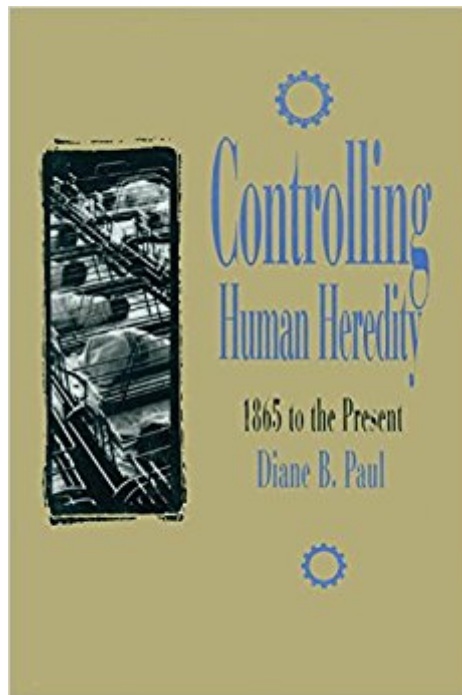




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Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 To The Present (Control Of Nature)



Synopsis

In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, it was widely assumed that society ought to foster the breeding of those who possessed favorable traits and discourage the breeding of those who did not. Controlled human breeding, or "eugenics" as it was called, was a movement with broad support that lasted into the 1930s. In this concise historical account, the author answers the questions of why eugenics, the search for means to propagate only "good genes," was so attractive earlier in the the twentieth century, why it then fell into disrepute, and whether it has returned today in the new guise of genetic counseling.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This is an excellent book and deserves a wide readership."-Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences

Diane B. Paul is the author of Controlling Human Heredity, The Politics of Heredity: Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine, and the Nature-Nurture Debate, and The PKU Paradox: A Short History of a Genetic Disease. She has been a visiting scholar in the ethics and health program at Harvard University, an associate in zoology at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, and professor emerita of political science at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Fantastic book. Smooth reading and great flow from chapter to chapter.

When the book arrived, it was bent and dented on the front cover, binding, and backside, almost to the point of ripping the pages. Actually, the spine has a small rip through it already; however, the rest of the pages remain sufficient. I do not recall if I bought the book new or used, but there is a "new book" sticker on it. If I bought it new, I would be very dissatisfied by the condition of the book I received it in. If used, which I am assuming as a "benefit of the doubt", then I am moderately dissatisfied. In either case, not one of my happy customer moments...

This concise book is a fine overview of the history of eugenics. It is largely chronologically organized and focused particularly on the USA and Britain. Paul covers the scientific roots of eugenics, its complex relationships with differing political movements, its interpenetration with demographic concerns about declining middle and upper class birth rates, the fate of eugenics movements in the 40s and 50s, and the relationship of modern medical genetics to eugenics. Paul starts with the widespread and to modern ears, rather naive, hereditarianism of the late 19th century and the enormous impact of Darwinism. These ideas extended across society but with very complex results. Paul takes pains to describe the great variety of ideas and motivations associated with eugenics. The evolution of eugenic ideas is quite complex and aspects of eugenics were appropriated by both conservative and reformist political movements. Paul does a nice job of concisely narrating the complex history. The impact of changes in genetics and their complex relationship to eugenics is discussed also. There is a lot of interesting detail in this book. The idea of sexual selection, for example, drove some reform efforts. Paul makes the interesting observation that the most deplorable eugenic practices were associated with the financial problems of the 1930s. The relationship of the eugenics movement to modern medical genetics and the considerable differences between medical genetics and many prior versions of eugenics is delineated well. As a concise overview, this book is excellent. Some minor drawbacks are the focus on American and British genetics. The German experience is covered only briefly, mainly in relationship to American-British eugenics. In particular, some discussion of the complex interaction of the types of scientifically oriented eugenics discussed here with the sort of non-scientific racism characteristic of the Nazi movement would have been interesting. This book was published in 1995, so some aspects of the concluding section are dated. Paul is critical of the idea that non-directive genetic counseling would produce effects largely equivalent to coercive eugenics because of "human rationality" regarding the desire for normal children. This idea has definitely been vindicated. Similarly, certain forms of mass screening not as difficult as Paul implies.

Diane Paul has produced a readable and brief introduction to the history of eugenic thought. After an excellent overview chapter, Paul proceeds chronologically from Francis Galton and social Darwinism through twentieth century campaigns for sterilization and immigration restriction in the name of eugenic reform. Paul convincingly argues that eugenics has been used by proponents of a variety of causes and political persuasions, left and right. With announcements every week of the discovery of the gene for some ailment, Paul's book is both timely and important. As the debates over cloning, genetic screening, or gene therapy continue, this book will provide a much needed historical context that can only help as we reflect on today's eugenics.

It is interesting (strange actually) that the author chose to present an inherently historical topic in a non-chronological format. The book is instead organized as a series of (IMHO arbitrary) topics, and the subject is analyzed in turn from the perspective of each. In fact, there is a great deal of redundancy from "topic" to "topic", so much so in fact that reading any 20 pages of the book are as good as reading the whole. Still, those 20 pages would constitute a good introduction to the subject.

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