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2025 Volume II: History, Science, and Racism: The Long Shadow of Eugenics

Grasping things at the Root: Introducing a Critical Framework for Understanding Eugenics

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Introduction

I am a Social Studies teacher in a High School within the New Haven Public School District who teaches sociology, psychology, and current events for grades 9-12. My school has a population of over 1100 students, the majority of whom are African American or Hispanic and live within the local urban environment. My school also has a substantial percentage of students who are first generation English language learners and whose families have immigrated here from across the world. Consequently, these factors have informed my critical approach to addressing different topics within the classroom and maintaining a systemic focus on structural exploitation and inequality, since those factors must be recognized and opposed if students are to honestly reckon with the collective weight of our history.

One of the darker elements of human history that is often either ignored or dramatized is the deep-seated legacy of eugenics. Although this can be a disturbing topic to discuss, it remains increasingly vital to provide students with the necessary framework for understanding how such an abusive and grotesque hierarchy of human value came into being. Even more distressingly, eugenics still remains actively practiced to this day in nearly every facet of our society. From the way in which our schools rank and sort students according to their perceived academic ability to the inherently ableist nature of the job market itself, eugenicist logic permeates many of the most mundane and vital aspects of our lives.

This unit will use a framework of critical analysis to explore how modern eugenics came into being through examining its historical context. While these assignments are made with a Sociology class in mind, they can still be applied in other courses, including history, civics and.... Once the different social elements that constitute eugenics have been identified in history, students will then analyze how eugenics advocates spread and operated across the US during the 1800s-1900s. Afterwards, students will begin drawing connections between those older practices and many of the policies and norms that still exist today in addition to learning from the efforts of different Critical theorists and activists today to abolish eugenics altogether.

It is my hope that this unit can provide students with some of the tools necessary to adequately grapple with different systems of oppression as they exist and to challenge the idea that injustice is natural or inevitable

under whatever circumstances it arises within or is practiced under.

As critical pedagogy theorist Henry Giroux said, “Education, in the final analysis, is really about the production of agency. What kind of narratives are we going to produce that students can understand, that enlarge their perspective not only on the world but on their relationship to others and themselves?”¹

Rationale for using a Critical Approach to Learning

Within the popular imagination, Eugenics tends to be thought of as a thing performed and justified by fascists and racist doctors, judges, and bureaucrats. While this observation is true, it tends to also miss the way in which eugenic logic is baked into our daily lives, especially as educators.

Every day within our classrooms, we are told to rank, categorize, and prescribe worth unto students based upon their perceived intellectual abilities. We are told to ignore any systemic factors that deprive students of the potential for a better life. Likewise, we are trained to ignore the way in which some students lack the means to attend college and avoid questioning whether the current schema of traditional education is not itself deeply ableist in several crucial ways.

While we accommodate on an individual level, such accommodations never go so far as to result in the restructuring of the system of schooling itself. In doing so, students never fundamentally learn to critique the system that ranks and makes certain demands of them. As a result, they often do not learn how to critically think about the hierarchies that they currently inhabit. Instead, they learn to view such hierarchies of imposed value and control as natural and inevitable as opposed to the ever-shifting and ever-challenged social creations that they are.

Therefore, these processes of sorting human worth go largely unaddressed. Students are channeled into different tiers of value and either given additional resources such as grants or scholarships based on academic performance, leaving those who cannot test as well to be deemed unworthy of resources. As students get older, they are gradually weaned off the social supports that they had as children and left to fester in cycles of structural poverty. Students are cast out into a society that exploits their labor and does not value or empower their lives, instead leaving them alienated from their work and community. Capitalism and its constituent systems of domination go unquestioned in favor of simply accepting the systemic abandonment of students as an inevitability.

Attempting to understand these issues within an individualized framework that focuses solely upon changing methods as opposed to the relationships that institutions have with those who labor within them, be they students or staff, remains an eternal impediment to truly understanding such degrading systems. In many ways, not only does this logic reflect eugenics through its sorting of people along alleged hierarchies of social worth, but it also reflects some of the differences between the medical and the social models of disability.

The medical model of disability treats each individual patient as though they are suffering from a disease or impairment that causes them to be “abnormal.” Consequently, it is the responsibility of medical professionals to fix the defects that another person’s bodily system is experiencing in order to lead a more conventional life. An example of this would be blaming a person’s inability to walk as the reason why they struggle to find

employment.²

Meanwhile, the social model of disability views the patient as someone who is being disabled, not merely by a given condition, but also by the environment in which they exist within. As such, the core focus of this model is for people across multiple fields (including the disabled themselves) to come together to alter the manner in which society operates so as to create circumstances that are less disabling for each person. An example of this would be blaming the lack of accessibility and support for bodily diversity in our social and economic system for why a person who cannot walk struggles to find employment. While the medical model blames the individual for their alleged “defects,” the social model seeks to emphasize the inherently oppressive dynamics of our own society that often result in the increasingly desperate circumstances of those who exist within with bodies that are different from what is considered to be “normal.”

On this note, it becomes apparent that educators need to address the origins of how we define “normality” itself. It becomes important to ask questions like:

1. What does it mean to be “normal”?
2. What tasks are people expected to perform in order to remain “worthy” of life?
3. What “resources” (bodily, material, and social) are people expected to have access to in order to perform these tasks?
4. Who and what systems decide how resources are accumulated, exploited, and distributed?

Furthermore, popular discussions of eugenics tend to fail to contextualize both its origins and its ongoing practice in society at a systemic level. While much focus is given to the connection between eugenics and the mass atrocities committed by fascist regimes such as that of Nazi Germany, the groundwork for these atrocities goes ignored. Specifically, the underlying colonial and patriarchal socio-economic logic that was first created under European colonialism and capitalism goes uncontested. It was within this context that both “disability” and “whiteness” as categories of social being emerged in their contemporary sense just as the subjugation of that which was deemed “feminine” was exported to colonized populations overseas.

“Whiteness” was first constructed in order to justify the dehumanization of indigenous populations of the Americas and Africa so as to impose a new hierarchy of worth that served to divide the poorer, laboring Europeans from forming alliances with these newly colonized populations against their mutually exploitative employers and imperialist kings.³

“Disability” was created as a means of normalizing the social conditions born of both imperial and capitalist social relations, as they served to individualize and alienate those whose bodies were deemed less capable of producing labor to the benefit of capital and colonial nation-state alike.

As Shaun Grech writes in the book *Disability and Colonialism*, “...any serious materialist disability offering cannot possibly bypass the colonial encounter, because it is the ‘crucial moment in which modernity, coloniality, and capitalism, as we know them today, came together’ (Mignolo, 2008, p. 248).”⁴ Further, Grech noted that colonialism only valued colonized people based upon their ability to perform work for the empire, thereby creating a broader cultural norm of “compulsory ablebodiedness.”⁵ Meanwhile, many indigenous populations found themselves forced to acquiesce to restricting their society in accordance with sexist policies enforced upon them by colonizing forces. Indigenous women who had previously played more flexible roles in their communities were then expected to mirror the subordinate positions that European patriarchy had imposed upon its citizenry.

Given that what we consider to be “normal” is always a product of our history, it becomes increasingly important to dissect and analyze how our society created such dreadfully limiting and dehumanizing frameworks for understanding disability and the worth prescribed unto different forms of human life. In addition to this, critical disability scholars have elucidated upon the ways in which “disability” as a social category was constructed within the confines of patriarchal societies, oftentimes being used to police the reproductive abilities of women whose lives and abilities to resist such persecution were further degraded along racist and colonized lines.

Overtly eugenicist promotional campaigns of the early to mid-1900s ran alongside government sponsored efforts to sterilize both poor whites and non-white women that resulted in the forced sterilizations of over 70,000 people and, at one point in the mid-20th century, roughly 1/3rd of all Puerto Rican women. Furthermore, there still exists ongoing disparities in the rates of sterilization of Native American, Black, immigrant and imprisoned women within the US, which continues to showcase how eugenics has always been a project rooted in patriarchy and born of the colonial expansion of European power.⁶

Consequently, to effectively engage with eugenics and the study of the politics of those who would deem another’s life “unworthy” of existence, it becomes crucial to apply an intersectional, analytical lens to all considerations of the topic. This is crucial if we are to properly historicize the process whereby these hierarchal societal logics coalesced into the form we recognize today as “eugenics.”

Objectives

The purpose of this unit is to explore the foundational logics of modern eugenics and to examine how eugenics evolved throughout the course of the twentieth and twenty first century within the context of the United States. The core goals of this unit are as follows:

1. Challenge the idea that eugenics emerged in a vacuum and connect the different influences that led to the formation of modern eugenics movements and practices
2. Examine how the practice of eugenics justified itself and relate how similar justifications for dehumanization and domination are used today.
3. Analyze how an emphasis on individualistic frameworks of understanding over societal structuring justifies pre-existing oppression.
4. Investigate current manifestations of eugenics in our society and examine different critiques made by critical theorists who seek to dismantle these systems of oppression.
5. Challenge eugenic ideas and practices while considering how to create an anti-eugenic society

Part I: Tracing the Origins of Modern Eugenics

Although the notion of eugenics can be traced back thousands of years to the days of Plato and his schema for eugenics within “The Republic,” it is vital to distinguish between those older forms of eugenicist thought and those which arose during the 1800s-1900s. I state this primarily in order to establish the differences in the

socio-economic context of the development and practice of both variants of the core notion that is “eugenics” that exists today. Where Plato, Seneca, and other authors from thousands of years ago existed within the context of their own empires, economic systems, and scientific understandings of the world around them, the re-emergence of eugenics within the context of modern colonial and capitalist practices gave a new impetus and set of economic compulsions to the age-old idea.

While both understandings of the term carried with it similar hierarchies of value ascribed to life, the capitalistic connotations of wealth accumulation coupled with the hegemonic logic of white supremacy rooted in colonialism gave rise to the popular understandings of “eugenics” as they existed and continue to be practiced within its more modern incarnations. Even eugenicist and Yale faculty member Ellsworth Huntington acknowledges the differences between his own ideas and those of Plato when he wrote within his pro-eugenics book *Tomorrow's Children* that: “Plato’s ideas about the methods by which a better race might be produced were very crude, being based on class prejudice and the behavior of animals. He had little appreciation that there is a science as sociology. Only in our day have biology and sociology progressed so far that the first steps can be taken in consciously improving the biological inheritance of mankind.”⁷

As such, a contextualized analytical framework is crucial in understanding the role that modern forms of social devaluation played in the formation of “disability” as a concept within our contemporary imagination. Further, Grech explores this topic when discussing the impact of colonial violence and the kinds of logic used to justify and map meaning onto the abused bodies of the colonized subjects, “...the scarred, unfree body of the colonized slave became a disabled body, and where disability and colonialism fused together as ‘the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality ... the depository of maleficent powers’ (Fanon, 1963, p. 32). They came together in the mass known as the ‘degenerate’, or rather the ‘internal enemies’ as described by Foucault (1977), incorporating among others, women, the working class, racial others, and disabled people (Razack, 1998, cited in Betcher, 2004).”⁸

Thus, it is more relevant to evaluate current eugenicist logic and practices to the context in which Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and, later, his cousin Francis Galton’s theories on eugenics emerged. For it is within the age of the Industrial Revolution; the mass expansion of the European empires in all of their white supremacist and settler colonial trappings, the ongoing genocide of indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of the working classes within the imperial core inside grisly mills and environmentally destructive factories that Galton’s eugenicist views on how to go about systemically devaluing certain groups of human beings emerged.

As Erik L. Peterson writes in *The Shortest History of Eugenics*,

“In Galton’s first essay, titled ‘Hereditary Improvement,’ he proposed that in toxic British cities, only the most brutish people would thrive- like cockroaches, rats, and other vermin. The old, solid Anglo-Saxon racial stock, on the other hand, was already showing signs of degeneration... If Britain could establish special castes composed of superior individuals within each ordinary class group, and encourage those individuals to have numerous, hearty, white, English-speaking children, then they could reverse the slide toward barbarism brought on by filthy, undermanaged urbanization punctuated by the immigration of lesser races who intermarried with native stock.”⁹

Peterson argues that Galton’s desire for white supremacy and the genocide of social groups that he deemed inferior were the primary goals that underpinned his advocacy of eugenics. Specifically, he cites Galton’s article in the *The Times* of London titled *Africa for the Chinese*, as evidence of this claim. Within the article,

Galton advocates for the British empire to commit genocide by moving Chinese people to Eastern Africa in order to “out-breed and finally displace the negro, as completely as the latter has displaced the aborigines of the West Indies.”¹⁰

Peterson concludes that Galton’s eugenics functioned as a justification for racist and imperialistic beliefs, since “As Galton saw it, the white-run British Empire should create a Chinese state in East Africa and physically move Chinese to live and work the land, just as the young US had attempted to do in Liberia on Africa’s northwest coast decades earlier. The Africans would go extinct.”¹¹

It was during the 1870s through to the early 1900s that the fields of evolutionary science and the ideology of eugenics developed in tandem with the European seizure and private enclosure of African lands in a coordinated campaign that is now colloquially referred to as the “Scramble for Africa.” Therefore, the desire to rationalize these bloody conquests in modern, scientific terms became increasingly appealing to the colonizers who, due to the increasing secularization of society, sought to substitute their previous claims of striving to civilize the “savages” through despotically spreading the rule of Christendom via empire in favor of utilizing newer data sets. Hence, an accompanying slew of racist interpretative frameworks had to be created to form a seemingly “objective” justification for both colonialism and the hierarchal domination of those deemed “defective” or “disabled.”

In this sense, the divine right of Christian kingdoms to conquer and rule over foreign lands and domestic bodies alike was transformed by the gradual development of scientific practice, colonial expansion, capitalist economics, and Enlightenment-derived ideologies into a secularized series of pseudo-scientific claims. These claims then served as rationalizations for pre-existing forms of social dominance, devaluation, and exploitation as practiced both domestically and abroad by the reigning social classes.

Classroom Activity 1

Guiding Question 1: How is the dehumanization and domination of other human beings justified?

Students will begin by being assigned into groups and given a selection of older, racist political cartoons¹² that showcase immigrants arriving to the United States. The instructor will then ask the students to identify the ways in which each political cartoon dehumanizes or degrades a given group of people.

The instructor may ask questions such as:

1. What stereotypes are being promoted through this image?
2. Who is the audience expected to identify with?
3. What concerns or fears are being evoked in the image?

Each group of students will receive a paper in which all members may record their observations and responses to the questions. After the class is finished discussing and responding in groups, the teacher will ask each group to share their responses with the rest of the class and to add their observations on the board at the front of the room. Once all groups have shared their responses, engage in a dialogue with the students and ask them questions such as,

1. How might these stereotypes be weaponized against those groups of people?
2. Are there any stereotypes that you recognized in these images that still persist to this day?
3. What political policies might people who believe in these stereotypes and their associated fears choose

to support?

Once students have finished their class discussions, they should be given an article on Jacob Riis photojournalism of the slums in New York during the early 1900s that explores the conditions and cost of housing for new immigrants and the lower classes. Alongside this, each group will be given 6-8 of Riis' pictures¹³ to sift through and a handout to fill out that contains the following questions for each image.

Summarize the Contents of this Image	What is the Purpose of this Image?	Who is the Audience expected to identify or sympathize with?	What concerns or fears are being evoked in this image? What are they directed at?
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After the students have finished with the assignment; the class will collectively share their responses to each picture as it is displayed at the front of the room. As the students are sharing their responses, ask them to answer the following questions:

1. How do the messages of these photos differ from the messages of the previous cartoons?
2. How can images alone be used to tell a narrative?
3. What narratives are being told in these pictures and what stories are being told in those earlier comics?
4. How can these narratives be used as tools to either empower or dehumanize people?

This lesson should help make it clear that, even after the passing of Francis Galton in 1910, eugenics continued to flourish throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Oftentimes, popular forms of media such as newspapers and comics were used as vehicles to ascribe ideas of unworthiness to the laboring masses. The stereotypes that these images served to promote denigrated the lived reality of many poorer people who were thrust into shoddy circumstances that they were then subsequently blamed for. This led to activists and scholars attempting to shed greater light on the circumstances of many members of the lower class through their own efforts, such as the photojournalism of Jacob Riis, the efforts of unions, and various autonomous worker societies.

Urbanization required greater training and domestication of prospective workers. However, this occurred alongside the demonization of those who struggled against land enclosures, resented being subjected to the specialized forms of labor exploitation associated with industrialization, and those who found themselves unable to perform the tasks that were now demanded of them in order to survive. Therefore, prisons and asylums were leveraged as tools of subjugation against those deemed rebellious, lazy, or "defective" in meeting the new demands and conditions that were being foisted upon them.

Hence, this growing mass of working-class people and the simultaneous demonization of poor and immigrant communities produced socialist activists and candidates such as Eugene Debs, who identified with the broader struggle against such dehumanization when he said, "Years ago, I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth... While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free..."¹⁴

Teaching Note

Consider asking students:

- How does solidarity with other marginalized groups of people help oppose eugenics?

- How did colonialism influence the field of eugenics?

While capitalism rose in developmental capacity and capitalists grew in political power during the 1800s, there also accompanied an increasing concern amongst these elites in the rising expenses associated with the costs of educating, training, and disciplining workers via state and corporate power. On account of the worker uprisings against these hierarchies such as the Revolutions of 1848 and the rising popularity of communist and anarchist organizations across Europe, several European states had gradually adopted welfare policies so as to mitigate what could otherwise result in revolutionary discontent and maintain the power of the dominant social classes. Yet, many capitalists believed that even this meager aid had limited their companies' ability to profit and desired justifications to cut welfare just as soon as it came into being.

It is within the context of these struggles for healthcare, hierarchical desires to justify colonial domination, and the development of scientific industries and practices alongside their methods of categorization that the increasing crackdown on populations labelled as physically or mentally deficient in some way had come to pass.

Thus, the intermixing of ableist, white supremacist, patriarchal, and classist language within the vocabularies of modern eugenicists and their harsh, invasive, penal solutions emerged jointly as a phenomenon born of the unique historical conditions shared by their societies of origin. It was this medley of influences that led to the first openly labelled eugenics legislation to ever be passed in a modern democracy in July of 1895 by the state of Connecticut.

Part II: Early Eugenics Logic in the United States

In many ways, it can be difficult to firmly identify the exact date when eugenics in the United States emerged, as oftentimes language evolves to create new words so as to construct containers for concepts that are already known or practiced. Although the term “eugenics” is itself an older word, public mention of the idea or its relationship with ongoing practices were not always readily offered. Yet, it remains undeniable that eugenic logic is inherent within the institution of slavery throughout the United States, particularly given its penchant for sorting human life according to perceived market value

This system of speculating upon human ownership brought with it the desire for “strong” and “able-bodied” enslaved peoples who might then go on to produce similarly “sturdy” offspring. This occurred due to capitalism's innate compulsion towards capital investment in increasingly severe forms of human labor subjugation along white supremacist lines. As Dorothy Roberts notes within her book *Fatal Invention*,

“Eugenicists easily latched on to race as an integral element of their ideology. Moreover, the chattel slavery and Jim Crow systems that violently enforced racial classifications paved the way for the dehumanizing programs that implemented eugenicist ideology. Forced sterilizations, eugenicists' favorite remedy for social problems, were an extension of the brutality inflicted on black Americans. Slaveholders' total dominion over the bodies of enslaved Africans—including ownership of enslaved women's wombs, which they exploited for profit—provided an early model of reproductive control.”¹⁵

With this in mind, Connecticut's eugenics legislation passed in 1895 was merely the first piece of modern

legislation to be self-identified as such. This legislation criminalized those who sought to marry or have sexual activity with any person that was deemed “feeble-minded.” In addition to this, any person who assisted another in marrying someone labeled an “imbecile” would also be liable to a fine and up to a year in prison. Unfortunately, these developments were only the first in a slew of various types of eugenics legislation that promoted within and adopted by over 30 other states, which included Texas, California, Kansas, and Michigan from the 1890s through the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, although Francis Galton had passed away in 1910, eugenics found many new activists that sought to promote and implement eugenicist policies and practices at every level of society.

Standardized testing was developed as a tool to determine the “mental age” of children by Alfred Binet but was soon appropriated by eugenicists for the purpose of ranking students according to alleged innate intellectual ability and social worth. Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman helped create the Stanford-Binet IQ test and coined the term “intelligence quotient” while openly stating that he intended the test to be used by white, middle-class students. Terman even went so far as to state that immigrants weren’t worth testing and that black, native, and Latino kids were simply inherently dull.

As this style of testing went on to spread throughout schools, Yale psychologist Robert Yerkes created “Alpha-Beta” tests for use in the US military. Alpha tests were given to educated English speakers while Beta tests were given to those who struggled with English. However, despite criticism that his tests were obviously biased against people who struggled with English, Deborah Blume writes in an article on eugenics in the magazine *Undark* that Yerkes remained steadfast in his belief that his tests were a measure of biological, rather than learned intelligence. Blume writes that, “Yerkes declared that in either case, the tests measured innate intelligence rather than education. “It behooves us to consider their reliability and their meaning, for no one of us as a citizen can afford to ignore the menace of race deterioration,” he wrote.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, American philanthropists promoted ideas such as “Scientific Charity,” which advocated that the rich shouldn’t give their money to poor people without first engaging in data collection so as to provide the elites with information about the specific, measurable results of each transaction. This paternalistic approach to establishing early forms of means testing for welfare donations was thoroughly interwoven with that of the rising eugenics movement of the period.

The president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Albert O. Wright, was a firm proponent of this “Scientific Charity” model as a means of furthering a broader eugenicist social project. Peterson writes that

“...scientific experts declared the cause of pauperism and crime to be “essential,” some “defect inside,” not merely an effect of education or environment. Therefore, to prevent an ever-larger strain on the wealthy philanthropic class, there could be only one acceptable long-term solution to manage the unfit: Prevent more of them. Philanthropists, ironically, were about to become some of the chief promoters of American eugenics. Their reasoning: “Unless we are prepared for the drastic measures of wholesale death or equally wholesale castration,” Wright warned, “we must cut off defective heredity by the more expensive but more humane method of wholesale imprisonment.”¹⁷

However, while Peterson frames philanthropy’s promotion of eugenics as an irony, the field of philanthropy has always been a top-down, hierarchical approach to maintaining pre-existing states of class domination.¹⁸ Specifically, the massive powers of wealthy philanthropists were justified through re-framing their donations as evidence of the alleged superior wisdom that was thought to be inherent amongst those that are rich. The

poor, on the other hand, were to be viewed as beneficiaries to be acted upon rather than actors worthy of social agency. In many respects, the philanthropy industry is simply the age-old practice of noblesse oblige given a new secularized, capitalistic coating with a more overtly data-driven approach to controlling the outcomes of each donation.

The rise of philanthropic industries functioned as another means by which popular discontent with labor exploitation could be mitigated towards more stable channels of capitalist re-investment. Thus, even as eugenics was met with skepticism by significant portions of the public, there still existed a market for solutions to potential national unrest and labor revolts by way of controlled “scientific” investment in managing those forced into poverty and marginalization.

Capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism of the early 1900s interwove to allow for eugenicists such as Charles Davenport to successfully lobby the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations alongside the other wealthy Gilded Age capitalists like E.H Harriman and John Kellogg to donate the expansion of eugenics research centers and record offices across the United States. This led to the establishment of what Peterson called “The Eugenics Triangle,” wherein the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, NY, the Race Betterment Society in Battle Creek, MI, and the Human Betterment Foundation in Pasadena, CA were able to work with each other to construct an extensive propaganda network that served to promote the spread of eugenics across the world.

Over time, eugenics propaganda and lobbying successfully managed to gain increasingly prominent legal endorsements, with perhaps one of the most prominent of these being the ruling of *Buck v Bell* in 1927. It was during this case that the US Supreme court unanimously endorsed the authority of the Superintendent of Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded to sterilize one of their patients, Carrie Buck. Buck was a pregnant teenager who was institutionalized by her foster parents for alleged “feeble-mindedness” and “delinquency” while ignoring Carrie’s claims that she was assaulted and raped by a visiting relative of her foster family. These rape allegations continued to be wholly ignored as Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. proceeded to issue the court’s verdict 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.”¹⁹

However, as Peterson writes on the reasoning underlying much of the legal logic of eugenics,

“What we sometimes miss in the retelling of *Buck v. Bell* is that the Supreme Court decision didn’t end with that “imbeciles” quote. The justices also adjudicated the other portion of Priddy’s original eugenics plans: to use sterilization to allow asylums to release inmates who could take care of themselves, work jobs, and so on, thereby opening beds to pull in more feeble-minded from out of their own homes...”²⁰

He elaborates that this approach to sterilization was ultimately a “cost cutting” measure that allowed for less money to go to public health institutions while increasing the rate at which those viewed as “feeble-minded” or “disabled” could be sterilized. Afterwards, the patients were removed from hospitals and churned back into the workforce or back into the individualized care of different foster families.

Teaching Note

Consider asking students:

- How do cuts to welfare affect the likelihood that certain peoples will die as a result?

- Which groups of people are more likely to die than others? Why?
- How does this tie together with other forms of systemic inequality and exploitation?

By the mid-late 1900s, over 30 states had sterilization boards and over 70,000 people had been sterilized. Of those who were sterilized, women, black, brown, disabled, and impoverished people were the portions of the population that were most likely to be targeted. The colonial and patriarchal dimensions of this become increasingly apparent when examining how Puerto Ricans bore a disproportional brunt of this wave, as by 1956 nearly 1 in 3 of all Puerto Rican women had been sterilized.²¹

States on the west coast such as California targeted Latin American and Chinese populations for forced sterilization due to the extreme racism that was held by whites against those groups. States on the east coast tended to target black, poor, criminal, and disabled populations while playing host to various eugenics research centers such as the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Springs, New York and the American Eugenics Society at Yale. In the South, states targeted predominantly black populations to the extent that the term “Mississippi Appendectomy” was created to describe the various unnecessary hysterectomies that were performed on many African American women as practice for medical students.²²

Classroom Activity 2

Guiding Question 2: How was eugenics practiced and promoted across different industries?

Students will begin by being given a selection of articles to choose from on eugenics as it was practiced and promoted in different contexts during the 1900s. Each article will focus on a different institutions or systems that engaged in eugenic activity.

Examples of these are as follows:

1. Relevant excerpts from Erik Peterson’s book “Shortest History of Eugenics”
2. Stephanie Presch’s *UnidosUS* article, “The Long History of Forced Sterilization of Latinas”
3. Lisa Ko’s *PBS* article, “Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States”
4. John Rosales and Tim Walker’s *NEA Today* article, “The Racist Beginnings of Standardized Testing”
5. Daniel Loehr’s *The Sentencing Project* article, “The Eugenic Origins of Three Strikes Laws: How “Habitual Offender” Sentencing Laws Were Used as a Means of Sterilization”
6. Sheila Kaplan’s *Berkley University of Public Health* article, “The legacy of eugenics”
7. Adam S. Cohen’s *Harvard Magazine* article, “Harvard’s Eugenics Era”
8. Rick Cohen’s *Non-Profit Quarterly* article, “Redlining as a Product of the Racist/Classist Pseudoscience of Eugenics”

Students will then read through their assigned article and respond to the following:

1. Summarize the article that you just read in one paragraph.
2. What group of people did eugenicists target within your article?
3. What institutions either assisted or were run by eugenicists?

After students finish reading and writing their responses, reconvene for a class discussion on the articles. List each of the articles that they used on the board and re-write questions 2 and 3 below each article title. Have students answer as a group and then have a class discussion on the questions:

1. What are the similarities between each of the groups that were targeted by eugenicists?

(The answer would be that they are each marginalized in some way socially, legally, and economically.)

2. Were you surprised to learn about any of the institutions that supported eugenics? If not, why?

3. Are there any ways that these institutions are still practicing eugenics today? If so, then how?

Once this discussion is finished, have students look at this picture:

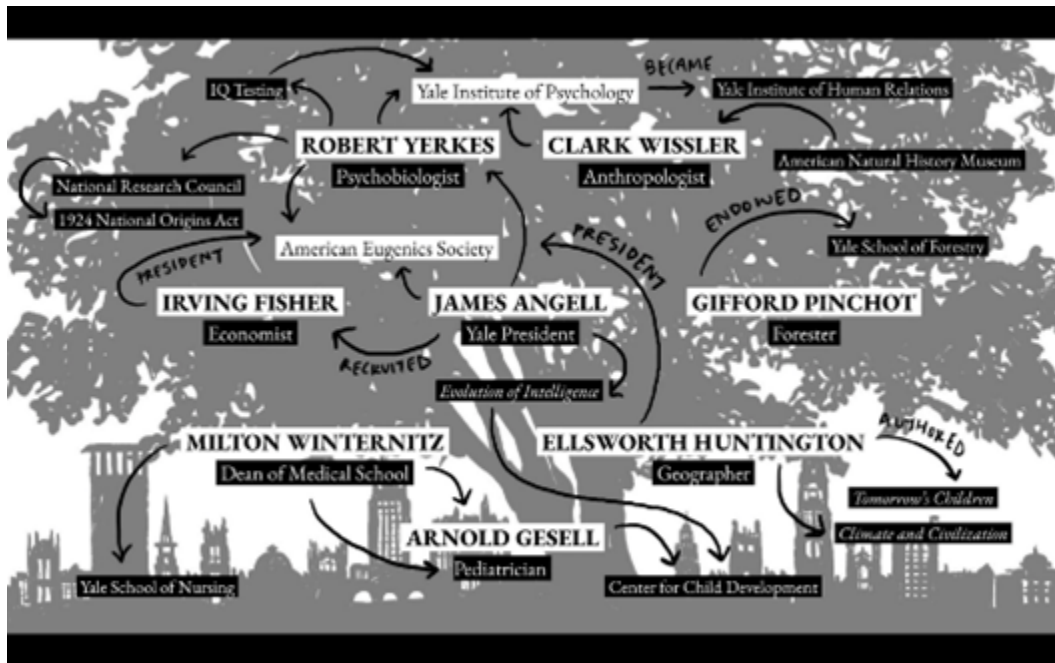


Figure 1 This Graphic identifies and connects various Yale professors and administrators who practiced and spread eugenics. Image created by Dora Guo (Yale College, 2023)²³

While students are examining at the picture, explain that it is a tree that showcases most of the prominent Yale faculty that were involved in the development of the eugenics movement in the United States. Oftentimes, eugenicists used the image of a tree when discussing eugenics to make the practice seem both natural and inevitable, much like a sturdy oak bearing fruitful offspring. However, in this case students will break off into groups and choose a specific person to research. They will each create a slideshow that contains the following pieces of information about the individual they chose:

1. What is the name, date of birth and death, and profession of the individual?
2. What accomplishments are they most well known for?
3. In what ways did they spread or practice eugenics within their field?
4. What were the long-term repercussions of their eugenicist activity in their field? (Did they help make any organizations? Did their eugenics approach influence certain research being done?)
5. What groups of people were most likely to be targeted by their advocacy of eugenics? (Age, race, ability, gender, class, citizenship status, etc.)

Some of this information can be found via the Anti-Eugenics Collective's research included with this link: <https://www.antieugenicscollective.org/>. After students have finished their brief slideshows, have them each present their information to the class. Once everyone has presented, ask them:

1. In what ways are these eugenicists similar? (Age, race, ability, gender, class, citizenship status, etc.)
2. What were the long-term repercussions of all of their actions when taken together?
3. What narrative did they collectively produce across multiple fields of study? (What are they saying about the value of human life? What traits are desirable or worthy? Do they believe that all people have the right to live? Who can live? Who can die? What groups do they believe have the right to reproduce? Which groups do they believe have the right to dominate other people?)
4. In what ways does this narrative persist today?

This assignment is intended to get students to think about interplay that existed between many local doctors, capitalists, bureaucrats, and professors who each strove to normalize eugenics through using their own unique skill sets. Despite being fairly mundane individuals that labored across different fields, they collaborated in the attempt to destroy those who they deemed socially unfit based upon classist, ableist, racist, and sexist beliefs.

Many high-ranking professors from Yale such as Ellsworth Huntington (Geography professor, president of the Ecological Society of America, and president of the American Eugenics Society), James Angell (President of Yale University), Robert Yerkes (psychobiologist and founder of the Yale Institute of Psychology), Milton Winternitz (Dean of the Medical School and founder of the Yale School of Nursing), and Irving Fisher²⁴ (Prominent Yale Economist) each played pivotal roles in integrating eugenics within their respective fields.²⁵

However, it still remains important to consider the way in which different organizations and institutions still function in a manner that is eugenicist. Further, eugenics is a social project, not just an individual endeavor. For every name mentioned, thousands of other integral collaborators for these eugenic projects go forgotten. Worse still, there remains an economic impetus to maintain eugenic logic across industries due to the ableism inherent in the capitalist structuring of society.

Part III: Current Eugenics and Disability Justice

From Theodore Roosevelt²⁶, Woodrow Wilson²⁷, and Howard Taft in the early 1900s, to Lyndon B Johnson²⁸ in the 1960s and onwards through to Donald Trump, eugenics has retained a close relationship with hierarchical power since it continually reconstitutes itself as a reactionary tool against socially marginalized groups of people along intersectional lines. However, here it becomes important to acknowledge how we are still exposed to eugenicist logic at present.

The education system utilizes multiple choice testing and student performance ranking systems to establish hierarchies of academic worth and intelligence. Educators often struggle to instill within their students a sense of dignity and understanding beyond the validation that they derive from so many myopic tests. Further, secondary schools and colleges establish hierarchies of human value at an institutional level through the myriad grants and resources that are promised to those who score highly and acquiesce to school rules. Meanwhile, kids deemed “problem” students are often divested of resources as they get older.

Intelligence tests have been more thoroughly integrated into the fields of psychology and education²⁹ that we engage with as educators on a daily basis. Medicalized as opposed to social models of disability continue to run rampant throughout the fields of nursing and medicine, just as we are expected to treat the symptoms of

social alienation rather than seek a systemic cure.

Bio-essentialist framings of racial identity have gone on to permeate the fields of geography and anthropology despite race being a socio-political construct. These racist frameworks continue to reverberate across our political discourse as black, brown, feminine, and disabled populations are repeatedly dehumanized in mainstream media. Meanwhile, ongoing acts of colonialism such as Israeli apartheid, the genocide of Gaza,³⁰ and the forced state of precarity for most indigenous peoples³¹ across the world continue to be supported by states and companies alike as their mass disablement continues.

By the time that many people reach young adulthood, their sensibilities and expectations for how society ought to work, what is considered fair, and what forms of social oppression and dominance are acceptable have been thoroughly molded by the mundane trappings of their daily lives. Consequently, the powers that have been prescribed unto the upper classes, imperialist nations, patriarchy, white supremacy and “able” bodies have been normalized and rendered into seemingly unquestionable and inevitable facts of existence itself. As Marx once said, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”³²

This state of affairs is most overtly displayed by many of the Trump administration’s racist remarks and ableist projects. Trump’s description of Latin American immigrants who commit murder as biologically predisposed to doing so by saying, “You know, now a murderer — I believe this: it’s in their genes. And we got a lot of bad genes in our country right now....”³³ is an example of the deployment of eugenicist propaganda to justify dehumanizing and destroying immigrant communities. Likewise, his claim that immigrants are “poisoning the blood of our country”³⁴ echoes the exact words which Hitler used to justify the Holocaust and further demonstrates the continued relevance of eugenics as a political tool for those in power.

Several commentators³⁵ and many³⁶ academics³⁷ have extensively documented the similarity between Trump’s rhetoric, his desires to evict immigrants, and plans to cut welfare spending with previous fascist and eugenic movements. This development is further exacerbated by capitalists such as Elon Musk³⁸ and other Silicon Valley billionaires who have actively embraced eugenic³⁹, fascist⁴⁰ politics that are driven by a desire for control alongside their belief that some people are more deserving of reproductive rights than others.

All of this is happening while women detained by ICE are still undergoing “unnecessary hysterectomies”⁴¹ and multiple⁴² judges⁴³ have offered plea deals for reduced sentences to women who undergo either sterilization or long-acting reversible contraceptives. This causes many women who enter the prison system or are detained in immigrant detention centers to be thrust into a struggle for the right to manage their own body while being subjected to pressure by the state to undergo sterilization. Black, Latino, poor, disabled, and trans women in particular remain continually targeted by this assault on their bodily rights.

Disabled people are greatly discriminated against in the job market for leading existences that are not deemed as economically efficient as other capitalist-managed workers. Many welfare recipients are derisively referred to as “scroungers”, “parasites”, and “welfare queens” as politicians continue to pass new means testing measures by which yet more disabled peoples may be stripped of aid and left to fight even more harshly for the means to their continued survival. People with disabilities have been documented to be roughly 2.5 times⁴⁴ more likely to be homeless than those without disabilities, while many homeless shelters are inaccessible and ill-equipped to handle people with disabilities.⁴⁵ Those with disabilities in prisons frequently find themselves abused⁴⁶ and neglected⁴⁷ throughout the prison system itself, their alleged legal

rights often wholly ignored. Meanwhile, fascistic politicians and groups across the country continue to express concerns about the falling “birth rates” in the United States and attempt to incentivize predominantly white, upper-class women to have more children.⁴⁸

Classroom Activity 3

Guiding Question 3: What are the similarities and differences between how eugenics used to be promoted as opposed to how it is currently being spread?

Students will begin by being presented with some contemporary examples of eugenics quotes in media:

Contemporary Examples of Eugenics Quotes in Media

1. “How about allowing people to come to an open border, 13,000 of which were murderers, many of them murdered far more than one person, and they are now happily living in the United States. You know, now a murderer, I believe this, it’s in their genes. And we got a lot of bad genes in our country right now.” – Donald Trump⁴⁹
2. “...when we know the complete genetic story, it will turn out that the population below the poverty line in the United States has a configuration of the relevant genetic makeup that is significantly different from the configuration of the population above the poverty line. This is not unimaginable. It is almost certainly true.” -Charles Murray⁵⁰
3. “I always said that winning is somewhat, maybe, innate. Maybe it’s just something you have; you have the winning gene. Frankly it would be wonderful if you could develop it, but I’m not so sure you can. You know, I’m proud to have that German blood, there’s no question about it. Great stuff.”- Donald Trump⁵¹
4. “The two principal race differences that I see are race differences in intelligence and in motivation...It’s no wonder there are very few black scientists, for example. ... If you have to have an IQ of 130 to be a successful research scientist, then the number of blacks in that region of the bell curve is negligible.”- Michael Levin⁵²
5. “You have good genes. You know that, right? You have good genes. A lot of it is about the genes, isn’t it, don’t you believe? The racehorse theory. You think we’re so different? You have good genes in Minnesota.”- Donald Trump⁵³

Students will then be shown quotes by a prominent eugenicist discussing his views on human worth being linked to genes:

Quotes by David Starr Jordan, founding president of Stanford University⁵⁴

1. “Poverty, dirt, and crime are the products of those, in general, who are not good material.”
2. "Wherever degenerate, dependent, or alien races are within our borders today, they are not a part of the United States. They constitute a social problem; a menace to peace and welfare."
3. "Mexico's teeming millions, ignorant, superstitious, and ill-nurtured, with little self-control... lacking, indeed, most of our Anglo-Saxon values."
4. "The dangers of foreign immigration lie in the overflow to our shores of hereditary unfitness. The causes that lead to degeneration have long been at work among the poor of Europe."

Students will then be asked to discuss and answer the following questions:

1. What was Trump saying about his own genes and Minnesotans? What about the genes of immigrants?

2. How do eugenicists refer to immigrants and poor people? What derogatory terms do they tend to use?
3. How is the issue of immigration and poverty framed by both contemporary and older eugenicists? What do they believe is the cause of poverty?
4. Which groups of people do they both tend to praise?
5. Which groups of people do they both tend to dehumanize?

Students will then do a Jigsaw activity where the class is divided into 4 Home Groups. Within each Home group, every student will be assigned different readings and documents. Students given the same reading material across Home Groups will form “Expert” Groups. After first meeting in their Home Groups, students will disperse and join their Expert Groups to discuss their respective documents. Once their Expert Group discussion is finished, they will all return to their Home Groups and share what they each learned with the rest of the Home Group.

Group 1: Eugenics, Anti-Immigration Laws Of The Past Still Resonate Today, Journalist Says⁵⁵

Source:

<https://www.npr.org/2019/05/08/721371176/eugenics-anti-immigration-laws-of-the-past-still-resonate-today-journalist-says>

Guiding Questions:

- In what ways were immigration policies shaped by eugenics?
- How did eugenics influence testing?
- How are current immigration debates and policies reflective of previous eugenic view on immigration?

Group 2: California compensates victims of forced sterilizations, many of them Latinas⁵⁶

Source:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/california-compensates-victims-forced-sterilizations-many-latinas-rcna1471>

Guiding Questions:

- How much money did the state of California compensate the victims of sterilization?
- How do the women who were sterilized feel about the state’s compensation?
- What organizations were involved in the women’s fight for legal recognition of the injustice that was done to them?

Group 3: Fighting for Disability Justice: An interview with Stacie Siebrecht⁵⁷

Source: <https://humanrights.fhi.duke.edu/story/fighting-disability-justice/>

Guiding Questions:

- In what ways did Stacie Siebrecht fight for disability rights as a lawyer?
- How does she differentiate her work as a lawyer from disability justice?
- Why does she believe that intersectionality is important?

Group 4: Disability Activists Bring Wisdom From the Pandemic to New Struggles Under Trump⁵⁸

Source: <https://wid.org/moving-from-disability-rights-to-disability-justice/>

Guiding Questions:

- What are some of the ways in which disabled people are under assault?
- How are disabled people currently fighting back and resisting oppression?
- How did disabled people organize during Covid-19?

Once everyone has finished reading and answering their questions, all Expert Group members will reconvene with their Home Groups to share what they learned. Together, the Home Groups will fill in the answers to a chart that asks the questions:

1. In what ways is eugenics still present in society?
2. What victories have been claimed in disability rights struggles?
3. Why is intersectionality important for disability justice?
4. How have disabled people managed to organize against oppression?

Part IV: Disability Justice and the Abolition of Eugenics

Much like the propaganda that shrouded the various “Great Men” of history in a cloak of purported innate superiority, so too does it continue on in the normalized state of acquiescence to the powerful. The devaluation of the exploited of the earth remains so normalized that many struggle to view marginalized communities with anything other than either fascistic disdain or liberalized pity. As a result, there remains many forms of eugenicist logic that are still accepted and even encouraged in our society to this day. Our media and workplaces are often saturated with the claim that human lives are only valuable if they are actively profitable or serve a group that reflects the interests of the ruling class.

The question of where we can go from here to abolish eugenics contains many different routes for collective activism. Disability Justice activists and scholars like Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Marta Russell alongside feminist socialist abolitionists such as Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have worked to educate and organize people. They work to highlight the capitalist and colonial dimensions of disability through lectures, podcasts, books, and building organizations such as Sins Invalid, Unidad Latina en Accion, and Critical Resistance. The goal of consciousness raising and organization building remains a key component in any fight against entrenched forms of hegemonic power.

Critical Disability activists have played important roles in analyzing the oppressive ways in which our current systems function. Oftentimes, considerations of disability is siloed into discussions of medical treatments and costs. However, these activists go on to grasp the problem by root through examining how those with disabilities are structurally undermined by the broader socio-economic system. An example of this can be found in Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant’s book *Health Communism*, where they analyze the role that capitalism plays in systemically exploiting and destroying people with disabilities. They quote socialist disability rights scholar Marta Russell as they write,

“To Russell, “people with disabilities function as canaries in the coal mine,” offering a picture of the treatment able-bodied workers should expect to experience in their lifetimes if American capitalism was allowed to

continue. Russell argued that in a society organized around the primary goal of ensuring maximum extraction and profitability in all relations, little leeway is given for the inclusion of people with bodies which do not conform to normative standards of productivity required of workers in the market”⁵⁹

In addition to this, the expansion of different concepts of health under Social Models of Disability have helped communities to come to understand disability, not as an individual problem, but as a communal project. The reorientation of reformist Disability Rights struggles towards more substantive Disability Justice movements have served to broaden public discourse and activism. Where once many activist groups had remained separate in their struggles, now more people are moving towards embracing intersectional approaches to both theorizing and organizing. The continued efforts of parents, students, and educators who have embraced elements from liberatory forms of pedagogy have allowed more students to develop a sense of historical agency and commitment to community both within and beyond the classroom.

As such, even while discussion of these topics may be difficult for some people, it remains important to stress that all sites where human life is devalued remain contested areas. Current forms of oppression and exclusion are not inevitable in all parts of life. Members of many different communities across various industries continue to strive together, not just for recognition, but a fundamental restructuring of society to create a more just future for all.

The main questions for us to consider is as follows:

1. How can we create a society that guarantees dignity, agency, health, and life to everyone?
2. Where can each of us begin?

Final Classroom Activity

Students will conclude this unit by creating a final project that explores a specific industry that eugenics has played a role in shaping.

Examples of potential research topics include:

1. Eugenics in Prisons and Courts
2. Eugenics in Treatment of Immigrants and Borders
3. Eugenics in Schools and Testing
4. Eugenics in Hospitals and Healthcare
5. Eugenics in Museums and Universities

Their projects should do the following:

1. Challenge the justifications provided for eugenics
2. Present the ways in which eugenics influenced the field
3. Discuss how people have challenged eugenics within their chosen industry in the past
4. Put forward their own views on how to further abolish eugenics going forwards

Their projects may take the form of a Slideshow, Poster, Tri-fold display board, video, audio, or whatever other creative format for presenting that they prefer. It is important that students are given the ability to conceive of their own ways to combat eugenics in addition to acknowledging the extent to which the world they currently live in functions in a deeply eugenic manner. Further, they need to learn how to ply their imagination towards critically thinking about what a world without eugenics would look like and consider ways to take

steps towards creating it.

For grading, consider using a combination of self-assessment, engagement, effort and self-grading based upon a rubric of your design. Many standardized types of assessments tend to carry with them a eugenic logic, so grading that occurs based on mutual discourse between teacher and student can be a more empowering alternative.

Bibliography for Educators

Any additional resources or citations that were used for this unit can be found in the notes section and may prove useful for any educators who want to further delve into the history of eugenics and intersectional approaches to liberation.

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Appendix on Implementing District Standards

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.

D2.His.7.9-12. Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

D3.1.9-12. Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

MW.Inq.4.e. Analyze the characteristics and causation of ongoing global problems, both past and present, using a multidisciplinary lens.

MW.Inq.4.f. Evaluate and implement strategies for individual and collective action to address global problems in classrooms, schools, and out-of-school civic contexts.

MW.His.14.a. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of industrialization (e.g., geographic features, technological innovations, access to capital, exploitative foreign policies and impact on native populations, environmental degradation, population trends, labor standards).

US.Inq.1.a. Explain how compelling and supporting questions reflect an enduring issue in United States History.

US.Inq.1.b. Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how new compelling and supporting questions emerge when engaging sources that represent varied perspectives.

US.Eco.12.a. Evaluate the impact of laissez-faire economic policies regarding corporate decision making, labor conditions, and public advocacy in the Gilded Age (e.g., monopoly, captains of industry, muckrakers, social Darwinism, labor unions).

US.His.4.c. Analyze how racism and nativism shaped perspectives about individuals and groups and influenced government policy (e.g., Red Summer, Sacco Vanzetti, eugenics movement, immigration acts in the 1920s, Angel Island, Ku Klux Klan).

US.His.2.c. Analyze the effectiveness of individual and group responses to public policies that they deem to be discriminatory.

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