

## Eugenics and the Promise of “Progress”

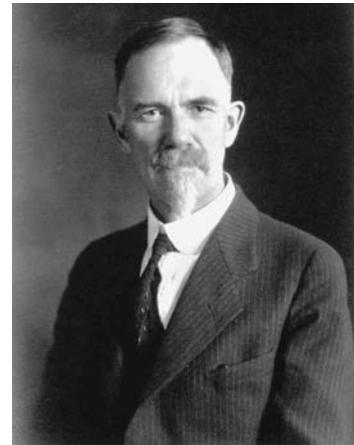
---

### Reading 4

By the early 1900s, a number of scientists were trying to combine Gregor Mendel’s research with Francis Galton’s theory of “race improvement” so that they could tackle some of society’s greatest problems. They viewed their work as a civic enterprise and claimed that eugenics would eventually reduce crime, end some diseases, and even boost human intelligence. It was a tempting vision—one that had particular appeal for middle class Americans in the early 1900s. It was a time when many marveled at the ability of science and technology to produce great wealth, create millions of new jobs, offer an ever-growing list of consumer goods, and open “life choices previously unimagined.”

At the same time, many people were deeply troubled by the changes in their lives. As a result of their dis-ease, they were attracted to ideas that gave scientific meaning to the old rules and the old hierarchies. By 1915, eugenics had become a fad in the United States. Although the theory also attracted followers in England, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Canada, and Brazil, the United States led the world in eugenic research in the first two decades of the 20th century. One of the most influential people in the American eugenics movement was Charles Davenport. While earning a Ph.D. in biology at Harvard University, he stumbled upon the writings of Francis Galton and other English eugenicists. Davenport was so taken with their ideas that he traveled to England to meet Galton. He returned home determined to incorporate eugenic principles into his own research.

In 1904, Davenport persuaded the Carnegie Institution of Washington to provide the funding for the Station for Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island in New York. He became its first director and oversaw early research into inheritance in both plants and animals. He hoped to combine Darwin’s ideas on natural selection with Gregor Mendel’s principles of heredity in controlled experiments.



Charles Davenport.

By 1910, Davenport was prepared to go further. That year he established the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor. There he and other researchers not only studied human heredity but also tried to demonstrate how social traits such as pauperism, criminality, and prostitution are inherited.

Davenport particularly wanted the ERO to educate the public about the importance of eugenic research in solving social problems. In 1911, he published a popular textbook, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, for use in college and high school biology classes. The following excerpts illustrate some of Davenport's key assumptions and conclusions.

Eugenics is the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding or, as the late Sir Francis Galton expressed it:—"The science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race." The eugenical standpoint is that of the agriculturalist who, while recognizing the value of culture [environment], believes that permanent advance is to be made only by securing the best "blood." Man is an organism—an animal; and the laws of improvement of corn and race horses hold true for him also. Unless people accept this simple truth and let it influence marriage selection, human progress will cease. . . .

There is no question that, taken as a whole, the hordes of Jews that are now coming to us from Russia and the extreme southeast of Europe, with their intense individualism and ideals of gain at the cost of any interest, represent the opposite extreme from the early English and the more recent Scandinavian immigration with their ideals of community life in the open country, advancement by the sweat of the brow, and the uprearing of families in the fear of God and the love of country. . . .

Summarizing this review of recent conditions of immigration, it appears certain that, unless conditions change of themselves or are radically changed, the population of the United States will . . . rapidly become darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial, more attached to music and art, more given to crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex-immorality and less given to burglary, drunkenness, and vagrancy than were the original English settlers. Since . . . there [are] relatively more foreign-born than native [in hospitals], it seems probable that under present conditions the ratio of insanity in the population will rapidly increase. . . .

If increasing attention is paid to the selective elimination at our ports of entry of the actually undesirable (those with a germ plasm [genes] that has imbecile, epileptic, insane, criminalistic, alcoholic, and sexually immoral tendencies); if agents in Europe learn the family history of all applicants for naturalization; if the luring of the

credulous and suggestible by steamship agents abroad and especially in the south-east of Europe be reduced to its lowest limits, then we may expect to see our population not harmed by this mixture with a more mercurial people.<sup>1</sup>

---

## CONNECTIONS

---

How does Davenport define eugenics? Compare his definition with Francis Galton's definition in Reading 2. On what points do the two writers agree? What differences seem most striking?

What is the effect of phrases such as "hordes of Jews," and "undesirables"? Who are the carriers of inferior "germ plasm"? Whom does Davenport consider "superior"? What traces of Camper's speculations about ideal types (Chapter 2) do you find in Davenport's work?

Davenport asserts that "human progress will cease" without eugenics. What does this suggest about the thousands of years of human history prior to 1900? He also asserts that Americans will become, on the average, shorter and darker than earlier generations. How does he seem to define human progress?

With whom do you think Davenport's book was particularly popular? Who do you think was most likely to oppose Davenport's ideas? How might these individuals and groups get heard in the early 1900s? or today?

---

1. *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* by Charles Benedict Davenport. Henry Holt, 1911, pp. 1, 216, 219, 224.