



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on May 18, 2012

## Scientific Racism and Progressive Education

One of the skeletons in the Progressive Education closet is Scientific Racism, otherwise known as Eugenics, which the leaders of the Progressive movement enthusiastically espoused until the Nazis in Germany gave it a bad name. The Eugenics movement had been founded by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin's, who became concerned with the low birthrate of the British elite which, he believed, endangered the future of civilization. He decided that ways had to be found to encourage the fertility of the superior stock and to discourage the fertility of the inferior stock.



To determine which individuals had superior traits, he devised a series of tests. In 1884 he formed an Anthropometric Laboratory in which he could make physical measurements of individuals. But he also needed a means of investigating psychological differences in human beings. In 1886, Galton was introduced to James McKeen Cattell, a young American who had just spent two years studying in the laboratories of Prof. Wilhelm Wundt, the world's leading experimental psychologist, at Leipzig, Germany.

Cattell spent the next two years at Cambridge University where he set up a psych lab. He was completely taken in by Galton's racial theories. In 1888 Cattell returned to the United States where he became professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1891, he moved to Teachers College, Columbia University, which became the birthplace of the Progressive Education movement. As professor of experimental psychology he built the nation's leading department of psychology. In 1904 Cattell arranged for his friend John Dewey to come to Columbia as professor of philosophy.

At Columbia, Cattell's star pupil was Edward L. Thorndike who espoused the principles of Eugenics and became America's leading educational psychologist. He devised a new theory of learning based on conditioning techniques used in animal training. His book, *Animal Intelligence* (1898), laid the groundwork for the school of behaviorism.

Both Cattell and Thorndike were active in applying the principles of eugenics to education. Like Dewey, they held an organic view of human society. Dewey wrote in his famous, *My Pedagogic Creed*:

I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. . . . Examinations are of use only so far as they test the child's fitness for social life and reveal the place in which he can be of most service and where he can receive the most help.

Implicit in Dewey's creed is the notion that individual human worth is determined by social usefulness, a concept taught today in lifeboat survival games.

The Anglo-American Eugenics movement grew in influence on both sides of the Atlantic. In England it



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was embraced by Fabian socialists because they believed that an ideal society could be produced only by “superior” people. In America, it drew such progressives as Margaret Sanger, Gifford Pinchot, David Star-Jordan, Charles W. Eliot, Emma Goldman, and such putative conservatives as Herbert Hoover and Charles Davenport. What both these conservatives and radicals had in common was their rejection of Biblical religion and their espousal of the new religion of science.

The eugenics movement persuaded Congress to pass new immigration laws to curtail the influx of “inferior” peoples from Eastern and Southern Europe. In 1921, the Second International Congress of Eugenics was held at New York’s Museum of Natural History. Its president was Henry Fairfield Osborn, who wrote in the program:

The right of the state to safeguard the character and integrity of the race or races on which its future depends is, to my mind, as incontestable as the right of the state to safeguard the health and morals of its people. As science has enlightened government in the prevention and spread of disease, it must also enlighten government in the prevention of the spread and multiplication of worthless members of society, the spread of feeble-mindedness, of idiocy, and of all moral and intellectual as well as physical diseases.

“Worthless human beings” are those who cannot produce anything of value for society. Whether or not they produce love among their families who care for them seems to be of no consideration to eugenicists. Your worth depends on your value to society, a collectivist idea.

In education, the eugenics movement led to the development of tests to measure intelligence. Lewis Terman, a student of G. Stanley Hall’s, devised a mental test that was to become the most famous of them all, one that measured the I.Q., or Intelligence Quotient. The I.Q. calculated the ratio of a child’s mental age to his chronological age, multiplied by one hundred. Terman believed that intelligence was a matter of genetic inheritance and that genetic superiority could therefore be determined by his test.

One of the earliest tests to determine racial differences was conducted by R. Meade Bache and published in *The Psychological Review* in 1895. It was a reaction-time test, using three groups of males: 12 Caucasians, 11 American Indians, and 11 American Negroes. They were tested for the speed with which they reacted to the sight of a pendulum, a particular sound, and a slight electric shock.

The Indians reacted fastest, the Caucasians slowest, and the Blacks fell in the middle. On the basis of these results, Bache determined that the smarter and more intellectually developed the individual, the slower his reaction time to ordinary physiological stimuli. From this he concluded:

Pride of race obscures the view of the white with reference to the relative automatic quickness of the negro. That the negro is, in the truest sense, a race inferior to that of the white can be proved by many facts, and among these by the quickness of his automatic movements as compared with those of the white.

In other words, a superior physical trait was now a sure sign of mental inferiority!

At Teachers College, Thorndike, who became chairman of the psychology department, taught the principles of eugenics in his books on teacher training which were widely read in the profession. In *Elementary Principles of Education*, which he authored with his protégé Arthur I. Gates and was published in 1929, he wrote:

Education, then, cannot improve the racial stock by the direct means of biological heredity, but it may do so, indirectly, by means of social inheritance. It may improve the race by teaching



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prospective parents to breed men, as they do plants and animals, by discovering the nature of the best stocks and by seeking to increase their fertility while decreasing the productivity of the poorest strains. To achieve this end, ideas and mores different from those now prevailing must be established since most persons still feel superstitious dread of tampering with the question who shall be born, though no other question so deeply affects the welfare of man.

To Thorndike, blacks were inferior and had to be treated differently in education. Thorndike's colleagues were in agreement on this issue, for the eugenics-inspired tests always seemed to provide "scientific proof" that blacks were inferior to whites. *School & Society*, Cattell's weekly publication, often reported on the results of these tests. For example, the March 6, 1915, issue published an account of tests conducted by W.H. Pyle of the University of Missouri entitled "The Mind of the Negro Child." When some of the Negroes turned out to be more intelligent than expected, Pyle commented, "It may be that the negroes living under better social conditions are of better stock. They may have more white blood in them." The issue of March 20, 1915, carried an advertisement for "The Mental Capacity of the American Negro" by Marion J. Mayo. And at the National Education Association convention in August 1915, Lewis Terman spoke on "Education and Race Improvement."

The practical results of all of this "scientific" study was the relegation of blacks to an education in keeping with their inferior station. In a speech Thorndike gave to his colleagues in 1928, he said:

I am commissioned to describe and discuss scientific researches concerning the curriculum. . . . Teachers in the course of their work observe certain facts about the results which certain courses of study have upon certain pupils and make up their minds that this, that and the other features of the course have such and such advantages or weaknesses. They then proceed to change the curriculum in so far as they have the zeal and power to do so. Many improvements have had such an origin, for example, the change in certain schools for Negroes from a predominantly literary to a predominantly realistic and industrial curriculum. . . .

Researches concerning individual differences have also exposed the fallacies of judging curricula by their products without allowances for the selection of the human material upon which the curriculum worked. . . . The differences in gain due to taking English, history, mathematics and Latin rather than English, history, typewriting and cooking is less than the difference in the gains made by very intellectual pupils . . . and average pupils taking identical programs, and is less than the difference in the gains made by white pupils and colored pupils taking identical programs.

In other words, as a result of "scientific research," pupils were now no longer being judged as individuals, but as members of different racial groups. Scientific racism had become an integral part of progressive education policy.

While Thorndike is barely remembered today, his impact while he lived was enormous. Lawrence Cremin, in his history of Teachers College, wrote:

Coming to Teachers College in 1899 at the age of 25, [Thorndike] rose within five years from instructor to full professor and head of the Department of Educational Psychology. For 40 years he served Teachers College and his chosen field, becoming in every sense the outstanding educational psychologist of his era. . . . The schoolroom was for Thorndike a "great laboratory" in which the modification of instincts and capacities into habits and powers was the central and unending subject of educational research. . . .

Like all pioneers, Thorndike inspired innumerable disciples and leaders to carry on his



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revolutionary work in education . . . . Indeed, it may well be stated that two thinkers, Thorndike and Dewey, supplied the two great formative influences of twentieth-century educational theory and together established the frame of reference in which their contemporaries and successors were to work.

In other words, the two most important influences in modern American education were a eugenicist and a socialist, and today's public schools reflect those influences. For example, most black students are not properly taught to read in American public schools. They go through a process called "learning to read," but they emerge from the process as functional illiterates, without verbal skills or writing skills, without vocabulary. This has been going on now for so long that a black underclass has emerged: that is, a significant number of blacks who simply do not have the skills needed to succeed in a high-tech society. To exist, they turn to welfare, drug dealing, and crime. Illiteracy is the plague of the black underclass even though most of them may have spent 12 years in a public school.

The horrible mess that is now public education is a direct result of the work of these men, their colleagues and disciples. The academic and moral disintegration of the system was caused by the widespread adoption and implementation of the policies based on eugenics, socialism, behavioral psychology, and humanism. As long as these basic policies remain the underpinnings of the system, no meaningful reform will be possible.



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