

# Tear Them Down: Old Statues, Bad Science, and Ideas That Just Won't Die<sup>1</sup>

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Monuments often lie. Political elites erect them in the name of one sanctioned collective narrative or another, and they come down by violence or by decree as historical winds shift. In 1776, American patriots toppled an equestrian statue of King George. Not one of the thousands of statues of Lenin that were once all over Ukraine is intact. The Lenins are now officially banned and have become the stone debris of another era. It is time to relegate all Confederate statues in the United States to the rubble heap or to commemorate them as images of a shameful, brutal, White supremacist lie.

In a recent Instagram post, I wondered what an American tourist would think if while wandering in German cities and towns she was repeatedly met with statues of Hitler, Goebbels, and Göring, swastikas emblazoned on buildings, and Nazi flags flying from official buildings and sports stadiums. Would the open display of these signs not be rightly read as a celebration of genocide founded on scientific ideas of racial inferiority? The Third Reich is surely part of German history. Defenders of Confederate statues continually evoke “history” and “heritage” as foggy justifications for these abominations. Media outlets obediently repeat the words to explain the position as if it were self-evident.

History is a story of the past, which can be told in many ways. Merriam-Webster defines “heritage” as 1. “property that descends to an heir” 2. “something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor: legacy” (“heritage”). What do *history* and *heritage* mean in this context? When the South seceded from the Union, forty percent of its population was Black and regarded as legal property by the Confederacy. The words *history* and *heritage* are code for White glorification of an antebellum past founded on a racial hierarchy repeatedly justified by sinister ideas of biological determinism.

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It is hardly an accident that the Confederate battle emblem was added to the Georgia state flag in 1956 after court-ordered desegregation. The message: This is Whiteland. The very same message of White ownership of the country now comes from the top. A single bullet from the ongoing presidential tweet barrage is illustrative: “This is a battle to save the Heritage, History, and Greatness of our Country!” (qtd. in Dawsey). Imagine Angela Merkel tweeting the same message to her fellow citizens about statues of high-ranking Nazi officials left standing in her country. The parallel is worth making because it helps put the current debate about monuments and symbols in perspective. It is illegal in Germany to display the swastika.

Historical parallel is not historical identity. Although the mainstream media often goes into panicked flutters whenever something “American” is tied to Hitler, I am hard-pressed to see why the buying and selling of human beings as property is not commensurate to Nazi crimes against humanity. Murder, rape, as well as physical and psychological torture were instruments of terror inherent to the institution of slavery, and they did not end with the defeat of the Confederacy. The enduring legacy of slavery in the United States is essential to the Black Lives Matter message. If George Floyd’s murder constitutes a breaking point in U.S. history it is because the image of a White man with his knee on a Black man’s neck as he slowly suffocates his victim to death is understood as part of centuries of domination and cruelty rooted in a pernicious racial ideology that has permeated all our institutions.

There are sound historical reasons to make connections between American and Nazi racism. Not only were the Nazis fervent students of Jim Crow and U.S. anti-immigration laws, racist eugenics thrived in both countries. Many of the Confederate monuments went up when eugenics was flourishing in the United States. Eugenics was hugely popular, was taught in high schools and universities as a scientific discipline, and was commonly viewed as promoting clean-living and medical hygiene.

“Hygiene and eugenics should go hand in hand,” said the Yale economics professor Irving Fisher, the first president of the American Eugenics Society in a 1921 speech. “They are really both hygiene—one individual hygiene and one race hygiene—and both, eugenics—one indirectly safeguarding the germ plasma and the other directly through breeding” (qtd. in Cogdell 188). Read “genes” for “germ plasma.” Fisher was adamant that “the biologically unfit” should be prevented from marrying.

The word *eugenic*, coined by Francis Galton (1822–1911) in the nineteenth century, means “well born” (Cogdell 3). Eugenics advocated controlling human reproduction to create a superior “stock” of human being. Galton’s science, which was based on the study of twins, statistical calculations, and his cousin Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, was explicitly racist. The catchphrase he coined “nature vs. nurture” has lived

on. Galton wanted to quantify how much nature and how much nurture went into a human trait such as genius. He always came down on the side of nature. After Gregor Mendel's genetic research was rediscovered early in the twentieth century, eugenics took hold of the American imagination in earnest with ugly consequences. White, wealthy Madison Grant founded The Galton Society with Charles Davenport and several others in 1908, an organization that stood for "preserving racial distinctions in their purity" (qtd. in Sussman 176).

Grant's book *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in 1916, is a classic eugenic text that warns against racial mixing and touts Nordic superiority as a fact of physical anthropology. The book so impressed Adolf Hitler that he wrote to Grant and pronounced the work his "Bible" (qtd. in Sussman 87). In a 1921 article in *Good Housekeeping*, soon-to-be vice-president Calvin Coolidge delivered the standard eugenic position: "Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races the outcomes show deterioration on both sides" (qtd. in Kendi 321). Anthropology was not a bulwark of consensus. It was intellectually and ideologically split on the meanings of race, but the eugenicists were devoted to the idea of pure blood and inborn psychological differences among the "races." Eugenics sought to prove Caucasian superiority by scientific means.

American sterilization laws and Nazi sterilization and euthanasia laws in the twentieth century were born of the same genetic science. Although eugenics is now regularly referred to as a pseudoscience, this distorts the truth. Pseudoscience is a word used in hindsight to disparage what has come to appear abhorrent. Anthropologists, geneticists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and large parts of the medical establishment embraced the precepts of eugenics. Brilliant statisticians, who were also devoted eugenicists, rabid racists, and followers of Galton—Karl Pearson, Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher, and Charles Spearman—provided elaborate models of calculation that were crucial to the scientific success of the discipline. Although it often served right-wing causes, eugenics had progressive advocates. W.E.B. Du Bois, a strong supporter of birth control, hoped to discourage breeding among "Negroes" who were the "least intelligent and fit" (qtd. in Roberts 77). He accepted Mendelian genetics as a way to improve the "race." Margaret Sanger advocated forced sterilization. Whether she was racist or not remains a subject of controversy.

Lewis Terman, author of the Stanford-Binet IQ test, still widely used, was another devoted eugenicist, who firmly believed that intelligence was a fixed, inherited biological trait that could be quantified. Spearman devised a statistical method for calculating general intelligence or "the g factor" in 1904. Poor Alfred Binet, the Frenchman who invented the tests as a teaching tool, was horrified with the claims made for it. Study after study in the 1920s found that IQ scores fell neatly into

a racial hierarchy. A typical study conducted in Texas placed Whites at the top, Hispanics in the middle, and Blacks at the bottom, a hierarchical mirror of earlier research on cranial size conducted by anthropologists in the nineteenth century that was used to prove polygenism—the idea that human beings were not descended from a common ancestor but were made up of subspecies, i. e., races, a science used as a justification for slavery.

The IQ studies also followed a class hierarchy. White people of the middle and upper classes were strikingly free of the taint of feeble-mindedness. Feeble-mindedness, a broad term for various forms of mental inadequacy, including moral laxity, was discovered to be shockingly high among immigrants, especially Eastern European Jews and Italians. “Not all criminals are feeble-minded,” Terman wrote, “but all feeble-minded persons are potential criminals. That every feeble-minded woman is a potential prostitute would hardly be disputed by anyone” (11). In the United States, IQ became a marker for feeble-mindedness and subsequent sterilization.

In 1914, Harry Laughlin, who had earned a doctorate in biology from Princeton and was assistant director of the Eugenics Research Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor, drafted a Model Eugenic Sterilization Law that was used as a template for the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring passed by the Reichstag in 1933. In 1936, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Heidelberg. American and German eugenicists had intimate ties. The Rockefeller Foundation funded German eugenics research at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in the 1920s and continued to fund it until 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Nazi genetic studies are also now described as pseudoscience, but Ernst Rüdin, head of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Psychiatry, architect of Germany’s euthanasia laws, is still described as the “father” of genetic psychiatry. His 1916 paper on the heredity of schizophrenia is frequently cited and lauded in the genetic literature, often with no mention of his Nazi affiliation. The Rockefeller Foundation gave a grant specifically for twin research at the Institute, which the organization knew used toxins on the subjects involved. After Hitler came to power, Nazi race science was hardly a world secret.

In 1935, the Nazi eugenics exhibition from the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum finished its successful tour of the United States. Rather than being returned to Germany, it was welcomed by the Buffalo Museum of Science as part of its permanent exhibition and was displayed in a room called Heredity Hall. Buffalo is far from Charlottesville and far from Richmond where the monument controversies are boiling, but that is the point. Nativist racism cannot be confined to any region of the United States. For the next seven years, visitors to that museum in the North digested its message of “racial hygiene” before it was taken down in 1942. In 2006, the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden mounted an exhibition of its Nazi past, its gruesome message contextualized for

the contemporary audience. Perhaps it is time for the Smithsonian to mount a massive exhibition on American eugenics, its racist uses, its sterilization campaign, and its ongoing legacy in the many U.S. laws enacted to control female reproduction, laws that have the greatest effect on poor women and Women of Color.<sup>2</sup>

Forcible sterilization laws were enacted in the United States as a direct result of eugenic ideas and were implemented by U.S. policy makers. Between 60,000 and 64,000 people were sterilized in the United States before the 1960s. But the practice continued well into the 1970s and cases in California were uncovered as late as 2010. In the 1920s, hundreds of people in institutions who had been diagnosed with dementia praecox (schizophrenia), epilepsy, manic depression, psychosis, and feeble-mindedness were sterilized. Girls viewed as immoral, loose, and unfit for motherhood, many of them poor and White, were also targets for “fixing.”

The scholar Alexandra Minna Stern notes in her paper “Sterilized in the Name of Public Health” that in the 1950s and 60s—after genetic science changed—a single recessive Mendelian gene was no longer regarded as the cause of myriad mental diseases—the operation “regained a punitive edge and, preponderantly aimed at African American and poor women, began to be wielded by state courts and legislatures as a punishment for bearing illegitimate children or as extortion to ensure ongoing receipt of family assistance” (Stern). I do not think it is coincidental that these punitive policies were put in place as the Civil Rights Movement was on the rise. It is not coincidental either that monuments honoring high Confederate officials went up mostly between 1890 and 1960. They are the symbols of ferocious racist intimidation, intimidation that had teeth.

The word *eugenics* vanished after the Second World War, but practices of reproductive control in the United States did not. Eugenics lived on by other names. By the 1960s, “Mississippi appendectomy” had become a familiar shorthand among Black women in the South. On June 8, 1964, the civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer testified before a select panel on Mississippi and Civil Rights held in Washington, D.C.: “One of the other things that happened in Sunflower County, the North Sunflower County Hospital, I would say about six out of ten Negro women that go to that hospital are sterilized with their tubes tied. They are getting up a law that said if a woman has an illegitimate baby and then a second one, they could draw time for six months or a five hundred dollar fine. What they didn’t tell you is that they are already doing these things, not only to single women, but to married women” (qtd. in Kluchin 177). What Hamer did not say in her testimony is that in 1961, she sought medical attention for a uterine tumor. The White doctor performed a hysterectomy without her consent.

Long after involuntary sterilization was banned in Germany, it continued in the United States. In 1974, with help from the Southern Pov-

<sup>2</sup> See also the special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* on (Re) Considering American Eugenics (<https://amst.winter-verlag.de/issue/AMST/2019/2>).

erty Law Center, Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf, who were sterilized in Alabama when they were just girls (14 and 12 years old), joined a class action suit, *Relf vs. Weinberger*. In his decision, Judge Gerhard Gesell found that an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 women had been sterilized under programs receiving federal funds *per year*. In his essay “Protection or Control?” Gregory Michael Dorr writes, “[a]lthough Gesell did not mention it, these sterilization rates indeed matched those of the Nazi regime in the 1930s. The only difference was that informed consent accompanied *some* of the American sterilizations” (180; emphasis in original). Gesell confirmed that minors, the mentally disabled, “and an indefinite number of poor people have been improperly coerced into accepting a sterilization operation” (qtd. in Dorr 180). A disproportionate number of those poor people, almost all of them women, were Black.

The equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia, was unveiled in 1924. That same year, Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act, which forbade marriage and sexual relations between Whites and any person with “a trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasians” (qtd. in Cashin 96). One can only wonder how such a trace could be detected. Even the Nazis, whose eugenic campaign resulted in mass murder, had less strict laws about who was officially a Jew, a *Mischling*—a person of mixed race—or an Aryan. At the same time, the Virginia legislature approved a bill legalizing sterilization of the “feble-minded.” Three prominent eugenicists in Virginia sought help from Harry Laughlin and Charles Davenport for how to draft the twin laws.

Two years earlier, Laughlin had been designated the “Expert Eugenics Agent” for the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. He testified that large numbers of the new immigrants—Jews from Eastern Europe, Italians, and Greeks—suffered from “all types of social inadequacy” (750)—feble-mindedness, insanity, criminality, and dependency. And so in 1924, the year Robert E. Lee’s imposing statue was revealed for the first time, the Johnson-Reed Act was passed by Congress. It banned all immigration from Asia and established two percent quotas based on the U.S. ethnic population of 1890, not 1920, which essentially locked out Eastern European Jews, Italians, Greeks, and Slavic peoples. If the quotas were exceeded, funds and instructions were provided for court-ordered deportation. Unsurprisingly, Hitler was a great admirer of the act. The mid-1920s also represents the moment the second Ku Klux Klan reached its height in the United States with about six million members. In 1926, 30,000 Klansmen proudly marched on Washington, many of them hoodless. They included members of Congress and state representatives happy to confirm their membership for enthusiastic constituents.

The Confederate monuments that remain standing, carefully tended by city, state, and national governments, do not represent the “Greatness” of America. They represent its shame and the shame of White people who championed or tolerated its ideology of White supremacy.

They were erected during a period when White terror operations, better known as lynching, were common and tacitly endorsed by local officials. Lynchings happened in the dark of night with burning crosses and crowds of anonymous figures, but they also occurred in broad daylight. White crowds gathered to watch the gruesome murders of their fellow Americans, both men and women. They brought picnic lunches with them. They cheered and laughed. They held up their children to witness incinerations and disembowelments, and they took home body parts of the victims as souvenirs. Look up the lynchings of Sam Hose and Richard Coleman. Say their names.

This is American history, our *history*. Taking down statues of Robert E. Lee and other Confederates will not alter the past, but it will declare that an ideology of biological inferiority based on the fiction of “race” in a country supposedly founded on the fundamental equality of all human beings will not be tolerated, much less venerated. The misty nostalgia for the Confederacy kept alive in monuments to the “Lost Cause” is destructive precisely because the ideology of White supremacy lives on, and it was not and is not an ideology confined to the South. It lives on in the genetic determinism touted in books, blogs, and science journalism that are as popular now as eugenics was in an earlier era. You are not your genes. The old nature / nurture dichotomy made famous by Galton is false.

In his classic 1974 paper, “The Analysis of Variance and the Analysis of Causes,” the evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin referred to nature versus nurture as a “pseudo question” (520). All complex human traits, including that abstract thing we call intelligence, are the result of multiple causes, and those causes intermingle. It is impossible to assign quantitative values to what is nature and what is nurture because genes and environment interact. The statistical calculations, heritability numbers that supposedly show the percentages of genetic and environmental influence on a human trait, have been severely criticized in science. In a 2018 paper, “The Paradox of Intelligence: Heritability and Malleability Coexist in Hidden Gene-Environment Interplay,” the authors write, “*when estimating the heritability of IQ, those gene-environment correlations that we do not recognize or do not know will be attributed to the genetic component*” (Sauce and Matzel 30; emphasis in original). This is exactly what the statistician Ronald Fisher did in the 1920s. He assigned leftovers to the genetic side of the equation. And he was criticized for it by the fervent anti-eugenicist Lancelot Hogben, who wrote in his book *Nature and Nurture* (1933): “There is a danger of concealing assumptions that have no factual basis behind an impressive façade of flawless algebra” (121). This remains a danger.

Based on the twin studies that were so crucial to Galton and eugenics, heritability numbers are now touted by popular academics like Steven Pinker whose nature trumps nurture arguments pass with the same ease in media culture that made it possible for Calvin Coolidge to mut-

ter gibberish about “biological laws” in *Good Housekeeping* in 1921 (qtd. in Kendi 321). Our biology is not fixed but fluid. There is no taxonomy of the “races.” There is human variation, a small part of which reflects geographic origin, but there is no dividing line between races. There are no subspecies, no grand scheme of racial differences, no hierarchy, much as some still desperately hope it exists.

The civil war that supposedly freed enslaved African Americans from bondage will not be truly over until the United States confronts and atones for its crimes against its own Black citizens. Black America has been living with this history for 400 years. It is long past time for White America to stop lying about it. Casting Confederate statues onto the garbage heap or consigning them to infamy is a tiny, if symbolic, step in the right direction. There is a film of German citizens who were forced to tour Buchenwald after the war and view the atrocities in that concentration camp. Many of them covered their faces or looked away. Germany’s silence about its criminal past was not broken until the 1960s, but it was broken, and a process of atonement and memorialization of the Holocaust began.

White America’s painful reckoning with its terrifying past and the reparations that must be paid one way or another lie ahead. Unlike the Nazis, we have not suspended our constitution and, despite the ugly mathematical compromise that brought the Southern states into the Union, the word used throughout the document about constitutional rights is “person” and “people,” not “man,” not “man with property,” not “some of the people,” not “White people,” just people. We do not have to change it. We have to begin for the very first time to live up to its promise.

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