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Eugenics

Session L14

Daniel J. Kevles, "International Eugenics," in *Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), pp. 40-59.

Lila Guterman and Francis X. Rocca, "Choosing Eugenics: How Far Will Nations Go to Eliminate a Genetic Disease?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49 (2 May 2003).

The topic of eugenics has loomed in the background of several issues we have discussed so far, especially euthanasia (fears that legalization of euthanasia would lead to euthanasia of 'undesirables') and optimizing offspring (fears that giving parents control over their offspring will lead to a 'Brave New World' of government controlled reproduction). Many of the fears have weight because of the history of Nazi Germany, where many of these slippery slopes actually occurred. This week we examine some relevant historical precedents and some of their contemporary legacies, first with eugenics and second with genetic engineering. The readings on eugenics provide an overview of the history (Kevles) and describe a contemporary program that may or may not be eugenic (Guterman and Rocca) -- you can decide.

"International Eugenics": Daniel Kevles is a leading historian of science, now at Cal Tech. He has written the definitive history of eugenics (*In the Name of Eugenics*). This chapter, which provides a broad context to a book (*Deadly Medicine*) that focuses on Nazi eugenics, covers many of the highlights. Try to get a sense of the broad outlines of eugenics, from its origins in 19th century Darwinism to its demise during the Nazi era. Note the role of scientists and other celebrities (e.g. Charles Davenport, Alexander Graham Bell, Winston Churchill), the broad political support (both liberals and conservatives), and the international comparisons. Why were people in so many countries so concerned about race (and class) purity? Why did so many states in the US support sterilization laws? Kevles does not focus on the ethical implications of eugenics. Try to imagine yourself as a scientist in the 1920s and 1930s: would you have considered eugenics to be unethical? Looking back at the eugenic movement from our modern perspective, in what ways was it ethically problematic? Why did eugenics lose popularity in the US in the 1930s? Since the emergence of molecular genetics in the 1950s, observers have worried that new genetic sciences will lead to a revival of eugenics (e.g. p. 59). Is this a realistic fear or just a fear-mongering slippery slope argument?

Guterman and Rocca, "Choosing Eugenics": Guterman is a prominent science journalist who recently completed the Knight Journalism Fellowship at MIT. In this article she describes a "eugenics" project in Cyprus -- an effort to use widespread prenatal screening and abortion to reduce the incidence of thalassemia (a disease analogous to sickle cell anemia: heterozygotes have some protection against malaria, but homozygotes suffer a severe and often fatal

disease). Why did the bad reputation of eugenics in the US and Europe affect this program? Why did parents of children with thalassemia support the program? Why did the Cypriot government support it? How did advocates convince the Greek Orthodox Church, which opposes abortion, to cooperate? The program has a series of critics, especially among academics in the US. What are their concerns? Why did her study of Cyprus make Ruth Schwartz Cowan (a prominent sociologist) change her mind about eugenics, and about slippery slope arguments? Do you think a similar program could succeed in the US -- what would happen if someone proposed a screening and abortion program for sickle cell anemia in the United States?