

Nancy Ordover: *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003

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1 The book jacket of *American Eugenics*, Nancy Ordover's lucid and unflinching account of the eugenics movement in the United States, makes a provocative claim: "The Nazis may have given eugenics its negative connotations, but the practice - and the 'science' that supports it - is still disturbingly alive in America." Fortunately, this is no casual allusion. Ordover argues that the history of eugenics, commonly thought to be the province of foreign fascists, is also grounded in American politics and culture of the past century. Indeed, as her study makes clear throughout, the record of eugenics in the United States is not even strictly historical, but ongoing, persistent, and enjoying a renewed respectability.

2 Writing passionately and with an abundance of research at her command, Ordover traces the sources and permutations of American eugenics as an ideological umbrella for a number of elite interests, each of which seeks to determine and distribute social value on the dubious basis of genes. Exposing the broad popularity of this "scientific" approach to social engineering over the past 120 years is the book's first blow to the eugenics movement. The 57 pages of Notes alone are worthy of publication and tell a moving and convincing story, ranging in just one chapter from Margaret Sanger's early *Birth Control Review* and a 1920 U.S. House Committee Hearing on *Biological Aspects of Immigration* to the more recent publishing phenomena of Murray and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve* and Hamer and Copeland's *The Science of Desire*. As Ordover suggests, the mass appeal of eugenics has been matched only by its ability to "be resuscitated, repackaged for public consumption, and hailed as brave, groundbreaking, and legitimate" once a particular form of it has been discredited (xii). A second organizing objective of the book is therefore to reveal eugenics' agility as an ideological formation.

3 While *American Eugenics* casts a wide net over eugenicist currents, it never loses sight of the depths reached in three overlapping areas: (1) the consolidation of American nationalism; (2) the regulation of sexuality and gender norms; and (3) control of women's reproduction. Indeed, the real power of the book is in the links that it finds between issues that are commonly thought of as separate-namely, anti-immigration campaigns, the biologization of queer sexuality, and the compulsory sterilization of poor women and women of color. It offers a single point of departure for a truly interdisciplinary critique of the ideological turn to biology and science, and creates new prospects for activist interventions into that field.

4 The first section, "National Hygiene: Twentieth-Century Immigration and the Eugenics Lobby," takes up the role of eugenics in nationalist and racist enterprises. It examines the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 as it constructed ideas about the American "nation" and offered a biological and quantifiable basis for national character. As Ordoover shows, standards of anatomical correctness were imposed on immigrants' bodies and legislative debates alike, with the eugenics lobby predicting dire consequences for the nation's bloodline if the "unfit" were not kept out. She traces the echoes of this thought through to *The Bell Curve's* 1994 call for IQ-based entry for immigrants and the termination of welfare, which the authors claim promotes reproduction among women with low intelligence quotients. As Ordoover notes, while the authors claim they are not "the people to try to rewrite immigration law," the book appeared shortly before the vote on Proposition 187, in which California voters sought to bar undocumented immigrants from health care and public education. *The Bell Curve's* model may have replaced racial "purity" with the more palatable standard of "competency," Ordoover argues, but its rhetoric is intertwined with previous eugenics crusades. Despite disclaimers to the contrary, it still finds an end in restrictive immigration laws, as Ordoover writes: "In the year following the passage of Proposition 187, the United States deported a record 51,000 undocumented immigrants" (xix).

5 The second section, "Queer Anatomy: One Hundred Years of Diagnosis, Dissection, and Political Strategy," examines the recent interest in discovering a "gay gene" in light of a century of medical models and interventions impressed upon (and sometimes embraced by) queers in the United States. Ordoover recounts the "medicalization of queers" since the nineteenth century, which includes psychiatric diagnoses, hormone regimens, aversion therapies, and surgery-all under the guise of "treatment." The demand for legitimacy among queers has witnessed a redeployment of the same vocabulary and once-disqualifying medical categories, to varying degrees of effectiveness. Hamer's highly publicized search for a gay gene serves as a case in point. The claim following from Hamer's research is that if homosexuality is hereditary, then it should be a protected minority status. However, Ordoover argues that eugenic thought operates through precisely this kind of "liberatory biologism," dangerously predicating civil rights on anatomy, a strategy generally used against the marginalized. One need only think of the potential use of such a genetic marking in prenatal screening and genetic engineering to understand the risks of such a strategy. Citing the backlash in legislative and cultural responses to AIDS, the twenty-eight antigay initiatives passed in the U. S. between 1992 and 1997, and the nine gay rights laws repealed, Ordoover

asks, "If queers were truly safe, would the scientific community be having this discussion?" (xxiv).

6 Ordovery's study looks not just to the political right for supporters of eugenics. As she convincingly shows, the history of American eugenics also includes the history of the refusal of liberal organizations, including some feminist organizations, to oppose what amount to state-sponsored population control measures. The third and final section, "Sterilization and Beyond: The Liberal Appeal of the Technofix," explores the liberal acquiescence to and participation in the eugenics movement by way of mandatory sterilization policies and the reliance on quick "technofixes" to divert attention away from the need for more fundamental social changes. Ordovery takes aim at Margaret Sanger and the early birth control movement's alliance with eugenics and support for income-based population control measures. She argues that this was more than a politically savvy alliance, but rather constitutes an "unabashed courtships of eugenicists" in their attempt to eliminate "not poverty but the poor." This liberal-eugenic alliance has yet to be severed. Ordovery traces its reverberations in welfare policies and medical practices in the decades that followed, including the euphemistic "Mississippi appendectomy" or sterilization, which used dubious protocols for obtaining "consent," and the latest round of reproductive technologies-quinacrine, Norplant, and Depo-Provera. *American Eugenics* offers a powerful critique of liberal assent to such "solutions," treating eugenics as an extremely agile current that can jump from right-wing causes to liberal "reform."

7 Skeptical readers of the book might wish for a more nuanced picture-if the history of bigotry Ordovery uncovers here did not make itself so spectacularly and doggedly transparent.