

Review of

Sex, Race, and Science – Eugenics in the Deep South
by Edward J. Larson
ISBN: 0-8018-5511-X

Daniel C. Koboldt (dkoboldt@wustl.edu)
November 2006

ABSTRACT: In `Sex, Race, and Science – Eugenics in the Deep South`, Edward J. Larson explores the introduction, theory, and practice of eugenics in the American South. Like many scholars who have studied the history of eugenics, Larson finds that the blame of eugenically unfit individuals for a plethora of social problems, together with a concern for protecting the Caucasian race, opened the door to eugenic ideals. Championed by physicians and others of the intellectual elite, the influence of eugenics was manifested in marriage restrictions, sexual segregation, and compulsory sterilization. Larson's account, however, centers on the tightly knit community of the American South, where deep traditions and religious faith shaped a distinct response as the eugenics movement swept the United States.

An examination of the title serves to introduce the central themes of Larson's exploration into the history of eugenics in the American south. Sex is a word that draws the immediate attention of any readership. Its use helps convey the eugenicists' obsession with sexual reproduction, especially the control of it in mentally deficient individuals. Sex in the context of this book, however, also refers to gender in that the author investigates the role of women from the southern upper-middle class whose associations and individual efforts played a significant part in the politics of eugenics. By race the reader might immediately assume that the book centers upon segregation between blacks and whites, but Larson suggests that eugenicists in the south were more concerned with preservation of the Caucasian race and less worried about the threat of the African race. Like many historical accounts of eugenics, the word science highlights the recent advances in genetics and evolutionary biology of the early 20th century that were used by eugenicists to make their claims. Deep South refers to the six southeastern states in the US: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi. Larson believes that these states shared a sense of tradition, commitment to families, and devout religious faith that distinguished them from other regions in the United States.

In `Sex, Race, and Science – Eugenics in the Deep South`, Larson argues that the response of the American south to the eugenics movement was very distinct. He makes a convincing argument that the response was largely shaped by two key characteristics that defined Southern society. First, family was a revered institution in the Deep South during the early 20th century. This empirical observation is supported with statistical evidence: Southern families tended to be larger and the divorce rate was substantially lower compared to the rest of the nation. Historical accounts also described how an individual's pedigree had great influence on his employment prospects and social status. Second, religious faith had greater influence on education, politics, and race in the South than in other regions of the country. Federal census data showed that church membership was more extensive and more homogenous in the South, while written reports described a greater influence of the church and clergy on Southern communities. Larson explores other characteristics that defined the Deep South, including ethnic homogeneity, agrarianism, rigid social/economic class divisions, the role of women, and a general skepticism toward science. One can easily see how these unifying tenets of the Deep South might have a profound effect on the eugenics movement.

The author also offers convincing evidence that eugenicists recognized the distinctiveness of the American south. While eugenics theories did not develop in the south, they gradually came to influence public policies and community practices in the region. Through elegant deconstruction of historical data, Larson shows that the seemingly broad eugenics movement in the Deep South was in fact a series of campaigns for state legislation by small groups of determined eugenicists. He vividly describes how eugenicists capitalized upon the prestige of Southern scientists and the influence of well-connected politicians to push legislation into law, often with little opposition. Interestingly, Larson shows that the battles over eugenic sterilization in the Deep South were also distinctive for the region; eugenicists found support in the organizations of upper-middle-class women but were strongly opposed by a powerful Roman Catholic Church. The well-organized narrative follows individuals and groups on both sides of eugenics issues, whose successes and failures are heavily influenced by Southern society.

The organization of `Sex, Race and Science` is impressive in that it follows events chronologically in a clear, concise manner. The first chapter offers a brief introduction to the Deep South at the beginning of the eugenics era, giving particular focus to

traditions that would significantly influence the region's response to the eugenics movement. In chapter 2, the author gives an overview of eugenic doctrines and practices in other regions of the United States, especially those in California. Here the author shows remarkable restraint, offering enough background to form the context and perspective for events in the Deep South while avoiding eugenics history that has been extensively covered by other scholars. The narrative begins in chapter 3, describing the initial introduction of eugenics ideas into the Deep South. Chapter 4 follows the events that led to eugenic segregation legislation in the South. In the next two chapters, Larson eloquently depicts the story as it unfolds after 1920, with the push for further eugenics restrictions eventually leading to major battles over sterilization in the Deep South. Chapter 7 takes the reader through WWII and describes the eventual repudiation of eugenics. Finally, in his concluding remarks Larson offers his personal perspectives on the eugenics heyday, drawing thought-provoking parallels between that era and the near future of modern medicine.

Part of what makes this book an enjoyable read is the elegance with which Larson interweaves his own prose with direct excerpts from historical accounts. The result is a highly fluent narrative that accurately captures the mood of the times. Larson also improves the readability of his chapters by following important events one state at a time. This does not detract from his argument for a tightly knit community in the Deep South, but does make it easier for the reader to follow key people and events of a time period. Larson demonstrates a talent for finding brief excerpts of historical accounts that summarize key ideas. For example, he describes public understanding of eugenics in the early 20th century with a 1913 quote from the Legislation Committee of the Florida State Federation of Women's Clubs, "Every State wishes to eliminate as many delinquent, defective wards as possible. In order to decrease the number of feeble-minded, insane and blind, defectives of these classes must be prevented from reproducing their kind." This excerpt not only captures the thinking behind eugenics, but it rhymes.

Examples such as these demonstrate the depth of Larson's research and the care with which he selected quotations that supported his arguments. The extent and variety of written sources cited in his notes show that Larson was a meticulous researcher. His search for evidence went beyond mainstream literature to include personal journals, committee meeting reports, documents of public record, and even the lyrics of hymns such as "There is power in the blood." Larson's true mastery, however, is manifested in his ability to present an excerpt, offer relevant contextual information, and interpret the mindset of the speaker who said it. For example, in chapter six Larson recounts the re-introduction of a comprehensive sterilization bill to the South Carolina House of Representatives by Representative William R. Bradford. "Blackburn then faced the two questions that had torpedoed previous sterilization bills in the House. 'Are insane children sometimes born to sane parents?' one colleague asked. 'Yes, but if you prevent the feeble-minded from reproducing, you will cut down on the number of insane,' Blackburn replied with care. 'Is it possible for insane parents to bear sane children?' another legislator asked. 'Possible, but not probable,' Blackburn responded, and then turned the question aside by reading a series of eugenic case histories..." From Larson we learn that the bill's sponsor "had rehearsed these answers with Blackburn, and probably planted the questions, to address the persistent objections that sterilization laws were both overly inclusive and not inclusive enough." This example illustrates just how effective Larson presents historical evidence and illuminates the people and issues that are involved, but might not be obvious. In this manner, the arguments made in 'Sex, Race, and Science' are well-supported by evidence that Larson lays bare before the reader.

This book might not be an appropriate choice for students who need a general overview of the history of eugenics. That said, I would highly recommend it for any reader interested in the eugenics movement in the United States in the early 20th century. As a reader, I found 'Sex, Race, and Science' enjoyable because Larson has a clear, concise writing style and manages to integrate an astonishing amount of historical evidence without interrupting the flow of the narrative. The organization of information at the chapter and sub-section level was exceptional. As a scientist, I find myself convinced of Larson's arguments and appreciative of the mountain of documents he must have combed to find the best evidence supporting his ideas. The concluding remarks bring to light as-yet-unaddressed questions around human genetics, artificial fertilization, and other areas that have seen major breakthroughs in recent years. For scientists and politicians who will influence public policy related to these advances, 'Sex, Race and Science' should be required reading.