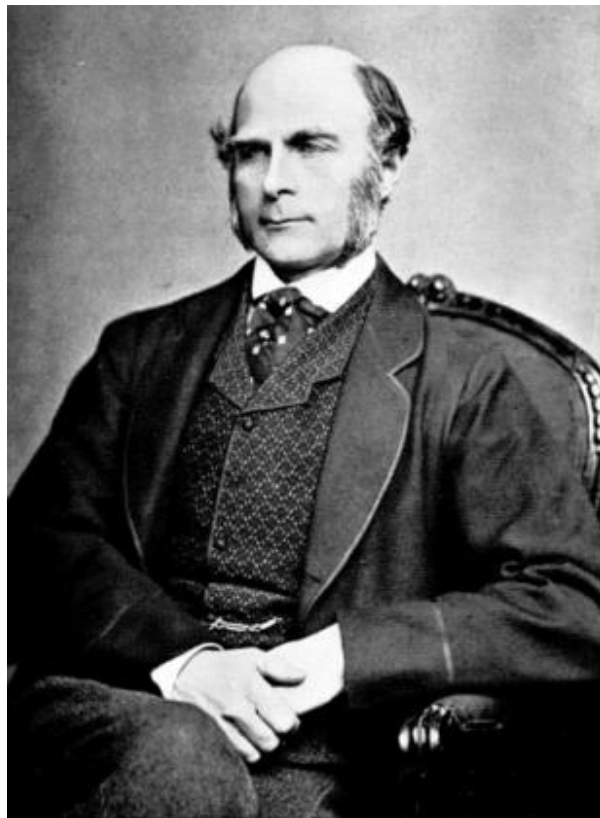


## “Improving the Human Species” Eugenics in Europe, Nineteenth-Twentieth Century

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of eugenic ideology is to promote good births. The term was coined by Francis Galton (1822-1911), who proposed a definition in 1883. The desire to improve the human species had not previously been treated as a science, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, parts of the medical field converged with regard to the notion of degeneration, and the subsequent need to improve the human species. Eugenics emerged as a solution. “Positive” eugenics promoted good matches, while “negative” eugenics discouraged or banned them. Eugenics became a subject of debate in the European medical field, while certain states adopted eugenic laws. Nazi Germany took eugenic ideology to the extreme, practicing a “negative” eugenics in the form of forced sterilization and the euthanasia of “undesirable” individuals. Synonymous with Nazi crimes, eugenics remained taboo until the late twentieth century.



Francis Galton, British scientist (1822-1911). Photograph from the 1850s taken from Karl Pearson's *The Life, Letters and Labours of Francis Galton*. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



This poster from the 1930s reads: “60,000 Reichsmarks is what this person suffering from a hereditary illness costs the People’s community during his lifetime. Fellow citizen, that is your money too. Read “A New People,” the monthly magazine of the NSDAP Office of Racial Policy. Source : [Wikipedia](#)

## The Traces of Eugenics Dating Back to Antiquity

In his *Republic* (Book V), Plato wrote: “It follows from our former admissions that the best men must cohabit with the best women in as many cases as possible, and the worst with the worst in the fewest.” While the term did not yet exist, the eugenic idea was present in the human spirit: there is a hierarchy between individuals, and the best deserve to have their lineage live on through procreation. The question of good births did not return in force in the West until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1655, *Callipédie* (Callipedia) by the French doctor Claude Quillet presented rules for ensuring good progeny, and enjoyed great success. In 1756, the French doctor Charles-Augustin Vandermonde published an *Essai sur la manière de perfectionner l'espèce humaine* (Essay on the Manner of Perfecting the Human Species) to identify “all of the qualities needed in both sexes to have children that are as perfect as can be desired.” The idea of perfecting the species connected with that of making beautiful children. The revolutionary message regarding the regeneration of humanity circulated under different names, including megalanthropogenesy, viriculture, hominiculture, orthobiosis, etc.

In 1862, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) provided his definition of natural selection in his *The Origin of Species*: “Men are not equal before nature: that must serve as our starting point,” read the introduction to the French translation. The English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) analyzed natural selection as “the selection of the fittest,”

thereby giving birth to social Darwinism, which justifies the fittest individuals surviving while “inferior” beings die out. At the same time, the concept of “degeneration” developed in medicine: if the state of the population and conditions of hygiene did not change, human extinction would become inevitable in the future. Infectious diseases (tuberculosis and syphilis), social disorders (alcoholism and criminality), and mental illnesses lent substance to these theories.

The artificial selection of humans by humans—henceforth made possible by advances in science—was given consideration in the effort to remedy society’s ills. At the same time, the Austrian monk Gregor Mendel (1822-1884) laid the foundations of genetics. The English mathematician Karl Pearson (1857-1936) developed the statistical method of biometry, which could classify humans according to the distribution of hereditary characteristics, and hence their capacities. Psychiatry established a clear link between madness, degeneration, and social disorder, thereby placing mental patients in the crosshairs of eugenicists. In this context eugenics emerged as a solution for regenerating the human species.

## **Nineteenth-Twentieth Centuries: Galton Theorizes Eugenics and the Ideology Spreads in Europe**

In 1883, Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics” (from the Greek *eu* meaning “well” or “good,” and *genos* meaning “race” or “birth”), which he defined in the following manner: “The science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had.” Eugenics had a dual character: “positive” eugenics promoted judicious mating whose progeny would be of high quality, while “negative” eugenics limited the reproduction of individuals deemed to be unfit.

In order to impose eugenics in Europe and the world, eugenicists presented their ideology as a religion that was “secular, a scientific substitute for official religions” in the words of Galton. Despite the eugenic temptation of much of its medical field and the creation of a Société française d’eugénique (1913, French Eugenics Society), the human losses from the First World War led to the banning of all contraceptive propaganda in France during the 1920s. At the same time, pressure by Catholics promoted the total abandonment of negative eugenics: it was not through the suppression of present or future individuals that the “race” would improve. The only law of eugenic inspiration implemented in France was one involving moderate negative eugenics, which was enacted in 1942 under the Vichy regime, and sought to discourage poor matches by instituting a prenuptial medical visit. In both France and Europe, Catholicism served as a barricade against eugenics, with countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy not passing any eugenic laws. This was also true of the Catholic cantons of Switzerland, whereas the majority of Protestant cantons legalized eugenic sterilization (Vaud canton in 1928). Similarly, Norway and Sweden legalized eugenic sterilization in 1934 and 1935, with Sweden passing a law requiring the consent of those involved only in 1976. Great Britain, where eugenics was theorized, was steeped in this ideology until the Second World War, and saw the creation of the Eugenics Education Society in 1907. Directed by Leonard Darwin (1850-1943) from 1911 onward, it engaged in lobbying, and campaigned for the internment of mental patients as well as the need to prevent venereal diseases. Figures such as Winston Churchill and H.G. Wells were seduced by the idea of eugenic sterilization, although the British Parliament adopted no law of this kind.

## **Nazi Eugenics**

Inspired by the ideas circulating in Europe and the United States, Hitler developed a radical racist and supremacist eugenic ideology. Improving the Germanic race would take place through negative eugenics, the elimination of inferior beings and peoples. While he had numerous scapegoats, the primary ones were the Jewish people, Gypsies, homosexuals, and individuals with physical and mental handicaps. He had a law passed on July 14, 1933

for the forced sterilization of any individual believed to be suffering from a genetic disorder such as congenital imbecility, schizophrenia, epilepsy, hereditary blindness, serious congenital deformities, or chronic alcoholism. The year 1936 saw the launch of the *Lebensborn*, a program designed to promote the birth of Aryan children. Deeming the practice of forced sterilization insufficiently effective, Hitler launched *Aktion T4* in 1939, a program that legalized the euthanasia of handicapped or mentally ill individuals, thereby initiating the process for the “complete cleansing” of the Germanic race. All deviants and “undesirables” were interned in concentration camps and later deported to extermination camps. With the use of gas chambers and the genocide of six million Jews, Hitler marked a turning point in the history of eugenics by intertwining it with racism. Eugenics became taboo in 1945. Following in the steps of Jacques Léonard (1935-1988), French as well as German, British, and American historians turned it into a topic of historical study only in the 1980s.

## **Today: The Question of Private Eugenics**

The idea of eugenics itself has returned to the scene, as scientific advances have enabled its potential application with no need for radical measures. The argument made by the philosopher Jean-Noël Missa and the anthropologist-geneticist Charles Susanne (*From State Eugenics to Private Eugenics*, 1999) is that in our late twentieth century, the question of eugenics arises in the intimacy of a couple or a family, thereby shifting from the medical and political context to the private sphere. The definition for the historically charged term of eugenics nevertheless remains unclear. Is prenatal diagnosis in the form of fetal ultrasounds, which can detect the presence of genetic anomalies and lead to the termination of pregnancy in cases of pronounced chromosomal anomaly, also a kind of eugenics? What about research on the human genome, which seeks to eliminate the genes for certain genetically transmitted diseases in embryos? The philosopher Jean-Paul Thomas asked the following question in his *Les fondements de l'eugénisme* (The Foundations of Eugenics): “When eugenics is no longer associated with nationalist or racist prejudice, and is no longer the subject of coercive measures, instead being based on free choices made by people, what basis is there to oppose the improvements offered by science?” The question nevertheless remains: should humans be improved, and at what price? It is one that deeply divides public opinion. What is true is that preimplantation diagnosis, sperm screening, and choosing the child’s gender are henceforth possible. Unlike the United States, the European Union forbids these methods, and is suspicious of the excesses they could cause.

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