

[Paper for South African Society of History Teachers Conference, September 2006]

## The Layering of History

A brief look at Eugenics, the Holocaust and Scientific Racism in South Africa.

Writing in 1995, Saul Dubow made the following comment, “undeniably, racism has been, and remains, an inseparable part of the structure of South Africa society. Patterns of paternalism and prejudice have been deeply embedded in the collective mentalities of white South Africans, for whom notions of superiority, exclusivity and hierarchy exist as more or less conscious ‘habits of mind’”.<sup>1</sup>

Recent experience, in the History classroom, has caused me to stop and reflect on how the ‘mind of South Africans’ – all South Africans, reflects a struggle with the past and a reluctance to think deeply about its present implications. For example, recently in a Grade 9 History class, while discussing Nazi racial theory I had a learner hold up a ‘*Nik Naks*’ chip packet and point to the ‘*Nik Nak figure*’ as an illustration of ‘a wrong’ being committed in South Africa. After further questioning it was stated that the learners felt that they were on the receiving end of ‘reverse discrimination or racism’. The discussion is one of many that I have experienced with my classes. Each time I think that I have explained our past and the implications for the present I am confronted with a new example. If Saul Dubow is correct and ‘race thinking’ is a ‘habit of the mind’ how do I as an educator begin to deconstruct this thinking for my learners and evidently for their parents?

Thinking about ‘race’ and how we ended up in a world ‘full of race’ has forced me into reading more about the theories that surround racial ideology. The Grade 11 NCS requires educators to examine what the impact was of pseudo-scientific racism and Social Darwinism on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. This includes the eugenics movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and its impact on the ideas of race and racism in Africa, the USA, Australia, Europe and particularly leading to genocide in Nazi Germany. This may be helpful, however many learners select not to do History to Grade 12 and hence the theories and practices remain unknown.

The focus of this paper is a reflection on an on-going investigation into how the eugenics movement developed and impacted on South Africa and how ‘eugenics thinking’ facilitated the establishment of a foundation of racists thinking in the minds of white South Africans which left the policy of segregation and the ideology of apartheid unquestioned and accepted as scientific fact. It is just a start.

The idea of investigating the development of eugenics in South Africa was prompted by a three-day workshop entitled *Understanding Race, Eugenics and Human Rights* that I had the privilege of attending last year at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. It was run by Stephen Feinberg from the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. It opened my eyes to a whole different world, and the international eugenics movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> *Illicit Union, Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* by Saul Dubow, Page 5.

The origins of the word race is thought to be derived from the Arabic *ras*, meaning ‘beginning’, ‘origin’, or ‘head.’ The idea that all the peoples of Europe belonged to one white race is credited to Professor Johann Blumenbach (1752 –1840). Blumenbach, a pioneer of comparative anatomy, and ‘skull analysis’ (craniometry) is generally credited with the invention of the ‘five-race scheme’ According to his analysis Europeans represented the highest racial type within the human species.<sup>2</sup> His ideas became conventional wisdom and others followed in his footsteps. In 1855 Joseph-Arthur, Comte de Gobineau (1816 –82) made the following statement: “History shows that all civilization<sup>3</sup> derives from the white race, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble race that created it. Peoples degenerate only in consequence of the various admixtures of blood which they undergo.”<sup>4</sup> This racial hierarchy was used in many cases to justify European dominance and imperialism. Although these ideas have been scientifically discredited and have ‘gone out of fashion’, for close on a hundred years they remained acceptable in scientific circles and accepted in society at large.

Race theory developed in a particular intellectual environment in which Evolution and Social Darwinism were being debated and discussed. Charles Darwin’s (1809 – 1882) ideas about evolution and the processes of natural selection and the constant struggle for existence were picked up and extended by philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820 –1903). He applied the theory of evolution to philosophy, psychology and the study of society. The result was the development of Social Darwinism, which espoused the idea of the ‘survival of the fittest’. The idea of human society being in an evolutionary process led some of Herbert Spencer’s followers to believe that society ought to weed out its unfit and permit them to die off so as not to weaken the racial stock. It was Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton that coined the term eugenics meaning ‘well born’ in 1883. Galton applied the principle of natural selection to humans, believing that the biological health of humans could be improved by ‘selective breeding’. He defined eugenics as “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally.”<sup>5</sup> The eugenics movement saw itself as fostering the public good. It believed that scientific changes to human breeding habits would solve many of the complex problems faced by modern society. Eugenicians favoured: better public health, family planning, more thoughtful preparation for marriage and education about human reproduction.

Two strains of eugenics developed. Those that argued that many of the social problems could be eliminated by discouraging or preventing the reproduction of individuals deemed *genetically unfit*. This was known as negative eugenics. On the other hand positive eugenics encouraged the reproduction of those who were deemed *most genetically fit*. Eugenic ideas began to spread around the world and societies and association were set up in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, Finland, France, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Britain and the United States. The assumption was that physical and psychological differences between individuals and ‘races’ were an indication of their relative worth. Eugenicians encouraged the reproduction of the ‘*best and the brightest*’ and discouraged reproduction of the ‘*unfit*’. They sought to isolate the genetic stock from the taint of allegedly ‘bad genes’. Those thought to be unfit included

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of craniometry see *The Mismeasure of Man*, by Stephen Jay Gould

<sup>3</sup> Jared Diamond has a detailed deconstruction of ‘civilized people’ in his book *Gems, Guns and Steel*

<sup>4</sup> *A History of Europe*, by Norman Davies, Page 734 - 735

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from *South African Journal of Science*, Vol. 21, 1924, page 498.

criminals, alcoholics, psychotics, the retarded, paupers, and those in poor physical health. This was extended to promote the purity of some 'race' groups over others and prevent racial mixing.

Eugenics in America had its origin in agricultural genetics. Every farmer knew the value of selective breeding. The man who promoted the idea of eugenics in America was Charles B. Davenport. He referred to the 'science of human improvement by better breeding'. Davenport and others set up a Eugenics Committee of American Breeders Association in 1903. This was later followed by the Eugenics Record Office, founded in 1910 and merged in 1920 with the Station for Experimental Evolution which became the Department of Genetics at the Carnegie Institution, in Cold Spring, Long Island. Their work and views were publicized in books and magazine articles. They promoted exhibitions and conducted the "fitter family" contest to encourage eugenic thinking. Interest in the eugenics movement coincided with one of the greatest eras of U.S. immigration. During the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between 600 000 and 1,250 000 immigrants entered America per year. Eugenics began to express concern that the immigrants would weaken American biological stock. Hence they lobbied for federal legislation to be 'selective' about immigration and restrict those from 'undesirable' countries. This resulted in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924.

Another aspect that was important was that of sterilization. Those deemed 'defective' were to be prevented from reproducing, thus reducing the burden of 'social dependents' who needed to be institutionalized. In America, according to Edwin Black, "elements of the philosophy were enshrined as national policy by forced sterilization and segregation laws, as well as marriage restrictions, enacted in 27 states. In 1909, California became the third state to adopt such laws. Ultimately, eugenics practitioners coercively sterilized some 60,000 Americans, barred the marriage of thousands, forcibly segregated thousands in colonies, and persecuted untold numbers in ways we are just learning. Before World War II, nearly half of coercive sterilizations were done in California, and even after the war, the state accounted for a third of all such surgeries. In its first 25 years of eugenics legislation, California sterilized 9,782 individuals, mostly women. Many were classified as bad girls, diagnosed as passionate, oversexed or sexually wayward."<sup>6</sup>

American eugenicists influenced the thinking of eugenicist around the world, and were proud of their influence on legislation in Nazi Germany. They recognized that the California Sterilization Law had influenced the drafting of the German Law to Prevent Hereditary Diseased Offspring (1933). Maria Kopp, an American eugenicist visiting Germany in 1935, claimed, "Without information regarding sterilization in California, it would have been impossible to implement the comprehensive German sterilization program."<sup>7</sup>

Eugenic theory and practice was used to justify Nazi racial ideology and ultimately resulted in the 'Final Solution' – the extermination of the Jews of Europe.

For me the question that looms larger than life is, what was the influence of eugenics on South Africa's racial ideology and practice?

According to Saul Dubow, the presence of mainline eugenic thought in South Africa became visible in the years after the First World War. The most consistent and active promoter of

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<sup>6</sup> From an article by Edwin Black, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, 9 November 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Note from power point provided by Stephen Feinberg, at conference in 2005.

eugenics was Prof. Harold B. Fantham (1876 –1937).<sup>8</sup> He presented a number of academic papers to the South African Association of Science. In these papers he claimed that ‘the ultimate factor of national decline is racial deterioration.... There are two chief ways in which human betterment can be brought about, which may be summarized as (1) improving the individual, and (2) improving the race. It is clear that one great basis is that of heredity.’<sup>9</sup> He went on to say that, ‘the development of a eugenic conscience in the community as a whole is necessary’ and that the segregation of persons with marked hereditary defects was important. These people included ‘epileptics, idiots and habitual criminals. The development of the best mental and moral strains should be the ideal.’<sup>10</sup>

In 1932 Prof. Fantham, together with Annie Porter presented a paper entitled, *Notes on some Cases of Racial admixture in South Africa*. The purpose of the paper was to summarize the effects of various racial admixtures, as seen in the descendants. The classification, ranking of the individual and racial hierarchy is evident in the text, which reads as follows (I have quoted one example in full):

#### The D. Family

Founder, German, with hints of coloured blood; foundress, Hottentot, who has never left South Africa; family 2 sons, 2 daughters. F1, eldest, son, 27, light skin, light brown eyes, with slight coffee tints to the whites; lips, full, pouting; hair with slight crimp; intellectually bright but given to bragging, conceited, dandified. F1, second daughter, G., 25, fair skin, brown hair, hazel eyes. Rather marked full lips, pigmented patches on legs which are explained as due to an accident, always ailing, flashy in dress, musical tastes, violent explosions of temper at times; married to young, fair haired, blue-eyed German, who thinks her pure German; she is in terror of her coloured blood becoming known; infant son said to be like father, but with hazel eyes. F1, third daughter A., 19, big, fair, florid rather flabby, always suffering from chest trouble; very arrogant, overbearing, bad tempered, ashamed of her mother’s side of the family, bullies her brothers, domineers over her mother; has abandoned her family name and taken another German surname; unmarried. F1, fourth, son, P., 17, resembles his mother but has European type nose; narrow chest, coughs a good deal, not really strong; skin yellowish, hair slightly crimped but shining and fine; quiet, hardworking, well spoken, kind to his mother but on bad terms with his father, as he has not mastered German.

In this family, F1 generation is physically weak and temperamentally unstable. The European influence is definite but varies in degrees. The native influence is more obvious in the two males than in the two females. There is antagonism between the whiter and less white members of the family, the former considering themselves white. The Hottentot mother is bitterly conscious of the position of her children. In her own words: “The whites look down on my family; the blacks spit at us; we are outcasts.”<sup>11</sup>

As can be seen this extract is riddled with the thinking of the eugenic movement of the 1920s and 30s. In the conclusion, Prof. Fantham and Annie Porter stated that, ‘in regard to conditions in South Africa, it would seem desirable that attention should be given to the maintenance of racial

<sup>8</sup> *Illicit Union, Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* by Saul Dubow, Page 133

<sup>9</sup> *Heredity in Man*, SAJS, no. 21, 1924, page 522 - 423

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Notes on Some Cases of Racial Admixture in South Africa*, SAJS, no. 24, 1927, page 478 - 479

purity’<sup>12</sup> It is not difficult to see how these views and others like them were embraced and propagated in order to secure a racial hierarchy in South Africa.

The use of this text in a classroom allows the educator to highlight specific aspects of racial ideology, namely:

1. Physical anthropology – the size of the lips, the crimped hair, skin pigment etc.
2. The caricaturing of people according to Social Darwinian hierarchy of race – the German, the Hottentot (an explanation of etymology may be appropriate) etc.
3. Eugenics, the idea of how racial mixing causes a ‘degeneration’ of individuals revealed in suggestions around health problems, temperament (bragging, conceited, overbearing...) and language acquisition.
4. The suggested ‘fear of discovery’, ‘antagonism between siblings’ and people becoming ‘outcasts’.

Using one extract it would be possible to explore the main ideas on which the foundation of racial thinking has been built. Newspapers from the 1930s and 40s (and even later) are helpful in allowing learners to analyze the role of the media in moulding public thinking. The example of the Empire Exhibition of 1936 comes to mind.

A lot more could be said about public health, the nature of criminality and mental testing. All of these are areas that need further explanation and deconstruction. This would require the educator to prepare notes and questions or assessments that would assist in deconstructing the ideas of the past. As yet I haven’t undertaken this task, but I must admit I would like to experiment with these ideas in my Grade 9 classes next year.

I found an interesting comment by Hendrick Verwoerd quoted in Dan O’Meara’s *Forty Lost Years*. “He (Verwoerd)...told his wife in November 1960, [when the question of Coloured representation in the House of Assembly came up] that he was not the man who would lead the Afrikaners to ‘bastardization’... he publicly rejected the plea for the representation of Coloureds as ‘a springboard for the integration of the races, leading to biological assimilation.’<sup>13</sup> This clearly reflected the influence of biological determinism, which is the essence of eugenics. More over it encouraged me to consider doing more with my classes that simply teaching the apartheid laws.

How does all this help me as a History educator in South Africa today? I think that some of the discussion above answers this question. It could be stated that the policy of segregation and apartheid established as they were on a twisting of scientific theory (pseudo-science) in order to meet social, economic and political ends has led to a complex society in which race is still very much an issue in the minds of learners. It is my belief that it is important for learners to understand the process of knowledge acquisition. How ideas influence peoples thinking and how ideas can be used to manipulate. A more detailed explanation that goes deeper than simply explaining apartheid laws is needed. Learners could be encouraged to investigate and expose the false premise and resultant thinking behind the apartheid laws that still affects our thinking today. Hence the use of the example of ‘Family D’ is a powerful window in opening a range of

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<sup>12</sup> *Notes on Some Cases of Racial Admixture in South Africa*, SAJS, no. 24, 1927, page 485.

<sup>13</sup> *Forty Lost Years* by Dan O’Meara, page 107.

preconceptions in the classroom. This together with other examples of stereotyping allows the educator to make explicit the similarities and differences between South Africa's race policy and that of the United States and Germany.

There is a lot more that could be said. For me this is just the beginning of the process and I would welcome feedback and discussion.

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