

The cautionary history of eugenics

Improving the human breed

By Ian Dowbiggin

OVERSHADOWED TODAY by other issues of health care is the mounting concern about the growth of reproductive and genetic technologies.

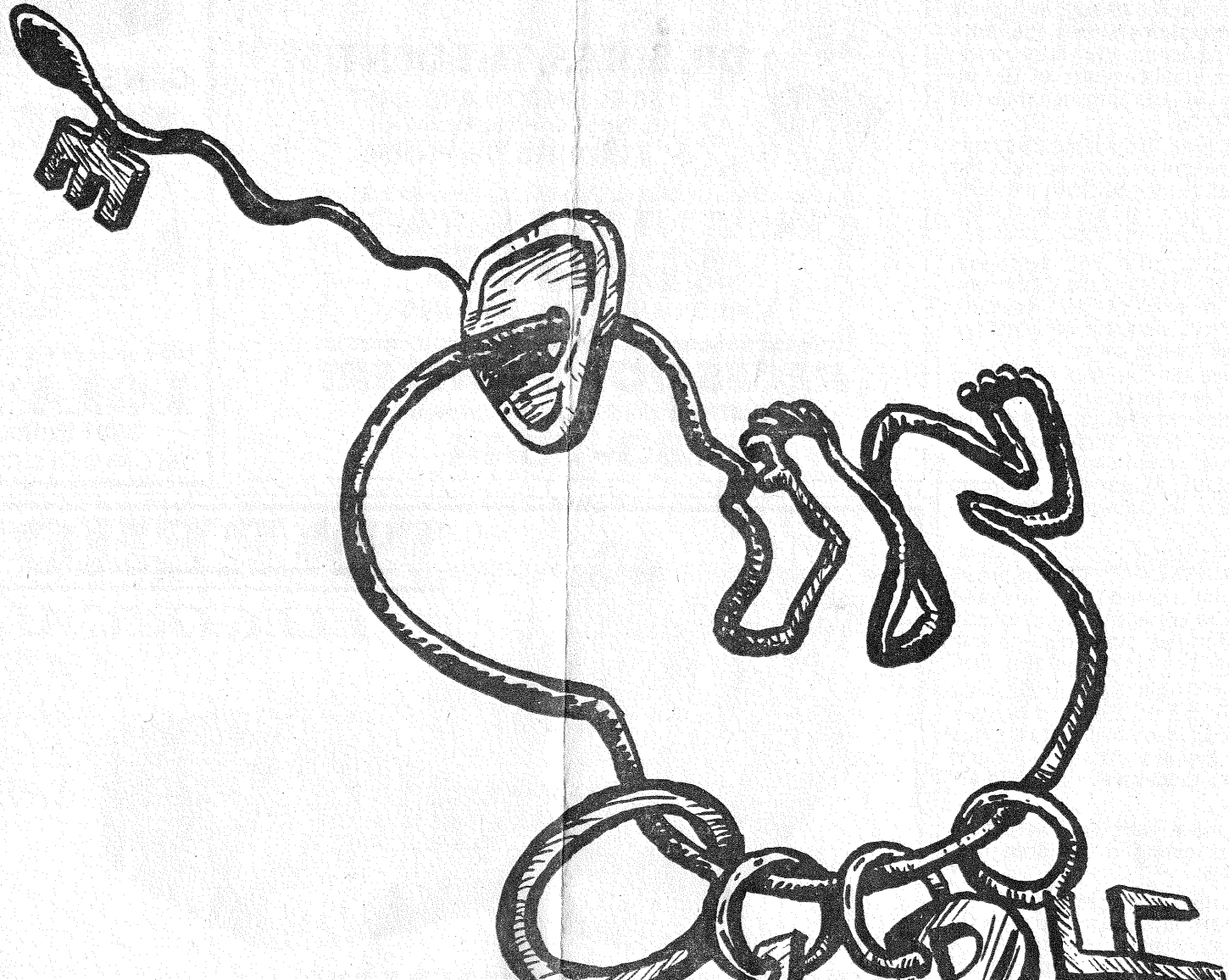
In vitro fertilization, sperm banks, gene-splicing, and genetic screening — many are alarmed that the use of these techniques will affect things like immigration policy, job prospects, health care rationing, and the freedom to bear children.

Those who think this way fear the return of the eugenics movement that swept much of the globe in the early 1900s. Eugenics is the study of the laws of heredity and how to control them so that future generations do not inherit the flaws of their ancestors.

About a century ago some countries began using eugenic ideas to justify laws authorizing involuntary sterilization of the mentally handicapped, restrictive immigration quotas against certain racial groups, and strict regulation of marriage between men and women with unhealthy family histories. The most notorious example of this trend was the race purification campaign of Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

Examples like these have convinced many that eugenics was a sinister right-wing, racist, and sexist conspiracy. They worry that the renewed interest in genetics is simply a revival of eugenics under another name.

This concern is legitimate but it rests on a misconception of what eugenics really was. What the historian of eugenics notices immediately is that eugenics was the sort of thing that most well-intentioned men and women supported to one degree or another, with the consistent



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It seemed that everyone was convinced that the application of eugenic knowledge would save society a lot of money and actually improve the quality of life for the disadvantaged. Few thought that meddling in intimate matters would create any significant problems.

The striking thing about the history of eugenics was how it appealed to people we normally associate with the political Left. Countless Socialists, trade unionists, feminists, educators, public health reformers, and birth control advocates agreed that talent, intelligence, ambition, criminal instincts, and physical health were largely inherited. Indeed, the feminist Margaret Sanger chose "To Breed a Race of Thoroughbreds" as her slogan for the American Birth Control League, while going about urging the sterilization of the mentally retarded.

In light of the Nazi atrocities, it is surprising and sadly ironic that even some leading members of the Jewish community in Canada and elsewhere publicly endorsed eugenic measures before news of the Holocaust leaked out of Germany. In other words, eugenics was not an obviously racist doctrine even to those who stood to suffer from it.

When it came to restricting immigration for eugenic reasons, some were unhappy with the prospect of cultural pluralism and readily accepted the claim by some of the more extreme eugenicists that the intelligence of many immigrants

was subnormal. But much of the opposition to immigration also came from organized labor, which resented flooding the labor market with men and women ready to work at low wages. Thus the cause of immigration restriction in Canada united groups as disparate as the Trades and Labor Congress and the Ku Klux Klan.

Similarly, though eugenicists succeeded in getting 31 American states and two provinces (Alberta and British Columbia) to pass sterilization laws, there was no clear racist or sexist pattern to their campaign or its implementation. Sterilization of whites in the U.S. South outstripped that for blacks. Sterilization of men in the United States predominated up to 1927.

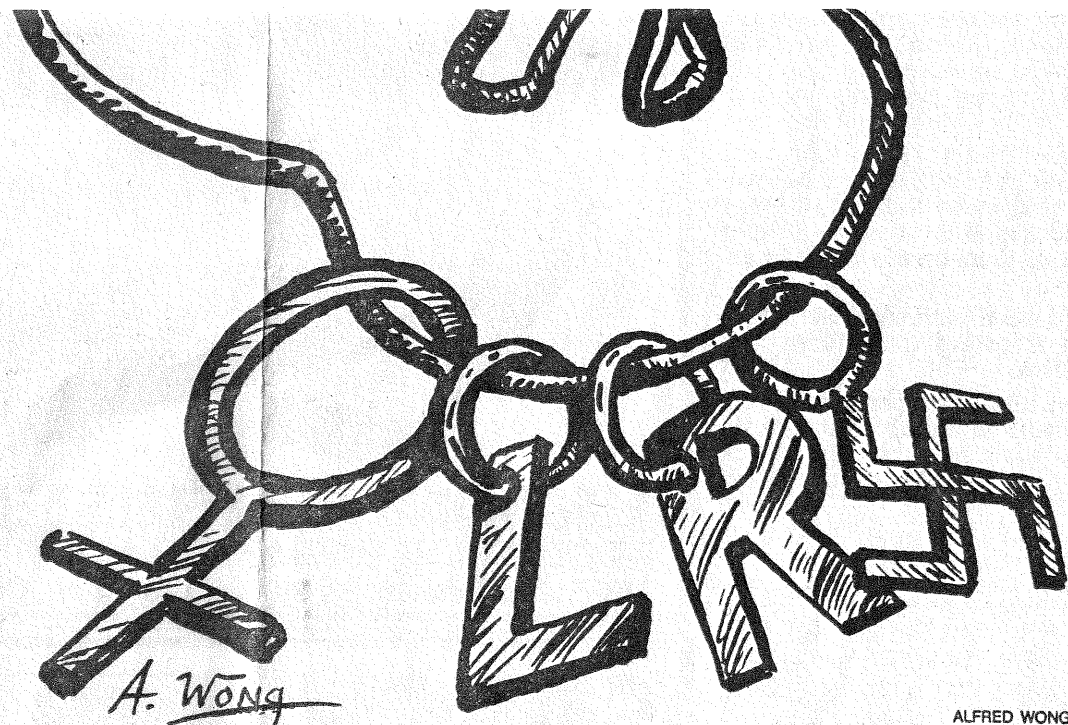
But even when the numbers of women sterilized in the United States increased substantially after the Depression, women's groups continued to endorse sterilization programs. In Canada, for instance, feminist pioneers like Nellie McClung, Helen MacMurchy, and the geneticist Madge Thurlow Macklin recommended the sterilization of the supposed-

ly "feeble-minded." As the historian Angus McLaren has shown, the National Council of Women, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the United Farm Women of Alberta also supported sterilization of the hereditarily unfit.

What probably does more than anything else to disprove the theory that eugenics was a right-wing and conservative policy is the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has consistently opposed it as a form of birth control.

But if eugenicists were not right-wing fanatics, who were they?

Eugenicists were more apt to be "progressives" than conservatives. They tended to be well-educated, middle-class men and women with a firm public conscience. They were considered in their day to be up-to-date with the latest scientific knowledge about health and disease. Many were also physicians and academics eager to jump on the nearest bandwagon if it stood to improve their status as experts in questions of public policy, regardless of the consequences for personal liberty.



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Whether this is the nature of the "new eugenics" is hard to say, but people are right to question the recent hoopla surrounding new genetic technologies. Still, it is important to do so for the right reasons. Just as eugenics defies so many popular labels, so too does the resurgence of interest in genetics.

We must realize that many of the critics of the new genetics share with the eugenicists an equally dubious scientific and historical faith in the dramatic improvable of human beings. The difference is they stress environmental rather than innate factors. What remains the same is the conviction that human nature is a malleable substance.

Recent events in Eastern Europe have shown that political regimes based on this clumsy notion are doomed. Until men and women cease believing in such alluring yet ultimately empty ideas, a return of eugenics with all its injustices will still be possible.

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