goal is the constructive, practical advancement and betterment of human life, character, and citizenship, in such manner as to make for human happiness and progress” (E.S. Gosney). Gosney made a personal statement, elucidating his role:

I am about to begin a quiet investigation of the sterilization in the state, with a view of aiding, through judicious and diplomatic education of the public, in the limitation of the reproduction of the unfit, by sterilization or otherwise (Gosney).

Gosney and Popenoe’ concluded that human sterilization considered the best interests of the individual and society, and thus they published their research in a book, *Sterilization for Human Benefit* and subsequent follow-up reportings.

The credibility and thorough research in *Sterilization for Human Benefit* conceptually transformed human sterilization into a feasible and realistic method of racial cleansing. In stark contrast to competing publications, Gosney and Popenoe’s book was a synthesis of the history of human sterilization as well as an examination of its value. The scientific community produced

multiple journals detailing new findings or positing eugenic theory, whilst *Sterilization for Human Benefit* focused on the efficacy of sterilization laws on the individual and societal benefit in California.

Paul Popenoe dedicated two years of sedulous travel and research to the project of identifying the true results of California's sterilizations. When he began his research 1926, Californian medical institutions had performed 12,000 legal eugenic sterilizations on 'feeble-minded' individuals. Popenoe investigated the first 10,000 sterilizations (E.S. Gosney). Under the authority of Meaghan Watters dissertation, a History of Medicine and History of Science graduate from Yale, Popenoe gathered "records from over 6,000 sterilizations performed in California, traveled across the state visiting superintendents and public institutions for the insane and feeble minded, and informed eugenic supporters of his work" (Watters 13). This publication was unique in that it was not limited to complex, theoretical scientific conjecture. Rather, the work explored patient medical records, legal paperwork, and incorporated statements and interviews from superintendents of mental institutions that prescribed sterilization as a solution for patients. The book included, for the first time in any eugenics publication, assertions from individuals who had undergone the procedure. Watters asserts that "Popenoe easily gained access to medical records, statistics, clinical case studies and demographic profiles for his two-year research project" (Watters 13).

The final publication was an amalgamation of Popenoe's work, as well as the research begun by the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in 1910. Jill Briggs, Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, states Popenoe utilized research the ERO gathered on "family lineages by conducting house-to-house surveys and looking through records from prisons, almshouses,

and institutions for the deaf, blind and mentally deficient or ill” (Briggs). Informed by the credible sources of ERO, top-tier eugenics professors, physicians administering the procedures and their patients, as well as their own research, Popenoe advocated for involuntary sterilization and laws that enabled the State of California to perform them, deeming such practices humane and scientifically sound. Gosney and Popenoe’s work culminated in the 1929 publication of *Sterilization for Human Betterment: a summary of results of 6,000 operations in California, 1909-1929*. In her book titled *Eugenic Nation*, professor and historian Alexandra Stern posits that the HBF’s book “communicated the urgency of sterilization to a national and international audience” (Briggs), asserting that “at least five percent of the population needed eugenic sterilization due to feeble-mindedness or mental illness” (Briggs). Popenoe’s publication was powerful rhetoric, approaching the topic of sterilization from a seemingly unbiased, scientific and social standpoint, claiming “no preconceived notions... [so] the reader could draw his own conclusions from these facts” (Popenoe), concluding with assertions evoking an impending urgency to the matter of sterilizations.

Popenoe and Gosney’s work was thorough and credible, leading the Human Betterment Foundation to draft two bills “in 1935 and 1937 to establish a state eugenics board and to extend the sterilization procedures to all states” (Briggs). In her book, *Eugenic Nation*, Stern deems their efforts in spreading eugenic sterilization laws a success. The HBF firmly opposed human sterilization as a punitive measure inflicted upon prison inmates, as was commonplace in numerous state laws. Rather, they proposed eugenic sterilization as preventive strategy, much like a vaccination (Briggs). Popenoe and Gosney concluded from their research that sterilization in practice is for the betterment of the individual and the human race.

Gosney and Popenoe's contributions to the legality of human sterilization surpassed those of competing publications by disseminating information in approachable ways, increasing accessibility to the layman, in common vernacular that destigmatized sterilizations. By presenting the public with information and normalizing sterilizations, the pair made human sterilization a socially welcomed concept. Accompanying denser analysis published in *Sterilization for Human Benefit*, Gosney issued "Human Sterilization Today." The four page leaflet summarised the conclusions of the book. It describes the function of HBF and its publications as ensuring "the public is familiar with these facts" (E.S. Gosney) referring to methods and rationale for sterilization laws. Charles S. Buschmann, a state attorney in Indiana and an active proprietor for sterilization laws in the early 20th century, commented on HBF's publication, saying "[t]he book is in no sense a legal treatise, but is a short comprehensible statement of the arguments in favor of sterilization for human betterment" (Buschmann).

The short, digestible literature made it easier for parents, teachers, average citizens to understand the convoluted science of eugenics. It encouraged family members or the individuals themselves to seek voluntary sterilization. Until 1937, eugenic sterilizations in California were performed proportionately on males and females with 5,933 vasectomies and 5,551 invasive tubal ligation operations (Gosney). Following 1937, sterilizations were predominantly proposed for women. It was suggested as a solution to repair immoral behaviours in women, targeting sexually deviant behaviour such as prostitution, and women with 'too many children' or illegitimate children. Women were "viewed as oversexed and aggressive; sexual predators who needed to be contained for the good of themselves and society alike" (Watters 15). Thus, HBF proposed sterilization as a safe and socially acceptable form of permanent contraception. In

“Human Sterilization Today,” author E.S. Gosney defines sterilization as “a surgical operation that prevents parenthood *without unsexing the patient*” (Gosney 396). In a 1930 edition of *The American Journal of Nursing*, Frank J. O’Brien reviews *Sterilization for Human Betterment*. O’Brien writes, “[t]he chief purpose of the book is to prove that sterilization under certain safeguards is not only feasible, but advantageous and necessary” (O’Brien 802). He further states that “[d]ata are presented to show that when sterilization is surrounded with the proper protections, it works as an injustice to no one, but rather is a benefit” (O’Brien 802). O’Brien argues that the book presents “[t]he practical importance of sterilization not only for the insane, feeble-minded and so-called criminal, but also for those who desire or need it for health reasons” (O’Brien 802). Founded by thorough research, Gosney and Popenoe’s written work built a case for the validity of sterilization. Originally used as a cure for the feeble-minded and criminal, Popenoe presents that sterilization is now also a solution for women to use as acceptable contraception (contraception prior to the late 20th century was taboo and difficult to find).

O’Brien further elucidates the efficacy of Popenoe’s publication in its goal to convince Americans of the benefits of sterilization, stating that “this volume presents a rather fair statement of this important subject. Their thought is clearly expressed so that what might otherwise be complicated matter is presented so as to be easily understood” (O’Brien 802). One of the primary accomplishments of HBF publications was the destigmatization of sterilization, which was a previously controversial practice in the late 1800s. In “Human Sterilization Today,” sterilization is normalized when it is stated to be a commonplace practice in human history and globally. In the words of author E.S. Gosney, “[e]ugenic sterilization in this form represents one of the greatest advances in modern civilization [...] It has been continuously used by American

institutions since 1899” (Gosney 396). He further elucidates that sterilization laws are incorporated in the legislation of “the Canadian province of Alberta and British Columbia; Norway; Sweden; Denmark; Finland; Esthonia; Germany; the state of Veracruz, Mexico; Switzerland” (Gosney 396). The HBF’s writings regarded voluntary sterilizations as normal, highlighting its accessibility and acceptability as a form of contraception and a safe solution for women, and parents, or teachers of the feeble-minded. Gosney emphasises that “eugenic sterilization is not an experiment, but a well tested solution” (Gosney 396).

Furthermore, their publications offered additional readings for the interested layman in an effort to further increase accessibility to information. In “Human Sterilization Today”, Gosney garners support for the sterilization laws by offering a list additional literature encouraging citizens to find out more. Gosney lists “a score of technical papers in various scientific journals,” including where HBF’s works can be found in other publications, such as “*Collected Papers on Eugenic Sterilization in California* is accessible in most of the important libraries of America [...] A more popular digest of facts [published in] *Sterilization for Human Betterment*” sold for “\$2 through any bookstore or from [HBF]” and “*Twenty-eight Years of Sterilization in California*” (Gosney 397).

By leveraging credible analysis and research as an appeal to logos, Gosney adds an appeal to pathos by implying that it is the moral duty of the citizen to spread knowledge of sterilization and encourage those whom it may benefit to seek it out. Gosney claims in “Human Sterilization Today” that “[p]sychologists estimate that at least 1,000,000 persons in the United States are so feeble-minded as to need special care and supervision” and “[s]tatisticians have calculated that nearly 5 percent of the American population or 6,000,000 will at sometime during

life be legally committed as insane” (Gosney 396). This statement conveys to readers the severity of the perceived problem, and therefore the urgency for national sterilization laws. Gosney’s resounding message iterates that sterilization is the best solution for the betterment of society, mankind and the individual. Through the HBF’s rigorous work, it is clear that “Gosney believed that distributing information to the public was imperative for the spread of eugenic ideals” (Watters 10). With this goal at the forefront, their efforts succeeded. Their work emulates HBF’s mission statement, which is as follows:

“This organization [HBF] is not designed to take up original scientific research work, but rather to investigate the results and possibilities for human betterment by a safe, conservative application of the discoveries made by scientists, and to give this information to the public” (Gosney 397).

The impact the Human Betterment Foundation’s publications extended beyond the U.S., spreading California’s the successful methods of sterilization and leveraging legislation to a national and global audience. The HBF’s publications documented and reported the processes and successes of sterilizations in California. California was the third state to pass sterilization laws, but quickly became the state with the most sterilizations (Watters 8). On the authority of Gosney in “Human Sterilization Today”, by January 1, 1937, California had performed a total of 11,484 sterilizations in state institutions under state laws, with the state holding the second most procedures being Virginia with 2,634 (Gosney 398). The pervasive practice and lack of opposition allowed California to become a model for other institutions, with the HBF producing publications to pave the way for others.

Popenoe capitalized on California’s success, documenting its history and the details of its

implementation, spreading the information through their publications. As reported by Alexandra Stern, Professor of American Culture with a focus on the history of eugenics and author of *Eugenic Nation*, one of the reasons for California's success with sterilization laws was that "from the outset, California defined sterilization not as a punishment but as a prophylactic measure that could simultaneously defend the public health, preserve precious fiscal resources, and mitigate the menace of the "unfit" and "feeble-minded" (Stern). Popenoe publicized California's milieu surrounding sterilization, proposing it as a solution for the amelioration of public health. Stern further elucidates that "sterilization was described as a public health strategy that could breed out undesirable defects from the populace and fortify the state as a whole" (Stern). Reiterating this in their book, human sterilization was identified as a method ensure public safety for future generations, by controlling and eventually eradicating the births of individuals believed to inherent feeble-minded traits only to later become a problem for society. In a 1929 statement by the superintendent of the Polk State School in California, published in *Sterilization for Human Betterment*, Harvey M. Watkins claims that California's sterilization laws "pointed the way for other states states to enact permissive legislation and to give closer attention to this important phase of the problem" (Watters 8).

The breadth of *Sterilization for Human Betterment's* impacts are expansive. It's mission to disseminate sterilization as a solution for public good was achieved, as reflected in a 1929 review of *Sterilization for Human Betterment* by Arthur b. Dayton for *The Yale Law Journal* when he states, "this book has been written to urge legislation to encourage sterilization for eugenic reasons [...] These observations form a material contribution to the understanding of many sides of the subject" (Yale Law Journal 596). In her research on Californian sterilizations,

Watters affirms that *Sterilization for Human Betterment* was internationally lauded. She asserts that nation representatives from across the globe “claimed themselves thankful to all those American organizations and men who have worked in the line of Human Betterment” (Watters 17) to the extent that California’s legalization and implementation of sterilization was leveraged to justify and model the first eugenic sterilization laws in Germany in 1933 (Watters). A German scientist and notable champion for eugenics sterilization in Germany, Marie Kopp, reported in 1936 that, “leaders in the Germany sterilization movement state repeatedly that their legislation was formulated only after careful study of the California experiment as reported by Mr. Gosney and Dr. Popenoe” (Watters). The execution of Californian inspired eugenic sterilizations and creation of foundations that modeled the Human Betterment Foundation appeared across the globe. Manifestations appeared in Sweden (laws of eugenic sterilization for the unfit), Mexico (sterilization to combat poverty), Czech Republic (sterilization targeting ‘hereditary’ criminality), Japan, Norway and Germany (Watters 13). In his review of Popenoe’s book, Dayton gives appraisal to the research, yet warns that “enthusiasts who have a cause to advance may have difficulty in the evaluation of all factors of the problem”, even calling the book “frank propaganda” (Dayton 597). This assertion proved true Nazi Germany, where the eugenics movement propelled by Popenoe and Gosney’s publication.

Sterilization for Human Betterment was influential in the history of eugenics both in the U.S. and in numerous countries. Jill Briggs contends that “[b]y basing its claims in the language of statistics [...] the HBF spread their agenda of sterilization throughout the state and around the world” and Popenoe and Gosney guided the international argument “that the control of reproduction was crucial to the survival of their vision of society” (Briggs). Unfortunately, their

advocacy was widely accepted, leading to mass global sterilizations. The HBF was closely tied to scientists and leaders in Nazi Germany, assisting the country in the implementation of their own sterilization laws, and Popenoe and Gosney actively corresponded with researchers across the globe to disseminate their work (Briggs). Popenoe and Gosney's publications served as a missing link, connecting California's sterilization-welcoming milieu to the greater United States and the rest of the world.

Although the study of eugenics was formally renounced in the 1950s, the impacts of eugenics-based philosophy and policy remain ingrained in American culture, institutions, and policies. Without addressing the dark past of western history and modern science, it is difficult to address the structural racism, sexism, classism, and stigmatized mental illness that came as a byproduct of the movement. Analysing the history of eugenics exposes that science and medicine are founded in observational truths that change as research progresses to uncover new truths. For decades of human history eugenics was a credible and esteemed science. Even with access to *Sterilization for Human Betterment*, which brought research to individuals to help them come to their own conclusions, sterilization was still legalised and socially accepted. It calls into question how citizens can rely on medical professionals and government to protect their best interests, whilst navigating potentially misleading resources.

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