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# “For contributions to the science of racial cleansing:” Harry H. Laughlin and the American Eugenics Movement

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ABSTRACT: American biologist Harry H. Laughlin is now largely forgotten, but in the early decades of the twentieth century Laughlin’s Model Sterilization Law was an important factor in passing legislation supporting involuntary sterilization in various U.S. states. Laughlin was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Heidelberg in 1936 for his contributions to the “science of racial cleansing.” This paper will review Laughlin’s influential work as a researcher for the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) and as an advisor to a Congressional Committee on Immigration. In a strange twist of fate, Laughlin developed a disability later in life that would, theoretically, make him subject to the very sort of laws that he so enthusiastically endorsed. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on the implications of Laughlin’s career for current struggles with similar issues related to the value of human life.

IN MAY 1936, DR. HARRY LAUGHLIN, a prominent American biologist, received an Honorary Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of Heidelberg in Germany. The degree was conferred by the Nazi academics at Heidelberg to honor Laughlin’s contributions to “the science of racial cleansing.”<sup>1</sup> This paper will review Laughlin’s work in developing a Model Sterilization Law and his contributions to the American Eugenics Movement. In many ways Laughlin’s career followed the trajectory of the Eugenics Movement in its rise and fall, and I will consider the lessons of the Eugenics Movement as we struggle

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<sup>1</sup> Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 211-12.

with ethical issues related to life in today's world. Laughlin's impressive ability to marshal dubious science to gather public support for the policies of the Eugenics Movement is a cautionary tale for us all.

#### EARLY LIFE

Harry Laughlin was born in Iowa in 1880. He graduated from a teachers' college in Missouri and became a rural school teacher, and then a high school principal, with an increasing interest in teaching courses in agriculture and genetics. Eventually Laughlin became a faculty member in the department of agriculture at a rural teachers' college. Laughlin seemed to enjoy the life of a faculty member in the agriculture department far more than the profession of rural school teacher.<sup>2</sup> In 1909 he had the opportunity to take a summer course in genetics in New York City. While in New York Laughlin met Charles Davenport, a prominent biologist with a strong interest in eugenics. Davenport introduced Laughlin to the human heredity section of the American Breeders' Association. Through his membership in this organization Laughlin began to see parallels between the need for "good breeding" with farm animals and the necessity for good breeding in the human population.<sup>3</sup>

By the time Laughlin went to New York in 1909, the science of eugenics was on its way to becoming established in the United States and Europe. The term "eugenics" was invented in 1883 by the British statistician Francis Galton. Galton argued that most human ability was inherited, and that with the measurement techniques and statistical analyses available at the time, it would be possible to identify those individuals most likely to pass on positive traits to their offspring. Galton also assumed that most undesirable human traits (including most disabilities, criminality, alcohol abuse, and poverty) had a genetic base, and that individuals demonstrating the undesirable traits in society

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<sup>2</sup> Frances J. Hassencahl, "Harry H. Laughlin, 'Expert Eugenics Agent' for the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, 1921 to 1931" (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve Univ., 1970), pp. 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> Hassencahl, pp. 52-54.

would most likely pass these traits on to their children. Many eugenic research programs in the United States and other countries included basic research on the process of inheriting characteristics as well as the development of programs to advocate for improving the human racial stock. Garland Allen<sup>4</sup> distinguished between “positive eugenics” and “negative eugenics” programs. Positive eugenics programs conducted public campaigns to encourage people with desirable genetic traits to have children, while negative programs discouraged (by force if necessary) individuals with undesirable traits from having children.

In 1900 Mendel’s laws of heredity were re-discovered, and this gave additional impetus to the eugenics movement. Many of the most enthusiastic proponents of eugenics, including Charles Davenport, were convinced that with the proper application of Mendel’s laws, the science of eugenics could be firmly established.<sup>5</sup> Davenport, who was to be a significant influence in the life and career of Harry Laughlin, became an enthusiastic proponent of the application of Mendel’s laws to eugenics during his time as a faculty member at Harvard and the University of Chicago. In 1904 Davenport established the Station for Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island to conduct genetic and evolutionary studies of non-human species. In 1910 Davenport obtained funds to establish the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in Cold Spring Harbor. The ERO was designed to conduct research and gather data on the inheritance of human traits. Also in 1910, Davenport persuaded Harry Laughlin to join the staff at the ERO.<sup>6</sup>

#### EUGENICS RECORD OFFICE

Laughlin’s main contribution to the work of the ERO was his development of the Family Record Blanks. These forms enabled field research-

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<sup>4</sup> Garland E. Allen, “The Misuse of Biological Hierarchies: The American Eugenics Movement, 1900-1940,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 5 (1983): 108-09.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, pp. 109-10.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, pp. 111-12.

ers to record family pedigrees and to document family histories. The goal was to collect a large number of such records from the United States and Europe and then to analyze the data for evidence of the heritability of what were considered desirable and undesirable human traits. Although Laughlin and the ERO developed a vast database, much of this information was essentially useless as scientific data. Field researchers were encouraged to evaluate the individuals whom they interviewed according to a number of vague categories. For example, Hassencahl<sup>7</sup> noted that field researchers were to classify the people whom they were interviewing into the following categories: (1) "poor, failure to advance at school," (2) "medium to good," and (3) "exceptionally good." Allen<sup>8</sup> accurately summarized the research methods of Laughlin and Davenport: "They blithely constructed pedigree after pedigree based upon subjective observations, second- or third-hand reports, and even open speculation about individuals for whom no direct data was available." In addition to data obtained from the Family Record Blanks, Laughlin also used census data from the U.S. Census and from information about the populations of various state psychiatric hospitals and institutions, to draw inferences about the possibility that certain racial and ethnic groups were more likely to contribute negative traits such as disability, alcoholism, and poverty in the general population.<sup>9</sup>

#### A MODEL STERILIZATION LAW

Early in 1914 Laughlin published an extended analysis entitled *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin No. 10*. This document provided a summary of the research and some professional opinions about the threat posed to society by the "anti-social and the unfortunate classes."<sup>10</sup> The report not only included the results of Laughlin's field research on family pedigrees and his analyses of census data but also extensive consulta-

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<sup>7</sup> Hassencahl, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Lombardo, pp. 48-51.

<sup>10</sup> Lombardo, p. 49.

tions with specialists from medicine, sociology, biology, anthropology, theology, as well as the “woman’s viewpoint.”<sup>11</sup>

Laughlin included with this document was a Model Sterilization Law that he had developed. The proposed law was designed to withstand legal challenges that had previously resulted in some state eugenics laws being overturned. The preamble to the Model Sterilization Law, as quoted by Lombardo,<sup>12</sup> reads as follows: “An Act to prevent the procreation of feebleminded, insane, epileptic, inebriate, criminalistic and other degenerate persons by authorizing and providing by due process of law for the sterilization of persons with inferior hereditary potentialities.” The proposal required every state to set up a eugenics commission to evaluate first those individuals residing at public expense in state institutions, and then the general population, as well as a directive to sterilize any member of a problem group. Laughlin reassured his readers that the science of eugenics was so advanced that the “hereditary potentialities” of any individual could be determined.<sup>13</sup>

Later in 1914 Laughlin presented his recommendations and his Model Sterilization Law to the First National Conference on Race Betterment in Battle Creek, Michigan. This conference was organized by Dr. John Kellogg and included presentations from some of the leading proponents of the eugenics movement. Laughlin presented detailed research findings and the implications of his Model Sterilization Law, and the conference proceedings were widely reported in newspapers across the country.<sup>14</sup> This conference was not, however, a complete triumph for Laughlin. Other presenters at the conference cast doubt on the validity of Laughlin’s research methods, and the Model Sterilization Law was criticized by sociologists, physicians, and lawyers as unconstitutional and impractical. Newspaper coverage was not always flattering, and Charles Davenport at the ERO disassociated the Office from

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<sup>11</sup> Lombardo, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Lombardo, p. 51. See also Hassencahl, pp. 98-100.

<sup>13</sup> Lombardo, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Lombardo, pp. 47-48.

proposals for mass sterilization in an interview with *The New York Times*.<sup>15</sup>

Laughlin himself rarely responded to his professional critics. Hassencahl<sup>16</sup> summarized Laughlin's response to criticism as follows: "Laughlin's work in the 1920's was characterized by a sort of religious fervor and dogmatism. He became almost impervious to criticism, viewing it merely as false doctrine."

#### LATER CAREER

In 1916 Laughlin took a leave of absence from the ERO and completed a doctorate in science at Princeton in 1917.<sup>17</sup> He then returned to the ERO and devoted his considerable skills and energy to the propagation of the science of eugenics. The basic message of Laughlin and other eugenicists was that there were categories of biologically and genetically inferior human beings, that these inferior humans tended to reproduce at much higher rates than the superior humans, and that this high level of reproduction was the source of most problems in society.<sup>18</sup>

Laughlin and his fellow eugenicists successfully spread their message through general books and textbooks on eugenics, articles in newspapers and popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, college and university courses (by 1928, 376 American colleges taught courses in eugenics), through popular organizations such as the American Eugenics Society and the Race Betterment Foundation, and through various forms of political advocacy. Allen<sup>19</sup> observed: "By 1915, it became difficult for any literate person, at least in the urban areas of the United States, to have avoided some direct exposure to eugenic ideas." Another important forum for the dissemination of eugenic ideas was a set of three international congresses held in London

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<sup>15</sup> Lombardo, pp. 48-49.

<sup>16</sup> Hassencahl, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Hassencahl, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Allen, pp. 116-17.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, p. 116.

(1912) and in New York (1921 and 1932) that generated considerable publicity. At the 1932 meeting Laughlin put together a detailed exhibit in the American Museum of Natural History to popularize his eugenic philosophy. As a former teacher, Laughlin was especially effective in introducing eugenics into the schools through his presentations to teachers' organizations and the public exhibits that he designed for school groups.<sup>20</sup>

Laughlin was also effective in his political advocacy of eugenic ideas. In his detailed testimony to Congress in 1923, Laughlin successfully argued for a restrictive immigration law based on racial and ethnic categories. This law eventually became the Johnson Act, which carefully restricted the immigration of certain groups to the U.S. without specifically labeling these groups as inferior.<sup>21</sup> Laughlin was also proud of his political advocacy of sterilization laws: by 1935 he was happy to report that over twenty thousand people had been sterilized in the United States.<sup>22</sup> A number of Laughlin's colleagues testified during the *Buck v. Bell* case before the U.S. Supreme Court (1927) in which the involuntary institutionalization and sterilization of some persons with disabilities was upheld.<sup>23</sup>

Laughlin's work was also noted overseas. In 1928 one of Laughlin's papers was presented at a eugenics conference in Munich. Many of the most prominent German eugenicists were friends of Laughlin who rose to prominence in the new Nazi regime. As noted above, Laughlin received an Honorary Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of Heidelberg in 1936. Many of the foreign guests invited to attend the celebrations at Heidelberg refused to attend, afraid of giving some kind of legitimacy to the actions of the Nazi regime. For financial reasons Laughlin himself was unable to go to Germany to receive his degree, but

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<sup>20</sup> Allen, pp. 115-16.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, pp. 120-22.

<sup>22</sup> Allen, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> See Lombardo, *Three Generations*, for a discussion of *Buck v. Bell*. The entire Supreme Court opinion in the case is reproduced in Appendix A of that book.



he had no reservations about accepting the honor and he picked up his certificate at the German consulate in New York.<sup>24</sup>

From the mid to late 1930s both the eugenics movement in the United States and Harry Laughlin's professional career began to decline following a similar trajectory. According to Allen, the eugenics movement began to lose political support and financial backing for three major reasons.<sup>25</sup> First, advances in genetic research in the 1920s suggested that the models for inheritance of traits proposed by Laughlin and other eugenicists were hopelessly out of date and over-simplified. There never was clear evidence for a simple genetic basis of many disabilities, alcoholism, poverty, and the other social problems that had been identified by the eugenics movement. There was also recognition that most damaging human genes are recessive, so that eugenic policies (even if based on accurate science) would never quickly solve social problems. Second, the true characteristics of the Nazi regime became clear to many in the United States by the middle of the 1930s, although Harry Laughlin apparently remained oblivious to the evils of the regime. The identification of many eugenic policies with Nazi Germany undermined popular support for any eugenic policies. Third, with the onset of the Great Depression, it became obvious that many prominent and wealthy people suddenly lost their wealth and status in society. It did not seem to make sense that wealth and social prominence could be explained by means of genetic endowment: sudden and unexpected changes in fortune could happen to anyone, and genetics could not explain the situation. A final reason for the decline of the eugenics movement was probably the actions of the proponents of the movement. The most vocal proponents of eugenics like Laughlin and Kellogg put themselves forward (along with advocacy for "pedigree marriages" and "registry of human thoroughbreds") as those types of humanity who should contribute to society by having many children. Clarence Darrow and many others mocked these pretensions in popular magazines and

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<sup>24</sup> Lombardo, pp. 211-13 and Allen, pp. 124-25.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, pp. 125-26.

newspaper articles during the 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

#### DEATH AND LEGACY

Laughlin found his fortunes diminishing during the 1930s. During the latter portion of that decade the foundations funding the ERO began to question the relevance of the Office and the research conducted by Laughlin and his colleagues. A committee of academics reviewed the work of the ERO and recommended that the organization be closed. By the end of 1939 the ERO ceased to exist.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime Laughlin, along with some wealthy supporters, founded the Pioneer Fund to conduct eugenics research. Laughlin became the first president of the Pioneer Fund. One of Laughlin's first actions at the fund was to distribute a Nazi propaganda movie in the U.S. The movie proclaimed the dangers to society of allowing inferior human beings to exist and to reproduce. The movie was distributed for three years and Laughlin seemed indifferent or unaware of the sinister implications of this propaganda.

Laughlin's health began to deteriorate in 1939. He had a history of epilepsy since 1923 and his seizures increased in frequency and severity in the late 1930s. By 1940 he was missing an increasing number of meetings of the Pioneer Fund, and the Fund directors forced him into retirement. He died in Missouri in January 1943. As in so many other areas of his life, Laughlin seemed to have no understanding of the irony of his disability. With his history of epilepsy, Laughlin would be subject to the same laws for involuntary institutionalization and sterilization that he advocated for others. There is no evidence that Laughlin even acknowledged the unusual situation.

Laughlin's work lived on after his death in a way that even he may not have appreciated. At the 1946 Nuremberg Doctors' Trial, Karl Brandt, Hitler's personal physician and the chief Nazi medical officer, cited Laughlin's work as a justification for Brandt's own activities

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<sup>26</sup> Lombardo, *Three Generations*.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, p. 126 and Lombardo, pp. 213-14.

during the Nazi regime.

It is easy to feel superior to Harry Laughlin and the other proponents of the eugenics movement. As Lombardo noted,<sup>28</sup> “Eugenics was a successful ideology because it was driven at least as much by hope as it was by hate.” He went on to state: “Does our embrace of techniques such as preimplantation selection of “normal” fetuses or prenatal genetic diagnosis and selective abortion make our motives in “eradicating defects” less suspect? Our modern emphasis on autonomy as a principle important to both law and ethics does not free us from the hard questions posed by our newest technologies.”

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<sup>28</sup> Lombardo, pp. 278-79.