

American Civilization: 1700
Assignment 3
20-6 Progressivism and Compulsory Sterilization (1907)
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Progressivism after 1900 was a time of societal reform. There was no clear-cut political agenda from either the Democratic or Republican parties, but at the forefront of this period was a groundswell of momentum from the American middle class to change society for the better. This was a time when America examined itself on every front and determined there was plenty of room for improvement. Many of these economic, political, and social changes attempted to right the wrongs of an unbridled industrialization period centered in larger cities of the northeastern U.S. and fueled by an influx of European immigrants, coupled with the increased mechanization of manufactured capital goods. The result of this industrial growth was a marked change in the economic makeup of the country where our once rural population and agricultural based economy was replaced with heavily populated cities centered about highly mechanized manufacturing plants and “Family Labor” textile mills. A byproduct of urban growth was the birth of a new social class; the “salaried” middle class. This new sector of society blurred the lines of social class between the opulent rich and the destitute poor that remained within the densely congested and overly polluted inner cities. As Industrialization matured, the middle class increased sevenfold between 1870 and 1910 to nearly nine million people comprising more than one-fourth of all employed Americans. As the economy continued to flourish on the backs of the poor inner city workers, others began to raise their heads and assess the social and political damage exacted against their generation. Decades of laissez-faire politics and “hands-off” economic policy, helped create monoliths of concentrated

corporate power, an oppressed working class seething with rebellion due to long hours, low pay, and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and the creation of sick and polluted inner cities designed and well oiled to mass produce consumer and capital goods but lacking any semblance of the most basic municipal infrastructure. The aftermath of decades of aristocratic economics and a “labor lords” mentality toward the lowly working class resulted in violent clashes between common workers, their employers and police, and health and safety atrocities that could not be covered up or ignored any longer. Due to increased frequency and a complete lack of governmental oversight or intervention these incidences became headline news and were reported in depth by progressive-minded expose journalists called muckrakers. These reports placed the American public on alert and mobilized likeminded citizens to take action. These efforts ranged from finding practical ways to care for and meet the basic needs of the needy and underprivileged to grand, idealistic visions of creating a utopian society. Unfortunately while on this course of reform some attempts to build a better society fell far short of their mark, substituting pragmatic progressivism with pseudo-science and social experiments gone completely wrong. In 1907 Indiana was the first state to enact a law based on the principles of “Eugenics”. Eugenics was pseudoscience that used scientific terms to explain social conditions of the day. These ideas gained popularity with academics and progressive activists. To the average working class American, the ideas of Francis Galton seemed outlandish. It was difficult for them to understand that intelligent people could believe that societies’ ills could be blamed on traits and behaviors of inferior or feebleminded people, typically referring to the mentally handicapped, the poor and targeted groups of European immigrants based on ethnicity alone. While the economy remained healthy and jobs plentiful,

the appeal of scientifically managing our society was reserved for the academics and their rich financial backers. Taking notice were progressive activists and many within the growing, progressive-thinking managerial (middle) class who held a strong faith in science to solve societies problems using rational and systematic methods. When World War I ended the once booming U.S. economy gave way to plant closures and an increased jobless rate. Though the United States emerged from the war as a dominant world power, returning troops were forced to compete with a mass of immigrant workers for menial and unskilled jobs in order to feed their families. The culmination of social, economic and political factors during the post World War I years created a time of racial strife, labor unrest, and political paranoia. A concept that was once inconceivable to the average American had been publically discussed and printed enough that it now seemed like a plausible solution to the mounting domestic problems at hand. The document 20-6 sites the Indiana law of 1907 calling for compulsory sterilization of inmates that had been deemed “unimprovable”. Historically this was a time in American history when pragmatism had not yet taken hold and producing “ends” with little thought to the “means” of achieving them was a common approach to finding solutions to difficult social, political, and economic problems. The justification for this compulsory sterilization law was equated to the public health need for mandatory vaccination in public schools. This same mindset fathered a time when scientific and systematic reasoning was revered but was conveniently devoid of all ethical or moral underpinnings. To find scientific evidence to support a course of action superseded any thought of the moral and ethical ramifications of the action and was justification enough to act upon it. The preamble of the Indiana law underscores the prevalence of this mindset due to its gross assumption that crime, idiocy, and imbecility is tied

directly to heredity. Dr. Harry Clay Sharp carried out 2,424 such sterilization in Indiana penal institutions starting in 1907. The practice was ended in 1909 by Governor Thomas Marshall who threatened to cut off all funding to those penal institutions that continued to use the law, but was not officially struck down until 1921 by the Indiana Supreme Court. An attempt to pass a similar sterilization law in 1925 was defeated by the Indiana State legislature. A law did pass in 1927 with a more limited scope regarding those targeted for sterilization. The 1907 law focused on “confirmed criminals”, “idiots”, “imbeciles”, and “rapists”. The law of 1927 targeted a smaller subset of Indiana’s penal population to the “insane”, “feeble minded” or “epileptic” and remained on the books until it was repealed in 1974. It should be noted that both laws targeted those housed in state institutions and never those in the general population. Other states followed suit underscoring the widespread acceptance of this heinous practice and the framework of the U.S. compulsory sterilization laws were used by the Third Reich during their mass extermination of Jews, and the mentally and physically handicapped of World War II to achieve and maintain their quest for racial purity.

Sources:

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Documents to Accompany America’s History – Sixth Addition