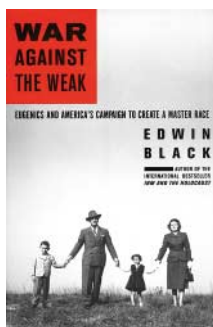


Was Nazi eugenics created in the US?

Garland E. Allen

**War Against the Weak:
Eugenics and America's Campaign
to Create A Master Race**
by Edwin Black
Four Walls Eight Windows, New York,
NY, USA
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Edwin Black's *War Against the Weak* was well known before the book ever hit the bookstores. Not only did it receive a large amount of advance publicity from the publisher and the author, but it had already

become a *cause célèbre* among historians of science working in the field of the history of eugenics, many of whom had been contacted by Black during the course of the book's preparation. It was billed as a far-reaching revision of our understanding of eugenics that would "tear away the thickets of mystery surrounding the eugenics movement around the world." The author's central thesis is that Nazi racial hygiene and its ultimate manifestations in the Holocaust were imported lock, stock and barrel from the USA, and that, indeed, it was US ruling elites who hatched the idea of creating a master Aryan race by selective breeding and then passed it along to the Nazis. More specifically, Black argues that the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the Carnegie Institution of Washington (CIW) funded much of the American-based movement, both at home and abroad, and so sat in the driver's seat guiding Nazi racial hygienists along their fateful path.

I am not opposed by nature to what are often called (pejoratively by historians)

'conspiracy theories'—meaning the claims that certain developments in history are planned or orchestrated by groups, usually highly privileged elites, who work behind the scenes. I am prepared to recognize that special-interest groups, particularly those who have held or still hold the reins of national and international capital, make plans and fund all sorts of movements and operations that they think will be to their benefit. Long ago, I even made a claim of this sort to account for why the CIW and Harriman family interests would have taken up the funding of eugenics in the USA in the early decades of the twentieth century (*Genetics* 79: 29–45 (1975)). So, it is not Black's persuasion that 'big-money' interests in the USA supported eugenics for class-based interests that bothers me; it is the claim that interest in eugenical theory and its use to create a master Aryan race were developed primarily in the USA and exported to Germany as the foundation for later Nazi racial hygiene. Such a claim ignores the results of a whole host of recent, detailed and sophisticated historical studies that trace the origin of eugenics movements in a wide range of countries, especially Germany and the USA.

Black's book covers much of the ground that has now become familiar through a wide variety of scholarly, as well as popular, writings on the history of eugenics: its first formulation in the writings of Francis Galton; the concern, around the turn of the twentieth century, about racial degeneration, both in Europe and the USA; the incorporation of Mendelian genetics into much of eugenical thought (especially in the USA); and the role of eugenicists (particularly in the USA before 1933) in passing legislation legalizing compulsory sterilization, immigration restriction of those deemed genetically unfit, and the reaffirmation or strengthening of existing anti-miscegenation laws. Black is correct in pointing out the important role of major US philanthropies, such as the RF and CIW (also the Harriman family and the Kellogg Race Betterment Foundation), in funding many

eugenical activities. The CIW had funded Charles B. Davenport's Station for Experimental Evolution (SES) at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, New York, USA, as early as 1904, although this was never an institution that focused on eugenics (*Osiris* 2: 225–264 (1986)). When Davenport convinced the Harriman family to fund a Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor in 1910, the two institutions, under Davenport's general directorship, worked side by side, although on notably different lines of research: the SES on animal and plant genetics and cytogenetics, and the ERO on human heredity and eugenics. In 1916, the CIW took over the management and funding of the ERO, with another healthy bequest from the Harrimans. Eventually, in 1939, they withdrew their support completely when an outside visiting committee reported that the research carried out at the ERO was "worthless from a genetic point of view." The RF, in its various organizational guises, also supported some eugenics-based activities in the USA, such as the Criminalistic Institute of the City of New York; however, it also focused much of its benefaction in the 1920s and 1930s on several eugenics-orientated Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes in Germany—most notably, Ernst Rüdin's Institute for Psychiatry in Munich. Both foundations also funded a range of individual eugenics projects, international meetings and publications.

Black is also correct that the American and German eugenicists were in close contact with each other, especially after World War I: they were working together in international organizations, following and even reporting on developments in eugenics in each other's countries. The Germans did, in fact, borrow much of their 1933 Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Defective Offspring (the so-called 'sterilization law') from the model sterilization law drawn up for the various states by Harry H. Laughlin, Superintendent of the ERO, and a number of American eugenicists were impressed with the Nazi eugenical laws after 1933. But all of this has long been known and written about.

So, despite the hype claiming that the book would unleash a bombshell of previously unknown findings, there is little that is new in Black's connections between US and German eugenics.

Furthermore, in enumerating these relationships, which are all true enough, Black downplays or often seems to ignore the long history of eugenics and racial hygiene in Germany itself (the two were separate in the early decades of the century but gradually became more synonymous by the 1930s). Absent from his bibliography, for example, is Sheila Faith Weiss's excellent book on Wilhelm Schallmeyer, one of the early German eugenicists who left a lasting imprint on the movement. Germany had a far more active and virulent pro-Nordic and pro-Aryan tradition than most mainstream American eugenics. And although some US eugenicists were Nordic supremacists (Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard come immediately to mind), the US movement was not primarily about creating a master race—it was about preventing what appeared to be degeneration of the 'old American stock' owing to the 'un-Darwinian' practices of allowing supposedly hereditarily defective people to reproduce. There was a lot of racism (especially focused on African Americans), nativism and jingoism in the writings of American eugenicists, but it was not primarily

couched in the overt language of Aryan/Nordic supremacy.

One could argue that although Black's work might exaggerate the American influence on the Nazis, it nonetheless reveals a more important underlying point: that genetic claims about the inherited basis of individual and group behavioural and social traits, especially when unsupported by rigorous scientific data, are dangerous, even deadly, and that we should use this insight to guard against repeating the same error in our own times. Indeed, we have been inundated in recent years with claims for a genetic basis for everything from alcoholism to criminality, homosexuality, shyness, manic depression and violence. The substrate is there for 'biologizing' our social problems and treating them with supposedly biomedical interventions (such as pharmacogenetics, gene therapy and fertility control). But Black does not, in fact, make much of whatever lessons we might learn, especially from his account. The problem with demonizing the older American eugenicists (many of whom thought they were taking the most modern, scientific and progressive approach to social problems) is that we distance ourselves from them and so can easily fall prey to our own biases today. For all his journalistic pursuit of a righteous cause, Black's conclusions about the present are remarkably

tame. He discusses all of the problems that have emerged in recent years that are associated with new genetic technologies: gene therapy, designer babies, sex selection, cloning and so on. By and large, he seems to see geneticists today working for the benefit of all mankind, as opposed to following narrow eugenical interests. But so were most geneticists in the 1920s, and that includes the perception of eugenicists about themselves. Black fails to note that many of the present claims for the genetic basis of social behaviours are no better supported than their counterparts in the past. Yet the widespread belief that such traits are biologically inherited, as frequently sensationalized in the popular press, could easily fall prey to fascist and other demagogical manipulations as we face and debate highly sensitive issues such as health care, the widespread use of behaviour-controlling drugs, and screening for 'violence' and 'criminal' genes. By having made it seem as though Germany imported its eugenics and scientific rationale for genocide, Black's book could easily lead a modern reader to miss the nascent eugenical developments that are occurring within our own society today.

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