Framing the Moron: the Social Construction of Feeble-Mindedness in the American Eugenic Era

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This book is a welcome addition to the growing field of literature on the history of eugenics. It brings that discussion into the field of disability studies as it deconstructs how and why concerns over feeblemindedness lay at the heart of eugenics ideology. While much of the literature has rightly emphasized how eugenics programs targeted subsections of society based on racial profiling, O’Brien shows that the concept of the moron has been central to understanding theories of degeneration that mobilized reformers to enact social control measures. To accomplish this, O’Brien examines how the moron concept enlarged to embody a host of social fears. He effectively analyses a series of metaphors that relied on an expansive interpretation of the moron as a container or vessel for a wide-ranging and historically specific set of concerns about the future, and moreover, that justified radical interventions including sexual sterilization and institutionalization.

He relies on a close reading of eugenicists’ writings from the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States. At times he compares their writings with other prominent eugenicists, including Canadian feminist Helen McMurchy, British intellectuals, and a host of infamous German Nazi eugenicists. By examining the way that they wrote about and conceptualized the eugenic threat, O’Brien deconstructs the common metaphors that they used to dehumanize segments of the population that they deemed unworthy of reproduction. The book is part sociology, part linguistics, and contextually historical. Its findings place it neatly within the growing interdisciplinary field of disability studies, on account of its multi-layered approach and his overarching argument that the use of metaphors continues to influence the way that we assess human value and employ medical technology to optimize hereditary abilities and disabilities. While his argument extends into the 21st century, the crux of this study examines texts generated in the early part of the 20th century by leading American eugenicists and social reformers who were in a position to direct the eugenics movement, often as physicians or scientists but also as political figures.

After explaining his methodological approach in the first chapter, O’Brien uses each subsequent chapter to explore another set of ideas that are encapsulated in the moron: the organism or disease metaphor; the animal; war and natural catastrophes; religious and altruistic; and finally, the object. In each of these chapters he convincingly shows how 19th- and early 20th-century writings on eugenics in America relied on these metaphors, most effectively to attract support for their cause. For example, people who fell into the
rather elastic category of moron, feeble-minded or mentally defective were described as a disease, scourge or plague on the otherwise healthy society. This imagery not only reduced the individuals to sub-human organisms, but instilled fear in other parts of the population and indeed in other regions that feeble-mindedness would spread like a contagion. Similarly, in his discussion of its use as an animal metaphor he provides a close reading of texts to show how the targets of eugenics campaigns were depicted as snakes or rats, connoting their unhygienic and unwelcome existence; as rabbits to convey their propensity to multiply; or as locusts, suggestive of their swarming invasion. These two chapters, in particular, reinforce the sub-human characteristics associated with people who fell into these categories.

In the remaining three chapters, the moron metaphor moves beyond human or animal characteristics and becomes a force. O’Brien here shows how the presumed menace of the moron helped to galvanize efforts to combat its presence in society. In this way he likens the reactions to the spectre of feeble-mindedness to a war, with two clearly demarcated sides, one healthy and progressive, the other diseased and regressive or degenerative. Likewise by associating the fear of degeneracy with a calamity beyond control, such as a tidal wave, the natural disaster metaphor served to mobilise citizens to preserve themselves against, for instance, a flood of feeble-minded immigrants.

The idea takes further root as he then considers how reformers championed these metaphors as they took aim at fixing social problems. In other words, addressing the challenges created by a degenerating society became a religious pursuit, and one could go about curbing its spread for altruistic reasons. Restricting the fertility of morons or eliminating the inherited qualities of feeble-mindedness through sterilization became a noble pursuit, a Christian endeavor, and a selfless act of altruism. As O’Brien ties these metaphors together, he convincingly demonstrates how reformers could justify identifying citizens as parasites and then offer to help reform them by sterilizing them. Beyond merely blaming eugenicists for their inhumane actions, O’Brien analyses the logic cultivated through the use of moron metaphors that attracted people to eugenic solutions.

As O’Brien effectively argues, the moron metaphor was an extremely powerful and pervasive component of the American eugenics movement. He uses a number of vivid examples from contemporary texts to show how these metaphors were constructed, and more importantly, how they galvanized public support for sorting people into categories and sterilizing those believed to be of low intelligence. Relying on both positive and negative eugenics, he shows how the metaphors cleaved American society in two: able and disabled. The able then fleshed out the category of moron using hyperbolic and dehumanizing language to justify a logical, Christian, middle-class response in support of controlling reproduction among those considered disabled.

Lest readers develop the idea that American eugenics assumed a different form than other regions, O’Brien makes regular reference to Nazi Germany to demonstrate the widespread use of these metaphors there and to emphasize their power. With frequent comparisons with the German-based movement, readers are reminded of the commonalities across the Atlantic and the powerful guidance offered by believing in the metaphors of disability. O’Brien is also quick to point out other influential contributors to the cultural metaphors, including Canadian and British players. Consequently, his central argument, that the metaphors themselves significantly shaped the conceptualization of eugenics, shows that this was a global, or at least a western, conceptualization and that Germany was but an extreme example of a common set of values.

These comparisons also underscore some of the racial and ethnic typologies that folded into these concepts. The history of anti-Semitism associated with Nazi eugenics is well established, but O’Brien adeptly shows how race co-mingled with concepts of feeblemindedness in historically contingent ways. For example, Japanese-Americans, even those who were born in the United States, became targets of eugenic-minded reforms during the Second World War. Race conflated with intelligence and became entangled in the language of the war, which exacerbated feelings of hostility towards Japanese Americans. In this and other examples, the literal meaning of moron or feeble-minded is overwhelmed by other considerations for the plight of people and populations who are regarded as a threat to American national progress and prosperity.
O’Brien also examines how class functions in a similar way, with lower-class workers falling prey to the same conventions. Workers, including immigrant ones, were revered as long as they contributed to building a healthy nation, but during times of recession or economic downturns they donned dehumanizing characteristics and became caught up in the eugenics discourse. Applying the moron label swiftly recast these characters as enemies of the state, or organisms threatening to destabilize progress.

By concentrating on deconstructing the language, O’Brien does not seem interested, or perhaps even convinced of the utility, of defining moron or feeble-mindedness from a contemporary standpoint. The medical, psychiatric or institutionalized experiences of feeble-minded individuals are not explored in detail. The result is an assumption that these labels applied to sub-sections of the population in politically expedient ways. However, as O’Brien makes clear in his introduction and conclusion, the history of eugenics is inexplicably connected to the history of disability, as recognizable deficits, deficiencies, or disabilities were not only recognized as genetically undesirable, but the debates over their human value continue and remain contested. Although the metaphors employed throughout much of the book move away from this discussion, the framing indicates that the discourse on disability rights continues to wrestle with these concepts, even if the language itself has been updated.

For historians, O’Brien’s format is not conventional. The book does not conform to chronology, nor does it offer a straightforward narrative that gives readers an overview of the American eugenics movement. This is perhaps not surprising given O’Brien’s training as a social worker. And, as he rightly points out, these kinds of historical accounts exist elsewhere. Instead, he teases apart the discourses on eugenics to demonstrate its linguistic legacy, or put differently, to examine how a practice viewed with contempt in hindsight could attract so many followers at the time. As a result he examines a broader culture of fear that pervades American history and that underscores the desire to participate in the creation and stimulation of metaphors aimed at dividing the population and assigning value to human behavior. Yet, for this reviewer who craves an appreciation for change over time, more chronological framing might help to clarify how these metaphors were used in particular moments and then how they changed to suit different conditions. For example, in his discussion of Margaret Sanger, the shift from sterilization as coercive to sterilization as birth control relied on some of the same language but assumed new connotations over the course of the 20th century. The shifting meaning of the terminology may complicate O’Brien’s analysis, but ultimately compliments his central focus on the significance of metaphors in shaping public discourse.

As a historian I found this book, in spite of its more sociological approach, tremendously valuable in showing how the language of eugenics established a political logic that justified significant medical interventions. It helps to remind readers that these ideas are not simply a feature of the past but are enmeshed in more recent debates concerning bioethics, reproductive technology and disability rights campaigns. Indeed we need to be cautious about judging the past when some techniques have simply altered the language to escape association with eugenic science. For instance, the more contemporary practice of aborting fetuses with known disabilities falls into controversial territory. As O’Brien points out, disability rights advocates argue that aborting fetuses on the basis of disability is a form of genocide or eugenics. By changing the metaphors and using different language to engage in what is at root a similar practice we run the risk of ignoring the more complicated ethical terrain connected with the history of eugenics, or convincing ourselves that our path is more enlightened because we no longer call it eugenics. These intriguing connections come out most clearly in the conclusion, and help to elongate the discussion by further underscoring the significance of language, discourse and metaphor to shape our historical and contemporary understanding of these issues.

O’Brien’s book is an important contribution to the literature on eugenics, and indeed on reproduction and human ethics more broadly. One small criticism is that he expects his readers to come to the subject with prior knowledge, particularly about the American eugenicists. Although his reliance on their texts to demonstrate how they socially constructed feeble-mindedness is important, it is at times difficult to appreciate the relative influence that these players had on the American stage. Individuals, such as Charles Davenport, for example, had both scientific and political gravitas and played a formative role in the eugenics movement. Other figures are perhaps less well known and it is unclear how widely their work was circulated.
or considered credible. Further detail on these individuals and how their views were understood at the time might serve to enrich the analysis and appeal to a wider readership.

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