International Journal of Social Science and Economics Invention

Research Paper

Eugenics and Women’s Bodies: Understanding the History of Ableism in Feminist Circles

Crow Chloupek

Abstract

This article discusses the history of eugenics starting with the beginning of the movement as a scientific justification for the incarceration and sterilization of people deemed disabled. It then goes on to describe how these practices were modified and used by the German Nazis during World War II. In the next section, three case studies are detailed where feminist movements and feminist actions have used ableism as a means of getting themselves ahead. The first explains Margaret Sanger's choices when deciding where to put her Planned Parenthood locations, the second shows a case of sterilization happening in recent history, and the third reveals a personal experience from the author where these concepts were used in their own life. The essay ends with strategies on how one can directly challenge one's own biases when it comes to ableism and ableist rhetoric, starting with recognizing ableism, then moving on to counteracting ableism through calling-in, raising the voices of disabled people, and moving toward practices of universal design.

Keywords: ***eugenics, feminism, margaret sanger, Ashley, naziism, ableism***

I. Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, the eugenics movement has made its mark on disabled bodies across the North American and European continents. From its starts as a scientific movement meant to better the human – read white – race and all of its transformations thereon, eugenics has not only tried to exterminate disabled bodies, but also black and brown bodies, women’s bodies, poor bodies, and queer bodies. While feminism has attempted – many times, successfully – to better the lives of women around the world, in many cases, eugenics arguments have been used to push down disabled people in order to raise the status of women.

In this essay, I will start by providing a detailed history of the eugenics movement in order to provide context for many of the arguments used, focusing on its roots in racially-coded biology in the United States, then moving on to its use in Nazi Germany and the attempt by Hitler to “prove” the biological superiority of the German people, then finally moving on how reactions to Hitler changed the ways we look at gender and disability back in the United States. I will then move on to showing links between eugenics and feminist theory by providing case studies. First, Margaret Sanger’s work in the birth control movement and the creation of Planned Parenthood, next, the Pillow Angel© movement with how the parents of Ashley X infantilize her through nonconsensual surgeries and hormone treatments, and lastly, a case in my own life with the organizers of the WWU Intersectional Lobby Day (WILD) using eugenics-based rhetoric in their arguments to ban chlorpyrifos. Finally, towards the end of the essay, I will focus on strategies to strike out eugenics-based rhetoric in both our daily lives and our theory.

II. History of Eugenics

1. Scientific Movement in 20th Century America

Eugenics as a scientific construct started at the turn of the 20th century, taking aspects of Darwin’s theory of evolution and the concept of “survival of the fittest” coined by Herbert Spencer[1]. Sir Francis Galton first coined the term in 1883 in a book he entitled *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*[1,2] in which he claimed that “the few best specimens of [a lower] race can alone be allowed to become parents, and not many of their descendants can be allowed to live”[3]. Already, we see that eugenics is a practice based on the genocide of those bodies and minds categorized as functioning too low to fit within their ideas of what intelligence is, as well as the clear use of race hierarchy, putting narratives of the natural superiority of certain races above others. In other terms, ableism and racism.

Using these bases, Galton, and many other scientists after him, justified their biases against not only disabled people, but also black and brown bodies[1], poor and working-class bodies[4], foreigners[1], and queer and trans bodies[5]. Indeed, the ideology of eugenics targets many groups of people who did not fit the dominant structures of the time. I will speak more on how people of color and poor and working-class people were targeted in the section on Margaret Sanger.

An important concept to which eugenicists come back, time and time again, is the idea that physical differences are the showcased indications of “fitness”[3]. For example, in Galton’s book, he focuses on the differences created by the change from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle in England in the quote, “There can hardly be a sadder sight than the crowd of delicate English men and women with narrow chests and weak chins, scrofulous, and otherwise gravely affected, who are to be found in some of these places. Even this does not tell the whole of the story; if there were a conscription in England, we should find, as in other countries, that a large fraction of the men who earn their living by sedentary occupations are unfit for military service”[3]. The beauty ideal, a concept surrounding the cultural designation of what physical characteristics are considered attractive[6], is on display here with how Galton focuses on the physical features that many English have.

He goes on to follow, “Our human civilised stock is far more weakly through congenital imperfection than that of any other species of animals, whether wild or domestic”[3]. Again, the overtones of ableism are hard to ignore in these statements. The use of the word “imperfection” shows the clear hierarchy he creates, putting abled bodies above that of disabled bodies. He also claims that this allowance of disabled bodies in our societies makes the human populace “far more weakly,” scapegoating disabled people for the positionality of humans in terms of physical and mental fitness.

While early eugenicists in the United States and England may have come up with the terms themselves, it was around 50 years later when the peak of eugenic-based rhetoric would arrive. In Germany during the Weimar Republic, the cultural milieu alongside the increasing popularity of eugenics would set the stage for the largest mass extermination in history.

2. Nazi Germany and the Holocaust

In Germany during the 1930s, an increasing shift toward National Socialism and white supremacy arose, many of the ideas of which came from eugenics. Throughout the Nazi regime in Germany, many eugenic-based practices flourished, killing millions of disabled people, people of color, Jewish people, queer people, among many other minority groups.

One striking example of ableist practices in Germany during the time was the forced sterilization of disabled people[7].Disabled people were legally sterilized in order to keep their disabilities from travelling to the next generation of children. This nonconsensual taking of disabled bodies shows that the Nazi regime did not want for disabled people to have the ability to live an unfettered life, but should rather be exterminated for the good of the German people.

Forced and coercive abortions were also heavily utilized by the Nazi regime, not only for pregnant disabled women, but also pregnant Jewish and Roma women, as well as women of other oppressed minorities during this time[7]. These abortions were meant to keep “the populations who brought the Germans misfortune” (“die Geister, die die Deutsche Unglück bringen”)[8] in check.

At a more extreme level, the Nazis also used the *Irrenanstalt* (mental asylums) as segregated death camps for disabled people. Schädlich documents this in his fiction piece entitled *Fritz* to document the life of a young man who has a mental breakdown and is sent to an *Irrenanstalt* [9]. Here, it documents that shortly before becoming interred at the camp, he loses agency over his life, things now happening to him rather than him controlling the things he does. Sadly, but accurately, Schädlich ends the piece with Fritz, the character from whom the piece is named, “…is gassed, burned in an oven, and sent back to his mother and father in an urn…” (“…mit Gas geduscht wurde, der im Backofen verbrannt wurde…der nach Hause geschickt wurde in einer Urne zu der Mutter und zu dem Vater…“)[9].

Throughout WWII, the Nazi regime committed millions of war crimes against many of the people who lived in Germany. After Germany lost the war, the Allies soon found out what happened within their borders and on how large a scale it was. While these countries openly and overtly denounced the Holocaust and eugenics-based practices, America ending many of their government institutions for eugenics, many of the eugenics-based ideologies still remain, most of which are largely mainstream, still holding vast amounts of support from the American public[1].

With this critical history and context of eugenics as an ableist and racist movement, I will now move on to three case studies of eugenics-based rhetoric and practices in feminist theory and activism which showcases the ableism which many people and ideas still have yet to unpack and disentangle. The first, “Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement,” will focus on the intersections of eugenics and abortion to effectively wipe out people of color and disabled people from the ability to have children. The second, “Ashley X and the Pillow Angel© Movement,” will focus on how nonconsensual surgeries and hormone treatments are still being used on disabled bodies by their caregivers without any form of communication. And, finally, the third, “WWU Intersectional Lobby Day,” will focus on how eugenics-based rhetoric is still being used as a justification of certain environmental regulations as well as the continuation of eugenics-based rhetoric being accepted in lawmaking bodies across the United States.

III. Case Studies in Feminist Theory

1. Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement

When speaking about Margaret Sanger’s commitment to the birth control movement, I find it firstly important to speak about why. What factors in her life contributed to her prioritization of women’s right to choose and control over their own bodies? What is the context in which she grew up that exemplified or furthered her narrative of the lack of agency for women?

The first thing that really impacted her life, causing her to critically analyze the ways in which women were being ignored, was her family growing up. She was one of eleven children birthed by her mother, Anne Purcell Higgins[1]. She went through all of the turmoil that a struggling low-income family had to go though during the turn of the 20th century in New York City. The second event that affected her life was her marriage to notable leftist senator, William Sanger[1]. These two things combined forced her to see the horrors of the control that men had over women vis-a-vis physical control over their fertility. Her marriage to William Sanger along with her intense focus towards bettering the lives of women was what really established her popularity with the women’s movements at the time[1].

With this context in mind, I will now analyze the specific rhetoric and practices she used that contributed to the growing eugenics movement at the time and positioned disabled bodies further lower in order to raise the position of women. I will start with the founding of Planned Parenthood, looking closely at where and why she positioned her clinics. I will then look at the language she used in her personal writings throughout her life.

The positioning of the Planned Parenthood clinics focused specifically on low-income and communities of color. Her first clinic was founded on Amboy Street in Brooklyn, New York[1]. During the time in which she lived, Brooklyn was very much a lower-income borough of New York City. Even her subsequent clinics, also founded in Brooklyn, further the narrative that the families in Brooklyn needed the most help. The is most effectively demonstrated by Jean Baker in her book *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion* where she says, "[by 1929,] 9,737 women, most of them mothers from lower-income families [visited the clinic]"[10]. Most of these women were lower-class because that was where the clinics were. By positioning her clinics in these areas, she furthers the narrative that low-income families and families of color need more family planning help because they are so promiscuous. We see that same racist and classist view of society on show here, furthering the disdain with which upper-class white families see others.

Beyond just the physical creation of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger also sided herself with powers that furthered eugenics-based practices through her words. In her correspondence to many notable lawmakers and leaders at the time, she made a point of using many words and phrasings commonly used by eugenicists at the time[1]. For example, throughout much of her writings in her life, she classified poor people as "human waste…not worthy of reproduction," especially using the view that "human 'weeds' should be exterminated"[1].

In Sanger's speech *The Morality of Birth Control*, she uses eugenics-based and ableist language in order to scapegoat disabled people as the burden for overpopulation in our society[11]. She claims that "irresponsible and reckless [people] having little regard for their actions" are the sole cause of overpopulation and should be stopped[11]. She continues, "Many of this group are diseased, feeble-minded, and are of the pauper element dependent entirely upon the normal and fit members of society for their support"[11]. She claims that people unable to live without a caregiver are unnecessarily populating the world and, therefore, must be stopped. She uses ableist language here, furthered by the eugenics-based rhetoric of "fitness" to construct a narrative that disabled people should be forced to use birth control, effectively sterilized.

While the debate still rages on as to whether Margaret Sanger truly supported eugenics o whether her rhetoric was simply widely accepted at the time[1]. Regardless, she used eugenics-based rhetoric and eugenics-based practices in order to garner support from upper- and middle-class white people to gain funding for women's birth control[1].

In the next section, I will focus on the Pillow Angel© movement, analyzing how the name itself depends on the infantilization of disabled bodies as well as racism and misogyny in respect to the parents of whom the movement was first named, Ashley X. I will also focus on how her parents used eugenics-based practices in their pursuit to create a smaller and more easily manageable body for Ashley X, utilizing nonconsensual surgeries and hormone treatments.

2. Ashley X and the Pillow Angel© Movement

On January 2nd, 2007, an intensely debated scientific article appeared from the Seattle Children's Hospital surrounding the treatment of a child only known as Ashley X. This article focused on the debilitation Ashley has had to go though because of her disability[12]. It detailed the ways in which her parents became her live-in caregivers, performing all essential tasks for her. In early 2004, doctors found signs of early-stage puberty in Ashley, and after conversing with the parents, the doctors decided to go ahead with high-dose estrogen treatment in order to stunt Ashley's overall adult height[12]. Later, after an intense ethical debate within the hospital, doctors decided to also go ahead and perform surgeries on Ashley X that would eliminate her ability to have a menstrual cycle and keep her from being able to grow breasts[12], effectively sterilizing her in the process.

The doctors performed these procedures on Ashley X with her parent's consent. However, without the ability to effectively communicate, she was not able to give her consent. The parents argued that, because she was unable to communicate or understand anything that went on to her, the responsibility fell onto them in order to take care of her[12]. I argue that forcing her into surgeries and treatments which she can not understand and end with sterilizing her follows a modern-day notion of eugenics by infantilizing her and completely taking away agency from her.

The parents claimed that these surgeries were meant to make her life more comfortable by negating the negative consequences of a menstrual period[12], however, this extrication of an organ takes away her bodily autonomy over her sexuality and ability to have children. Her parents even admit that by taking this away, the plan to lower the urges of future caregivers by relegating her appearance to that of a child[12]. This not only forces us, as the audience to her life, to physically see her as a child, but to infantilize her everything she does, and finally her very being. Throughout the article as well, her parents compare her mind to that of a baby, showing that even they see her as an infant[12].

Eli Clare also criticizes their choices in his book *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. His most poignant quote, in my opinion, is, "Tell me: Is it love when, in the name of nurturing and protecting your disabled daughter, you sterilize her and assure that she will never menstruate or grow breasts?"[13]. In his criticism, he focuses on the disabled women he knows, most of whom continue to have menstrual cycles, "who are all safe, comfortable, and happy"[13].

Taking a closer look at the term "Pillow Angel," we can also see the problematic bases on which it sits. It depends on the infantilization of disabled bodies, as I mentioned earlier. The general connotation of the word "angel" in Western society is something "pure" and "innocent." We as a society call things that we associate with those two adjectives an "angel," most noticeably babies. By calling disabled people such as Ashley a "Pillow Angel," we liken her predicament to that of an infant. Infantilization.

"Pillow Angel" also draws on elements of racism and misogyny. Ashley's parents, either knowingly or unknowingly, showcase their privilege in the coining of this term because Ashley is a white girl. Those same connotations of "pure" and "innocent" are most commonly associated with that or white women in our society; therefore, Ashley's parents must have capitalized on her other positionalities within our society in order to create and name their movement.

Now that I have explored two case studies within broad circles, I would like to turn the focus inward, looking at an event in my life that also used elements of eugenics and ableism. WWU Intersectional Lobby Day (WILD) used eugenics-based rhetoric in their arguments to ban chlorpyrifos in the state of Washington. I will focus on how eugenics is still prevalent in environmental research as well as lawmaking bodies across the United States.

3. WWU Intersectional Lobby Day (WILD)

In February 2019, I had the opportunity to go to Olympia as a part of group from Western Washington University to lobby our state legislators. We went under the name Western Washington University Intersectional Lobby Day (WILD) in order to keep true to the theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw surrounding the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality theory is the school of thought that says that all marginalized communities should combine their efforts in order to help better support each other and, especially, the members we share between us, who become marginalized on multiple levels.

On this trip, we were given packets of information of the specific agenda items for which we were lobbying. One such item was the move to ban chlorpyrifos in the state of Washington, a measure replicating the ones passed in Hawaii and California[14]. While I would have been fine with lobbying for the ban of such chemicals, shown to damage the environment[15], however, they decided instead to focus on how chlorpyrifos cause increased levels of learning disabilities in children[14]. This clear usage of disability as a determinant as to why we should not have chlorpyrifos shows that disability is still being used as a scare tactic, pushing people away from seeing disabled bodies as viable bodies on our society.

In fact, this scare tactic is so commonly used in environmental lobbying that when I went to conduct research on chlorpyrifos, all but one article focused on the negative health effects of pesticides – framing disability as the scary monster that lurks when we use these chemicals. These studies included links to diabetes[16], decreases in testosterone[17], and breast cancer[18]. In all of these studies, deviations from the normal are used to scare people into using these chemicals less and less, thereby inherently claiming that disability is something that should be wiped out.

This is also concerning because it means that eugenics-based rhetoric is still in wide use around the United States as a legitimate argument to our legislators. By using and framing disability as something against which we should fight, we force our disabled citizens further into a back seat which will be harder to us to get out of. This institutionalization of ableism in our society keeps disabled people from fully being able to enjoy a life made equitable to us.

In the final section of this essay, I will discuss ways to reduce the ways in which we reproduce forms of ableism and eugenics-based rhetoric and practices in our theory and activism. I will call upon arguments and points made in the previous two sections in order to provide concrete examples of the ideas about which I will speak.

IV. Striking Out Eugenics-Based Rhetoric and Practices

1. Recognizing Ableism in Our Lives

One of the most basic forms of striking out eugenics is learning the skill of recognizing ableism in our lives, both in what we say and what we hear and observe around us. By reading this essay, the requisite knowledge of how eugenics has historically halted disabled populations from being able to live our lives as we need has been gained. Even looking at the case studies in the second part of this essay showcases a few examples of how ableist structures operate in our modern-day environment. After reading this essay, other situations that parallel the terms and concepts brought up in the other two sections should be more easily found and struck out from our vocabulary. Although, I believe that this essay provides a solid foundation for the backlash against ableism, one’s job is never finished, and many other critical disability studies papers have been published, creating a wider plethora of works from which to choose when continuing research into the theory of disabled bodies.

While we like to believe that we can, it is impossible to completely avoid all forms of ableist and eugenic-based rhetoric, so it’s important to know what to do when they do come up. In the next section, I will detail three main points in practicing anti-ableism in our society: calling out and calling in others when ableist thoughts are vocalized, actively speaking out against systematic oppression of disabled people, and creating an intersectional analysis to make other liberatory movements also welcoming and inclusive of disabled bodies and minds.

2. Practicing Anti-Ableism

When in a situation characterized by ableist rhetoric, we must remain critical of those ideas while also maintaining our own safety and comfort. First assessing the situation to gauge our own safety is paramount to deescalating and calling out and calling in others who use eugenics-based rhetoric. Helping others to understand their own internal biases can make tangible step towards creating the world we want to see. By challenging language that keeps disabled people from participating in society, we can call others to think more critically at how their actions affect the people around in ways that their privilege has kept them from seeing. For example, in Eli Clare’s book, he calls out Ashley X’s parents to reconsider how they look at the actions they have committed and how that has affected the health and well-being of their daughter. He provides counternarratives to their idea of how discomfort would affect Ashley should she to have had a menstrual cycle.

It is also important to look inside ourselves and assess our own internalized ableism. We should unpack how our own narratives affect the ways in which we look at ourselves and other disabled bodies and minds. An example here is the very writing of this essay. I used this essay to help work through and unpack my own biases that I had towards the disabled community. I worked through the experience I had lobbying in Olympia to further focus my thoughts on disability and how it relates to environmental and political arenas.

Beyond simply working though eugenics-based rhetoric, we must also work through eugenics-based practices. Looking at it through a societal lens, speaking out against the systematic oppression of disabled bodies is tantamount to disabled liberation.

For abled folks, this can include speaking alongside disabled people, not over them. The Ashley X situation exemplifies this. Ashley’s parents spoke for her to her doctors, deciding what was best for her throughout her life rather than speaking to other disabled people who may have similar stories or experiences to that of Ashley. By speaking with those who relate to Ashley, her parents perhaps could have seen why their eugenics-based practices committed against her were so painful for disabled people throughout the world.

Another way that we can work towards making society accessible is to start implementing them in the events we create. Creating guidelines about standard practices to make events accessible to disabled people would go a long way toward creating a world based on universal design. I will speak more on that later. A few standard practices of which I think off the top of my head are wheelchair accessible rooms and spaces, separating things with certain allergens from the rest of the food, providing a quiet room, and providing captions for films and movies. Beyond that, also inquiring into the accessibility of other events we plan on attending will make other look into creating spaces where disabled people can access.

Universal design is a theory conceptualized in order to make spaces as accessible for as many different groups of people as possible. For what universal design pushes is the inclusion of disabled people in all aspects of life with abled people. It also takes the burden off of the disabled folks to request the access that we need, changing the environment instead to already anticipate and reflect those needs.

One third way to resist eugenics-based rhetoric and practices is through teaming up with other liberatory movements and taking an intersectional approach to identity politics in our society. By making other spaces for marginalized folks disability-friendly, we create a bond that not only links our struggles together, but also creates a space where those who share our identities can be better supported in both groups. What this also does is send a message to more privileged spaces that disabled people exist and survive. What it does is make privileged people start to question their own spaces and how friendly they are to marginalized people.

V. Conclusion

After reading this essay, what we must now do is take these skills and concepts mentioned throughout and go out and apply them in our lives. The context of eugenics as a historical practice against disabled people, people of color, poor and working-class people, women, foreigners, and queer and trans people fortifies our knowledge of how many forms of ableism still base themselves in eugenics, however overtly or covertly. The case studies provide relevant example situations from which we can find parallels in our own lives and work towards resisting the rhetoric used in such cases. And finally, I have provided strategies necessary for the striking out of ableism and eugenics-based rhetoric and practices in our lives. With this information, I expect that the lives and well-beings of disabled people around the country and globe can improve, but that depends on us, for it is not what we know that makes a difference, but rather what we do with that knowledge that makes all the difference.

VI. Works Cited

1. Shapy, Leslie M. “A Close Reading and Concept-Oriented Rhetorical and Literary Analysis of Margaret Sanger’s Eugenics-Based Discourse.” *Iowa State University*, 2016.
2. Soloway, Richard. “Book Reviews.” Review of *Love and Eugenics in the Late-Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 13, no. 4, Oct. 2004, pp. 541–545.
3. Galton, Francis. *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*. Macmillan, 1883.
4. Burch, Susan, and Lindsey Patterson. “Not Just Any Body: Disability, Gender, and History.” *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2013, pp. 122–137.
5. Lair, Liam Oliver. “Disciplining Diagnoses: Sexology, Eugenics, and Trans* Subjectivities.” *University of Kansas*, 2016.
6. Chloupek, Crow. “The Effects of Pornography in Western Society.” *Western Washington University*, 2018. [unpublished work]
7. Hunt, John. “The Abortion and Eugenics Policies of Nazi Germany.” *Lifeissues.net*, Association of Interdisciplinary Research Values and Social Change, 2002, http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/air/air_vol16no1_2001.html.
8. Goebbels, Joseph. “Wider Den Undeutschen Geist.” Bücherverbrennung. Bücherverbrennung, 10 May 1933, Berlin, Berliner Opernplatz.
9. Schädlich, Hans Joachim. *Fritz*. Reclam, 2009.
10. Baker, Jean. *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*. Hill and Wang, 2011.
11. Sanger, Margaret. “The Morality of Birth Control.” First American Birth Control Conference Closing Address. First American Birth Control Conference Closing Address, 18 Nov. 1921, New York, Park Theatre.
12. *Pillow Angels*©. “The 'Ashley Treatment': Towards a Better Quality of Life for '*Pillow Angels*'©.” *Pillow Angels*©, 17 Mar. 2012, http://www.pillowangel.org/.
13. Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke University Press, 2017.
14. Ethnic Student Center. *Legislative Agenda*. *Legislative Agenda*, Associated Students of Western Washington University, 2019. [unpublished work]
15. Women's Health Weekly. “Health & Environment; Agrochemicals, Lawn-Care Pesticides Induce Developmental Toxicity Mouse Embryos.” *Women's Health Weekly*, 26 July 2004.
16. Liang, Yiran, et al. “Organophosphorus Pesticide Chlorpyrifos Intake Promotes Obesity and Insulin Resistance Through Impacting Gut and Gut Microbiota.” *Open Access*, 2019.
17. Jones, Lisa. “Sex Bulletin.” *Men's Health*, vol. 21, no. 3, Apr. 2006.
18. Kemp, Melody. “Putting It Up Front: The Politics of Breast Cancer.” *Women In Action*, no. 1, 31 Mar. 2001.