

## Sterile Thinking

This winter is the centenary of the first mandatory sterilization laws in the United States, a major milestone in the eugenics movement. In 1907, as a precondition to parole, some 300 Indiana prisoners came forward to be sterilized. Holding that “heredity plays a most important part in the transmission of crime, idiocy, and imbecility,” the state legislature passed the first law that March permitting prisons to require sterilization “to prevent procreation of confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists.”

This was the first legislative application of the notion of “negative eugenics”—the idea that the undesirable elements of society could be reduced by preventing their reproduction. A flurry of states followed Indiana’s example, although many of their statutes were quickly overturned in court. Few sterilization operations were actually performed until the U.S. Supreme Court, in its 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision, ruled that “it is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.”

This opinion bears an uncanny resemblance to a passage penned in 1924 in Germany: “To prevent defective persons from reproducing equally defective offspring, is an act dictated by the clearest light of reason.... It would prevent the unmerited suffering of millions of persons, and above all would, in the end, result in a steady increase in human welfare.” These lines from *Mein Kampf* were put into practice when the Nazis came to power in 1933. American eugenics advocates, who could not know the full horrors to come, lauded the Nazis for “proceeding toward a policy that will accord with the best thought of eugenists in all civilized countries.” Years later, defendants at Nuremberg appealed to American precedent at their trials.

In the United States, tacit public support of compulsory sterilization eventually led to enthusiastic participation by asylums and prisons, even as scientific criticism of sterilization’s eugenic assumptions deepened. In 1934, the American Neurological Association created a committee to investigate the practice in institutions for the mentally ill; it found no scientific basis for a sterilization program, and caustically remarked that “the race is not going to the dogs, as has been the favorite assertion for some time.” Nevertheless, eugenic sterilization did not significantly abate until after World War II. By the 1960s, when the practice finally crept out of favor, an estimated 60,000 people had been sterilized in the United States.

What was lost goes well beyond the harm to individuals and the betrayal of basic justice in *Buck v. Bell* (which was never overturned). The desire to avoid the birth of disabled or troubled individuals is of course understandable. But a society that implements this desire by brutally separating the fit from the unfit paves the way to its own self-inflicted horrors. We forget the dark lessons of our eugenic history at our own peril.