

When Poverty Was White

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Abstract:

Ms. Buck, sterilization, white poverty – this older history disappeared in the mid-20th century, when prosperity isolated the stigmata of poverty in black Americans. The roots of the movement for the involuntary sterilization of poor whites – the policy that Ms. Buck embodied – reach back into 19th-century social-betterment circles and an abundant social science literature on poor families.

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Full text:

CARRIE BUCK, or rather her last name, appears just once in the books of Charles Murray, the conservative sociologist and author of the recent work "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010," his portrait of the decline of poor white Americans. To find it, you have to look through the endnotes for the introduction to his most famous book, "The Bell Curve," in which he cites *Buck v. Bell*, the 1927 Supreme Court case that approved Ms. Buck's involuntary sterilization.

It's a striking omission, because her case highlights the historical blindness of Mr. Murray's narrow focus on the cultural and policy changes of the 1960s as the root of white America's decline. The story of white poverty, as Ms. Buck's story illustrates, is much longer and more complex than he and his admirers realize or want to admit.

In 1924 Virginia ordered Ms. Buck, 18 years old, unmarried and pregnant, to be forcibly sterilized. Her legal guardian appealed, and the case made it to the Supreme Court. The winning argument blamed her pregnancy on hereditary weaknesses -- in particular, her presumed feeble-mindedness. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.'s majority opinion entered history: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Involuntary sterilization was the early 20th century's remedy for what Mr. Murray blames on changes in the 1960s. But it was precisely the changes of that era – for black civil rights, women's rights, poor people's rights – and socially committed Catholicism that ended this inhumane practice.

Along the way, though, something got lost. Ms. Buck, sterilization, white poverty – this older history disappeared in the mid-20th century, when prosperity isolated the stigmata of poverty in black Americans. In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" laid blame on a black "tangle of pathology" of ghetto culture. Mr. Moynihan voiced a logic widespread at the time, translating the disarray associated with poverty into a racial trait.

And so when Mr. Murray faults poor whites' morals today, he unwittingly joins an earlier tradition of blaming the poor for their condition, whether they be black in the 1960s or white at the turn of the 20th century.

The roots of the movement for the involuntary sterilization of poor whites – the policy that Ms. Buck embodied – reach back into 19th-century social-betterment circles and an abundant social science literature on poor families.

The movement's pioneer was Richard L. Dugdale, corresponding secretary of the Prison Association of New York and secretary of the National Prison Association. He took up the scientific study of crime after the economic panic of 1873, which he blamed on unmarried sex, drunkenness and crime.

After visiting county and state jails, Mr. Dugdale published a report destined for greatness: "The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity, Also Further Studies of Criminals." By Mr. Dugdale's calculation, the "fornication," "crime," "prostitution," "bastardy," "intemperance" and "disease" of generations of the pseudonymous Jukes family had cost New York State a staggering \$1.3 million.

"The Jukes" found favor among penologists, social workers and social gospellers, who combined a humanitarian commitment to the poor with a scientific approach to charity. One admirer was the Rev. Oscar Carleton McCulloch of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Indianapolis. Inspired by Mr. Dugdale, Mr. McCulloch sought to make his own philanthropy scientific through research on Indiana's poor, some of whom came through his church doors.

One result was "The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study in Social Degradation," which appeared in 1888. In it, Mr. McCulloch answered a gigantic question in the burgeoning field of heredity at a time when the concept of "race" divided not just white and black, but white people themselves: How could Americans of supposedly the finest racial stocks – English, Saxon and Anglo-Saxon – engender a long history of pauperism and crime?

The answer, Mr. McCulloch said, still lay in blood, but in blood of the wrong kind. He wasn't being original when describing the English ancestors of the Ishmaelites as the "old convict stock which England threw into this country in the 17th century," but he was among the first to put it into a social-scientific context.

That logic was largely superseded in the 1910s by a seemingly more advanced approach to the persistence of white poverty: I. Q. testing. Such techniques to quantify intelligence aligned perfectly with an interventionist approach to social betterment, thanks to Charles Benedict Davenport, head of the Eugenics Record Office. Mr. Davenport stood at the hard end of a continuum of eugenic thinking, beside so-called negative eugenicists like Madison Grant, who proposed the literal elimination of people he thought inferior.

Though genes were not yet fully understood, Mr. Davenport had something like them in mind when he argued that intelligence was passed on as a single "unit trait." That unit trait could be quantified, in the words of an enthusiastic tester, as "the value of a man." (Mr. Murray made a similar argument in "The Bell Curve," though he has since moved away from I. Q. hereditarianism.)

Mr. Davenport urged Henry H. Goddard, head of research at the Training School for Backward and Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in Vineland, N.J., to test his charges. Mr. Goddard found the perfect resident, a 22-year-old he called Deborah Kallikak. His results, published in 1912 in the best seller "The Kallikak Family," invented the name Kallikak by joining the Greek "kalos" (goodness) and "kakos" (badness).

HER forebear, he deduced, had engendered two families: one upstanding, from a legitimate union, and Deborah's degenerate one, from sex with a feebleminded barmaid. Rating Deborah a "moron," Mr. Goddard concluded that she would lack moral judgment and blamed her mental handicap on her ancestry. According to Mr. Goddard, Deborah's degenerate branch counted 36 illegitimate children, 33 sexually immoral persons (mainly prostitutes), 3 epileptics (epilepsy was considered solely hereditary), 82 dead babies, 3 criminals and 8 brothel keepers. How to block the propagation of hereditary social ills? Sterilization.

States had started sterilizing in 1907 to prevent crime, idiocy and imbecility, in the parlance of the day. But some governors vetoed sterilization laws; in other states, courts invalidated the laws as cruel and inhumane, for lack of due process and for lack of equal protection.

Were sterilization to prevail, expert guidance was needed, and Mr. Davenport's Eugenics Record Office supplied it in the form of a model sterilization law devised to withstand court challenge. Virginia passed the first such act in 1924.

The first person slated for sterilization under Virginia's new law was Carrie Buck, the daughter of an unmarried mother living in the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded. Since both mother and daughter had been designated as feebleminded, her sterilization was deemed necessary to halt the propagation of "the shiftless, ignorant and worthless class of anti-social whites of the South." After her sterilization, she lived an otherwise normal adult life.

Along with Ms. Buck, some 65,000 Americans were sterilized before 1968. Virginia repealed its sterilization law in 1974, and in 2002 the state placed a commemorative marker to Buck v. Bell in Ms. Buck's hometown of Charlottesville. The governor issued a formal apology.

Involuntary sterilization is no longer legal, and intelligence is recognized as a complex interplay between biology and environment. Indeed, the 1960s, the era that Mr. Murray blames for the moral failings that have driven poor and middle-class white America apart, was the very same era that stemmed the human rights abuse of involuntary sterilization. (Not coincidentally, it was the same era that began addressing the discrimination that entrenched black poverty as well.)

The stigmatization of poor white families more than a century ago should provide a warning: behaviors that seem to have begun in the 1960s belong to a much longer and more complex history than ideologically driven writers like Mr. Murray would have us believe.

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Photograph

Carrie Buck with Her Mother, Emma, Perhaps for the First Time Since Her Childhood, On the Day Before the Trial That Led to Her Sterilization. (Photograph by Arthur Estabrook Papers, Special Collections and Archives, State University of New York at Albany)