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## Review of Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race, and the Population Scare in Twentieth-Century North America, by Randall Hansen and Desmond King.

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RANDALL HANSEN AND DESMOND KING

*Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race, and the Population Scare in Twentieth-Century North America*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 314 p. \$29.99 (pbk.).

The authors, political scientists at the University of Toronto and Oxford, examine US and Canadian twentieth-century trends in coercive sterilization, which they call the eugenics movement's "crowning achievement" (p. 163). They consider their research to be a case study of an "illiberal social policy" wherein the state coercively assaults its "citizens' autonomy and control of their bodies" (p. 268). Their goal is not to offer a general account of the eugenics movement in North America, but rather to explain the North American eugenicists' relative success at sterilizing institutionalized populations from 1900 to 1945 and then, in the face of major scientific and ideological challenges, their continued success in doing so during much of the rest of the century.

Their account of eugenics during the first half of the twentieth century relies heavily on existing scholarship. They do, however, make a significant original contribution by documenting the important role that Catholic opposition to eugenics played in forestalling the adoption of compulsory sterilization laws in particular states. They offer a convincing institutional explanation for why compulsory sterilization spread so quickly throughout North America. Both the US and Canada are decentralized federations, and adoption of eugenic legislation occurred at the state and provincial level. Coercive sterilizations overwhelmingly took place in homes for the developmentally disabled, the mentally ill, and the "feeble-minded," and state legislation granted the superintendents of these homes a central role in deciding whom to sterilize.

The authors consider their major contribution to eugenics research to be their treatment of the endurance of eugenics in North America during the second half of the twentieth century. They note that the decentralization of eugenics policy early in the century helped preserve coercive sterilization even after the horrors of the Nazi eugenics campaign became well known and advances in genetics disproved much of the eugenicists' science. Because state legislators and superintendents rarely had to directly confront these ideological and scientific controversies, many state laws simply stayed in place. The authors also offer a more audacious explanation for eugenicists' continuing success in the US: "revisionist histories of the choice movement, the anti-population growth movement, and the Great Society program" (p. 5). They contend that each was guided by eugenicists who had simply adopted "new clothes" (Chapter 9) to protect them from a postwar environment hostile to classic eugenicist thinking.

These revisionist movement histories, though, are problematic. Each highlights the threads connecting the movements to a eugenic past but fails to treat them as movements with goals distinct from those of the eugenics movement itself. As a result readers are left to believe that eugenics played a central role in each. For instance, they portray Margaret Sanger as a full-fledged eugenicist who embraced the standard goals of "improving national breeding through positive and negative policy measures" (p. 46) and Planned Parenthood as a eugenic organization intent in the 1960s on "[i]nstituting the government-financed sterilization of the poor" and of providing "meaningful choices only for the middle and upper classes" (pp. 252–253). Seeing

Sanger as a simple eugenicist is odd since her goal was overturning an “illiberal social policy” closely related to eugenics: the criminalization of birth control that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Comstock and antiabortion laws passed then were a coercive state assault on the autonomy of those Americans seeking to have smaller families at the time, largely Americans of “Anglo-Saxon” heritage. Early-twentieth-century eugenicists, considering Anglo-Saxons to be among America’s most “fit stock,” strongly endorsed these laws while Sanger established a birth control movement to overturn them. She did attempt to build a coalition with eugenicists by calling for coercively limiting the reproduction of the “unfit,” but she never sought to compel any woman to have an unwanted child.

Similarly, to view the “anti-population growth movement” that arose at mid-century as a simple exercise in “cryptoeugenics” (p. 195) distorts the central goal of that movement’s major actors. Scandinavian governments, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the US government, the World Bank, and many third world leaders believed that populations doubling every 25 years as a result of the mid-century introduction of antibiotics and malaria control represented an authentic threat to their development chances and that offering women greater access to birth control might lower rates of population growth and enhance these chances. The authors simply dismiss the validity of this movement’s strategy by contending that instead of birth control these actors should have recognized that “wealth,” “procedural justice,” “democratic institutions,” “property rights,” “education,” and “proper sanitation” were what would lower fertility (p. 205). They fail to examine the extensive movement literature debating just this point, and their flawed demography—blaming mid-century rapid population growth on birth rates that “shot up” in Japan, India, China, and other parts of the developing world (p. 192)—suggests that they might be unfamiliar with it. And to see the Great Society program of Lyndon Johnson that gave voting rights to black Americans and provided a safety net for low-income Americans as having a significant eugenic goal of eliminating these populations through coercive sterilization should have required the authors to offer some explanation as to how this program could have had such apparently contradictory aims.

In these histories the authors avoided directly assessing the extent to which they believe that the choice movement, the population control movement, and the Great Society program were at their core eugenic enterprises. Avoiding such assessments heightened the histories’ “revisionist” character but only at a significant cost to their credibility.

In the last two chapters the authors usefully highlight the evolving relationship between coercive sterilization and eugenics over the course of the twentieth century. In Chapter 14 (“Those Who Sterilized”) the authors report on their interview with Dr. Robert Lampard, an Alberta physician who performed sterilizations during the 1960s at the behest of the Alberta Eugenics Board. He recounted (p. 266) the Board’s two-question protocol for making sterilization decisions: “(1) could the resident procreate? and (2) could he or she parent?” Those who could procreate but not parent were sterilized. The authors observe that with this protocol the board “had cast aside its eugenic origins and focused on the social capabilities of the parents and (if indirectly) the rights of potential children to have competent parents” (pp. 266–267). They recognize that in today’s world where having children is viewed as an individual’s right, there remains the thorny ethical question of how individuals who are incapable of raising children should be treated. Earlier in the twentieth century

widespread acceptance of eugenic thought had provided an easy answer to the question: the present and future good of society required their sterilization. This resulted in grave injustices being done to many whose potential to be adequate parents was incorrectly assessed. But what of (p. 279) “the severely mentally handicapped who could not take care of themselves much less their children”? Was *their* sterilization a grave injustice? The authors end by observing that even today, when eugenics has lost its scientific standing, the existence of such “varying categories” makes the drafting of ethical reproductive policies for the mentally handicapped “extremely difficult” and that it should be undertaken only with the greatest of care.

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## SHORT REVIEWS

*by John Bongaarts, John Casterline, Dennis Hodgson, Landis MacKellar, Geoffrey McNicoll*

LESTER R. BROWN

*Breaking New Ground: A Personal History*

New York: Norton, 2013. 224 p. \$24.95.

The onset of rapid population growth in the mid-twentieth century was alarming to many contemporary observers. Government efforts to lower fertility seemed at best to promise slow and long-term results. In the ensuing public debate, however, population experts mostly seemed to be on the sidelines, hewing to what Brown calls “the nitty-gritty of demographics.” As demographers turned inward, he writes, “the media turned to natural scientists for commentary on population growth and its effects on the demand for resources, the environment, or food security.” The main voices calling attention to the urgency of the situation—of a world surely reaching its limits—thus came from outside the field. Paul Ehrlich, biologist and environmentalist, was and remains the best-known such figure. But of nearly equal prominence in the public sphere has been the agriculturalist Lester Brown. Their interests overlap but differ in focus. Ehrlich’s prime concern has been the ever-expanding human appropriation of nature; Brown’s has been on emerging resource scarcities, notably as affecting the population–food balance. (The chief opposing voices were those of the futurist Herman Kahn and the economist Julian Simon.) Now 80, Brown in this memoir looks back over a life of high activity and significant accomplishment. He began as a young researcher in the US Department of Agriculture, gaining international experience in India in the 1950s and with the politics of food aid in the 1960s. But serious public influence came with his founding of the Worldwatch Institute in 1974. With a handful of colleagues and skillful media relations, this organization