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The art of medicine

From small beginnings: to build an anti-eugenic future

For more on the **From Small Beginnings** project see <https://www.fromsmallbeginnings.org/>

September, 1921 was unusually hot and New York was sweltering. For the many immigrants who crowded the city's tenements and pavements, one of the few places for relief from the incessant heat was the American Museum of Natural History. That summer the museum presented a new exhibition with rows of human skulls, snapshots of patients in psychiatric institutions, and the preserved brain of a serial killer. It was all terribly macabre. The immigrants among the museum's visitors who read the leaflet distributed at the entrance soon discovered that this exhibition was all about them. It included charts showing how migration eroded societies, statistics from IQ tests of arrivals at Ellis Island, and posters spouting anti-migrant rhetoric. All conveyed the same message: "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" were not welcome here.

Meanwhile, just upstairs the Second International Eugenics Congress was in full swing. The ramifications of this conference would be felt across the world. Leading eugenicists at the conference argued that the science of eugenics would enable the betterment of the human "race" by selective breeding for approved traits and through laws, policies, and medical interventions to eliminate traits deemed to be deleterious. It was clear from the papers delivered that their scientific conclusions had been predetermined. Still unknown was whether the eugenicists would be able to convince the general public of the practical application of their ideas. The choice of a major science museum to host the eugenics congress and exhibition was telling. But the nearly 10 000 visitors were a small subset of the people who were being reached by a much broader campaign to convince society of the practical benefits of eugenics. Eugenicists promoted their ideology at international exhibitions, state fairs, and zoo exhibits; and on the radio, in film, and with artworks. They collaborated with private and state institutions across the world. And they found receptive audiences among scientists, politicians, and the general public.

The early 1920s provided fertile ground for eugenic ideas. Widespread and indiscriminate death during the 1918–19 influenza pandemic followed on the heels of World War 1. In Europe and the USA nationalistic and colonial destabilisation exacerbated public fears about immigration and marginalised groups. New media helped blur boundaries between reality and fiction, with films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) helping inspire the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the USA, and similar white supremacist and far-right ideologies globally. Panic spread about the so-called "Yellow Peril" and "Red Scare"—social and political paranoia aimed at people and ideas from Asia and Russia. All this was happening in a world of stark economic, racial, and gender inequality. Meanwhile, experts across the political spectrum

proffered biological theories to explain social disparities. Against this background, it was all too easy for eugenics to take hold, fuelling beliefs that some groups are less worthy of resources and care and that some people are expendable.

A decade later the Third International Eugenics Congress took place in the same venue, with a newly revamped exhibition. The conference proceedings, entitled *A Decade of Progress in Eugenics*, testified to how successful the eugenics movement had become. In the USA, for example, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act had passed in 1924, denying entry to millions and changing the immigration patterns of the country for decades. In Germany, the Nazi party, initially endorsed by many present at the Third Congress, came to power afterwards, and went on to inflict some of the greatest atrocities known to humanity in the name of eugenic "progress". As in the USA, eugenics-inspired immigration laws in many countries closed off safe havens for Jewish, gay, and Roma and Sinti peoples, as well as other minority groups fleeing Nazi persecution.

Eugenicist ideas would go on to shape aspects of science, medicine, and politics throughout the 20th century. In the aftermath of World War 2, most scientists, politicians, the media, and the general public would distance themselves from the term eugenics. But the legacy of many of its key flawed assumptions and problematic scientific frameworks persists.

Societies must remain vigilant for the danger of repetition. In the 21st century, eugenics-based rhetoric around migration and shifting demographics have fuelled the discriminatory campaigns of some political leaders, while disinformation on social media blurs distinctions between reality and supremacist fantasies. As a century ago, pandemics and war present complex challenges globally. The wealthy 1% resemble the robber barons of the Gilded Age, funding eccentric schemes such as colonising Mars and metaverses. Meanwhile, deep inequalities and injustices persist. Many people face precarity. In some places decades of hard-fought disability inclusion is being undone. With shifting geopolitics, an escalating climate crisis, and deteriorating standards of living, it is easy to lose hope.

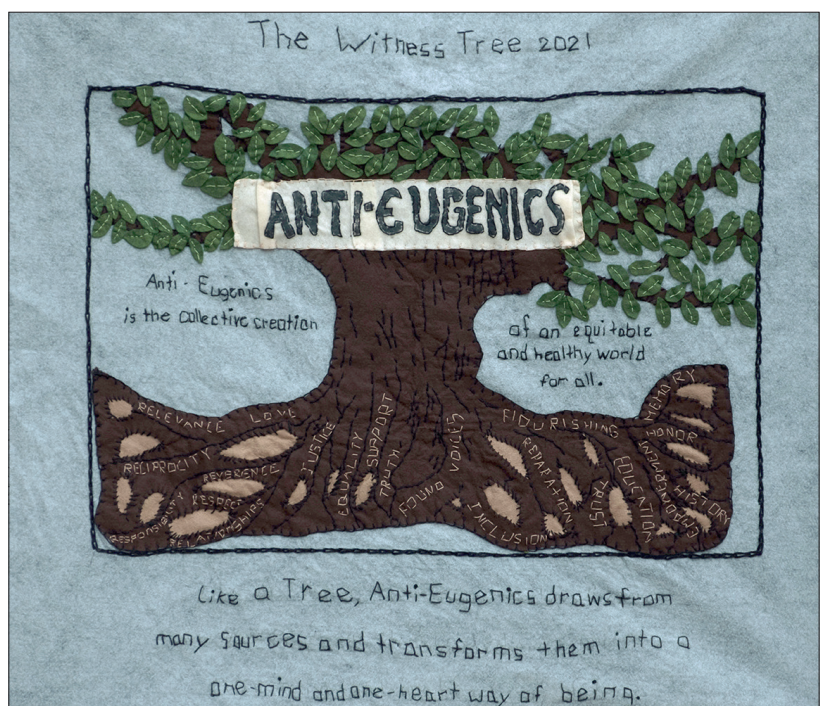
However, growing numbers of scholars, advocates, and institutions have begun to confront both eugenic legacies and their contemporary echoes, and to imagine an anti-eugenic future. Scholars have shed new light on our eugenic past. Law cases and truth commissions have been initiated, and apologies and reparations have been given or earmarked in some countries and US states for survivors of eugenic sterilisations. Foundations, museums, and universities have examined their past participation in eugenics and its present influences in their culture, research, and practice. Recent

efforts have stripped the names of eugenicists from schools, university buildings, city streets, and state parks.

We are part of a network of anti-eugenic academics and advocates called From Small Beginnings. Our project's title comes from Leo Alexander's reflection at the Doctors' Trials in 1946–7, out of which the Nuremberg Code arose: "Whatever proportions these crimes finally assumed, it became evident to all who investigated them, that they started from small beginnings". The public needs to engage in this history so that they are able to recognise those small beginnings and eugenic persuasions. People across the political spectrum and from a wide range of academic disciplines, as well as the public, were and still are capable of succumbing to eugenic temptations.

Over the past 2 years, From Small Beginnings has helped bring together anti-eugenic scholars, activists, practitioners, journalists, curators, and artists from different countries. The project seeks to engage broader publics and to build the capacity of communities that have been most targeted by eugenics to tell their stories and have them understood. It invites institutions to host their own national or regional reflections in the form of seminars, conferences, workshops, citizen assemblies, exhibitions, and other public engagement. From Small Beginnings holds that honest examination of manifestations of eugenic thinking will encourage initiatives to confront the re-emergence of eugenics. It aims to illuminate how eugenics engaged the public and became so widely accepted, and to support a range of work to confront eugenics past, present, and future. We are currently preparing the discussions, public engagement, and framework to inform what we hope will be a decade of progress in anti-eugenics. Examples of the work being planned include developing school curricula to empower future generations to take the lead; mapping acts of anti-eugenic resistance in a way that invites targeted communities to highlight their own narratives; encouraging the creative use of public spaces, especially around sites of eugenic abuses, such as institutions where forced sterilisations occurred; providing resources to encourage artists and civil society organisations to surface eugenic legacies and resistances; challenging eugenic thinking in policies on immigration, education, and health care; providing guidance and encouragement for institutions to grapple with their eugenic pasts and participate in anti-eugenic efforts; publishing a critical anti-eugenics journal to hold many of these efforts together; and engaging with the scientific community around the eugenic implications of emerging human genetic and reproductive technologies and other developments in the life and social sciences. From Small Beginnings and other similar initiatives will sharpen awareness of eugenic legacies and help counter their myriad influences in education, institutions, policy, science, and in how we conduct our lives.

In short, From Small Beginnings seeks to engage the public, civil society, scholars, and scientists with the lessons of eugenic history, and to encourage collective imagining



The Witness Tree by Judy Dow

Judy Dow is an artist, educator, and basket maker of French-Canadian and Abenaki heritage, and collector of testimonies of those targeted by the Eugenics Survey of Vermont. This tapestry was created in response to the Second International Eugenics Congress's logo of "The Eugenics Tree". Dow's tapestry recalls and reverses the infamous historical image of eugenics as a tree fed by roots labelled with the various branches of scientific knowledge. Dow depicts an anti-eugenics Witness Tree that is "the collective creation of an equitable and healthy world for all". It is fed not by statistics, genetics, mental testing, and the like, but by human values including relevance, reciprocity, love, justice, inclusion, reparation, trust, history, honour, and memory.

of an anti-eugenic future. As some governments pass on responsibilities of offering shelter to refugees and of "living with Covid" to the public, the mission of this project is as ambitious as the need is great. Having embarked on this project, we commit ourselves to working for a future where each person is equally valued, with robust commitments to social justice and human rights that will allow all to flourish.

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Further reading

The Anti-Eugenics Project. <https://antieugenicsproject.org/> (accessed May 5, 2022)
Confront Eugenics. <http://confront-eugenics.org/> (accessed May 5, 2022)
Eugenics Archive. <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/> (accessed May 5, 2022)