

Nativism, Eugenics, and White Nationalism: A Casual or Causal Relationship?

David Sowell

Democracy and Diversity Series, April 26, 2017

David Sowell is Professor Emeritus of History from Juniata College.

I want to share a political cartoon to introduce this topic (see Figure 1). The cartoon suggests that, as history marches on, nativism marches in place. It remains central to our history. Catholics, Chinese, Jews, Mexicans, and now maybe Syrians have encountered a nativist backlash in their migration to the US. This suggests a relationship, at least in this cartoonist's mind, that nativism permeates United States history. Should we go beyond this assertion and link eugenics and white nationalism to that nativist character of our society? This is the question that I have been asked to address as a historian.

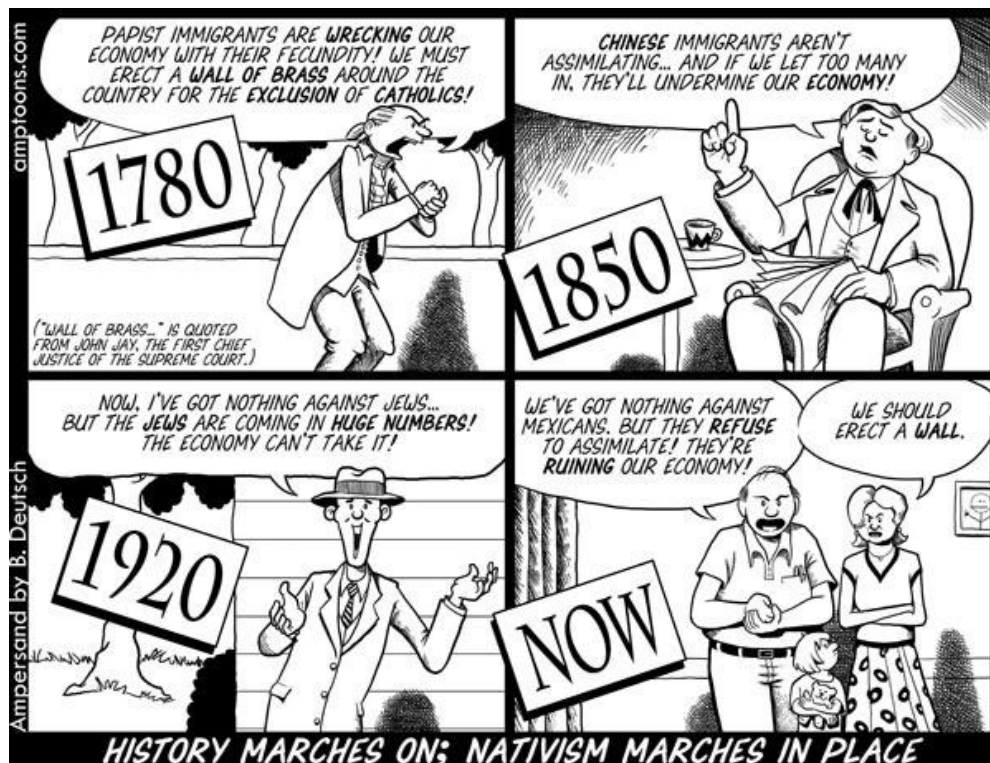


Figure 1: Barry Deutch, "History Marches On; Nativism Marches in Place." *Amperсанд. Dollars & Sense* 273 (November/December 2007): 4.

Before I can continue, we must think about casual and causal relationships. Nativism, eugenics, and white nationalism are casually related. When we read the cartoon, we can readily see their casual relationships. But, for a causal relationship, one thing must cause another. It is not enough to state there is a causal relationship; one must demonstrate it in a convincing manner to the reader. A causal relationship is much more difficult to determine and identify. Can we causally assert a relationship between eugenics and alt-right, or should we say that they are similar in some way that cannot be said to lead to the other? Should our language be more casual, or should we qualify our intellectual analysis as rooted in a firm historical analysis? My sense is that as members of the liberal arts community, we should be careful about what kind of language we use. This is obviously the case when describing politically loaded terms such as nativism, eugenics, and white nationalism.

As a historian, it is easiest to address this question in a chronological manner, establishing a starting point and moving through time. I will start in the 1830s and move continuously to about the 1920s. I will then jump forward to the current millennium and play a little bit with white nationalism. I will first look at nativism, second at scientific racism, next at eugenics, and finally at white nationalism. I



Figure 2: N. Currier, "The Propagation Society. More Free than Welcome." ca. 1855, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003656589/>.

will set out the distinguishing characteristics for each so that, by the end, we should be able to determine what type of language should be used concerning nativism, eugenics, and white nationalism.

In the waves of migration in the early 1800s, thousands came from Ireland. These Catholic migrants encountered the first overt expression of nativism. In its earliest phases, it was an anti-papacy feeling (see Figure 2). This political cartoon envisions a young America fighting against the grappling hook of the Papacy as it tries to integrate the faith into the United States. The country is defended by a Protestant Bible.

This tension between the Catholic immigrants and the Protestant citizens manifested itself in what would come to be called the Know-Nothing Party. The party went through various names and iterations after it was first formed in the 1840s in Philadelphia. They wanted people to be born in the United States, and if you were not born in the United States, you had to wait twenty-five years before you could become a citizen. That native-born soil was of prime importance for the Know-Nothing Party.

We see it surface in presidential politics in 1856. Millard Fillmore was the American Party candidate; the party had won the Massachusetts state legislature two years earlier. The American Party was strongest along the East coast, mostly in urban places, and mostly where immigrants were coming to live. They called themselves the Know-Nothings because they were unwilling to say publicly whom they supported because they were running against the standard political alignment. As a result, they would say, “Oh, I know nothing” when asked about their political affiliation.

I love what Mr. Lincoln says about the Know-Nothing Party:

I am not a Know-Nothing—that is certain. How can I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that “all men are created equal.” We now practically read it “all men are created equal, except negroes.” When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read “all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics.” When it comes to that I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.¹

Sometime after 1859, much of the Atlantic intellectual community began to advocate beliefs that have been termed “scientific racism.” The year 1859, of course, relates to the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. Biologists, Darwin, and a host of other people began to explain the world in a language that was both scientific and racist. They were going out into the world and trying to explain the differences that they saw. Nancy Stephan said, “[The] differences observed between peoples should be understood as realities of nature.”² If we intellectually join science and the reality of nature, why is that significant? It suggests that there is a strong causal relationship between a belief system and nature; that is, our language of description is articulated as truth. If we understand evolution, we can understand variation in nature.

You can see why some might call it scientific racism. Herbert Spencer, writing in 1864, noted that “[t]he survival of the fittest . . . is that which Mr. Darwin has called ‘natural selection, or the preservation of favored races in the struggle for life.’”³ For Spencer, one could always see differences in people, and now he had a way of understanding those differences scientifically. Scientific racists came up with a whole host of ways that they could judge these differences.



Figure 3: Anti-Immigrant cartoon showing two men with bodies as barrels, labeled ‘Irish Whiskey’ and ‘Lager Bier,’ carrying a ballot box. In the background is a rioting crowd at a polling place, ca. 1850. Granger Historical Picture Archive, <https://www.granger.com/results.asp?image=0006458>

A political riot on St. Patrick’s Day in 1867 in New York shows the Irish as dehumanized individuals (see Figure 3). This was a nativist reaction to waves of immigration, especially as Irish immigrants moved into urban areas and took command of the ballot boxes, the policing forces, and the fire departments. This might be “scientific nativism,” which gave evidence of a broader concern about how the immigrants were shaping the urban, political environment.

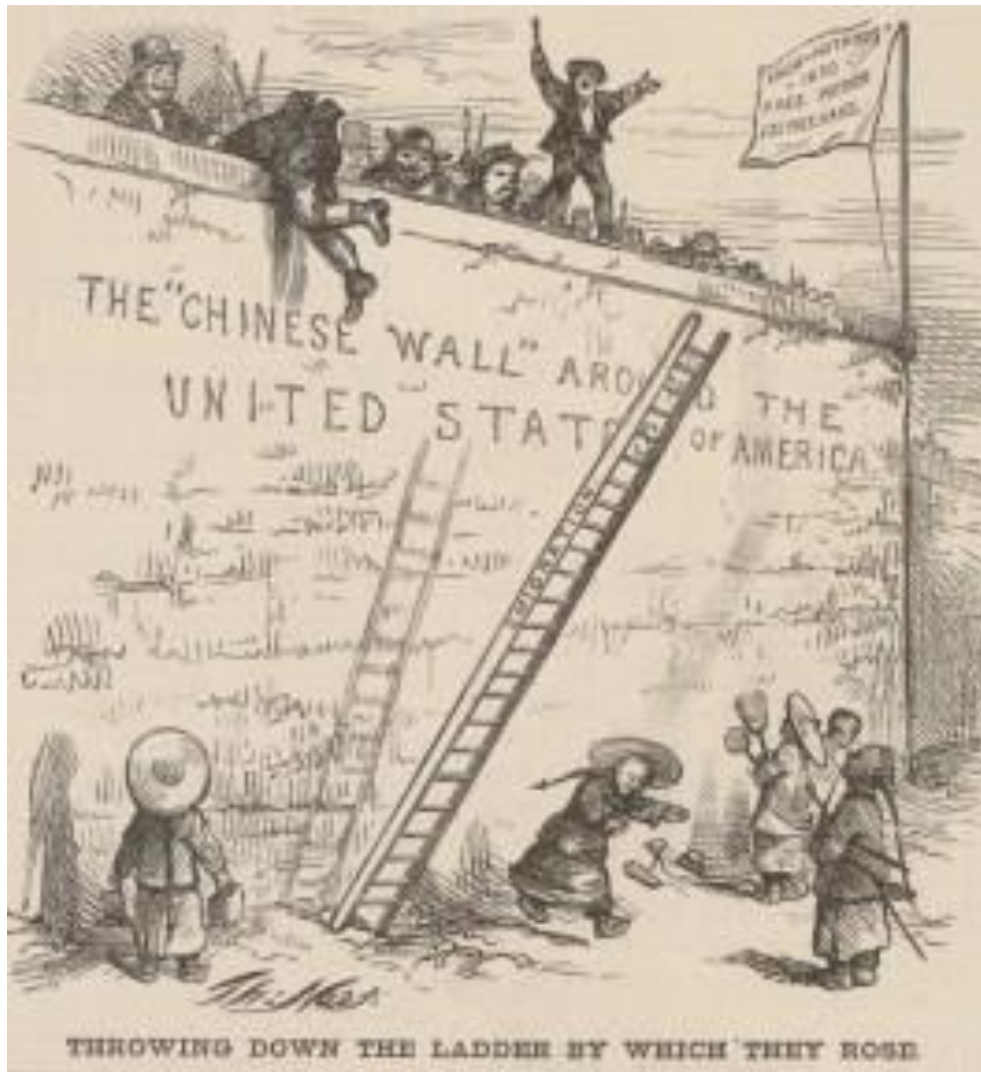


Figure 4: Thomas Nast “Throwing Down the Ladder by Which They Rose,” 23 July 1870. <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/tag/irish-and-chinese/> (accessed June 30, 2017).

It was not just the Irish that felt the effects of scientific racism, but also the Chinese. (See Figure 4.) The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 reacted to what some people thought was a flood of Chinese in the western economy, especially as they helped to build the western railroads. As the United States experienced unprecedented immigration from the 1870s to the 1910s, there was a growing concern about how “lower races” were changing the country. They thought that the US should be a place for the Nordic race to reign supreme, and that increased immigration threatened that reign.

The US entered the Great War reluctantly. Opposition to entry into the war was widespread, especially from socialists and communists. As prices spiked at the end of the war, laborers engaged in a series of strikes, often called Bolshevik strikes, in reference to the recent Soviet Revolution. Many cartoons envisioned these strikes as dangerous to the United States. (See Figure 5) The Attorney General

of the United States, A. Mitchell Palmer, was envisioned as surrounded on the streets by masses of Bolsheviks. Palmer arrested and exiled thousands of protesters from the United States without trial. This was one of the first official purges of the left in our country.



Figure 5: John Tinney McCutcheon “A. Mitchell Palmer Out For a Stroll.” *Chicago Tribune*, 1920. <https://online-optiker.info/free/nativism-1920s.asp#content> (Accessed June 29, 2017).

Fear of the other manifested itself in other areas. The revival of the Ku Klux Klan after 1916 proved a rallying point for those who thought that the United States needed to “regain” its Christian character. Again, the Pope became a public target. Here Madison Grant’s publications in favor of Nordic blood, as well as the emerging eugenic movement, proved to be powerfully influential. Both pushed to limit immigration into the US, leading to the Immigration Act of 1924. Policy stipulated that immigration quotas return to the percentages of the origins of migrants in 1890—before the flood of Eastern and Southern Europeans into the US. Moreover, only 3% of the migrants allowed into the US from a given county would be granted permission to migrate. The goal of this policy was to return the US to its roots and remove “dangerous” people from our society. Clearly nativism shaped this act, and as I suggest, so too did eugenics because it developed in the 1890s.

Eugenics is certainly part of scientific racism, though its goals were quite distinct. Founders of the movement envisioned that: “Eugenics is the self-direction of human evolution. Like a tree eugenics

draws its materials from many sources and organizes them into a harmonious entity.” (See Figure 6.) Eugenics and eugenic principles could help to create a perfect society.

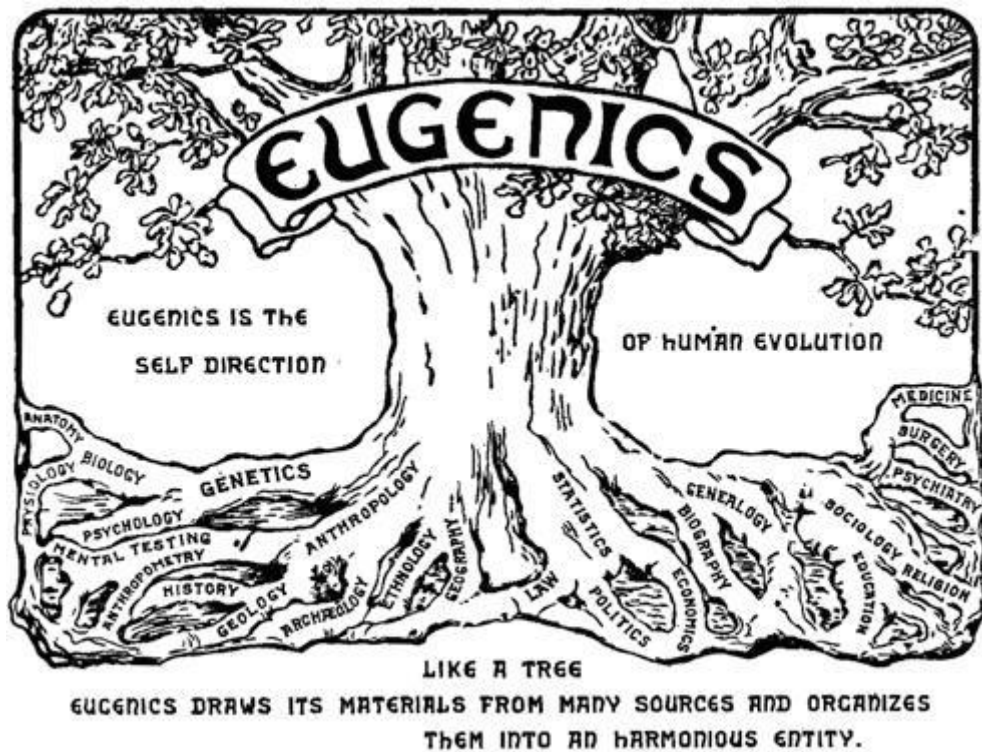


Figure 6 "Eugenics is the self-direction of human evolution": Logo from the Second International Eugenics Congress, 1921. http://wiki.dickinson.edu/index.php/The_Spread_of_Eugenics (accessed June 30, 2017).

Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin, coined the term “eugenics” in 1883. Galton built upon Darwin’s earlier writings to determine which people in England were capable of genius. In terms of eugenics, he was looking at the “best born” and how you keep the “best born” the best. You do this by judicious breeding—or “positive eugenics,” similar to the long-term practices in animal husbandry. Those who are the best born owe it to society to breed with others of the best born. If the better do not do this, Galton asked, what would happen to society? Poor-blooded people would run the polls, vote, and make crime, social problems, and imbecility the norm. They would have more and more babies that would lead to the deterioration of English society. Eugenics was both a positive and necessary good.

If positive eugenics fostered actions that improved society, then negative eugenics sought to remove social features that detracted from the public good. In the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, drunks, imbeciles, adulteresses, paupers, and others would be deemed to have socially undesirable characteristics. Scientists said that they could prove that these characteristics were bad for society. Negative eugenics was then to take measures to remove those persons from society, not when they were old, but before they were born.

Social Darwinism fit well into eugenic thought. People in the United States pushed “survival of the fittest” as a cause. It fit well with the aggressive individualism and industrial practices of the day. Imagine this social Darwinist scenario: Juniata College students drink, and if you live at East Houses, you drink substantially more. One student drinks every Friday, every Saturday, and every Sunday, and one night falls into Muddy Run in a drunken stupor. Now, as Social Darwinists, what should we do for the student? Social Darwinists would say they should do nothing. Let him die, or fail out of the College. What is best for society is the student following nature’s course; that is failing as unfit. Charity, in this vision, altered the course of nature, which flourished in levels of harsh competition.

Charles Davenport emerged as a visible leader of the eugenics movement. Davenport was a professor of evolution biology at Harvard. In 1898, he moved to Cold Springs Laboratory, established the Eugenics Records Office (ERO) in 1910, and wrote *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* in 1911. One of the things that the Eugenics Records Office did was to collect massive pedigrees, or a chart of one’s family. If you had an alcoholic or criminal, they would trace out your family history to determine the hereditary characteristics of the alcoholism. The large database of pedigrees was a strong foundation for social analysis.

The Kallikak Family, a study from 1913, demonstrated the utility of pedigrees. Kallikak was a study of a revolutionary, large landowner in New Jersey, who had a feeble-minded mistress. There were two lines of the Kallikak family: the normal line from his wife, and the degenerate line from his mistress. In the degenerate line, most of the people were feeble-minded, drunks, or criminals. Now the normal line was relatively successful, with only three drunks in their family. The study demonstrated that the degenerate line breeds more degenerates.

What could society do to prevent degeneracy? The ERO advocated that the Christian thing would be to sterilize substandard parents. Notably, science “proved” this as the best course of action. A 1950 booklet from North Carolina stressed the positive benefits of sterilization. (See Figure 7.) Selective sterilization for people who did not meet society’s standards—drunks, the feeble-minded, criminals, etc.—would benefit us all, especially those afflicted who could now have a happy home life.

Harry Laughlin was the Assistant Director of the ERO. Laughlin’s mission was to devise legal statutes that could pass the muster of the courts. He tried to design law, knowing that the cases would undergo judicial review, putting in place constitutional legislation. Laughlin designed model legislation and testified on the legislation’s behalf. His models for sterilization became the backdrop of all the sterilization laws in the United States and a few in Germany. Twenty-eight states in the United States had some form of state-sponsored sterilization. The last statute, sterilizing women criminals in California, was not repealed until 2013.

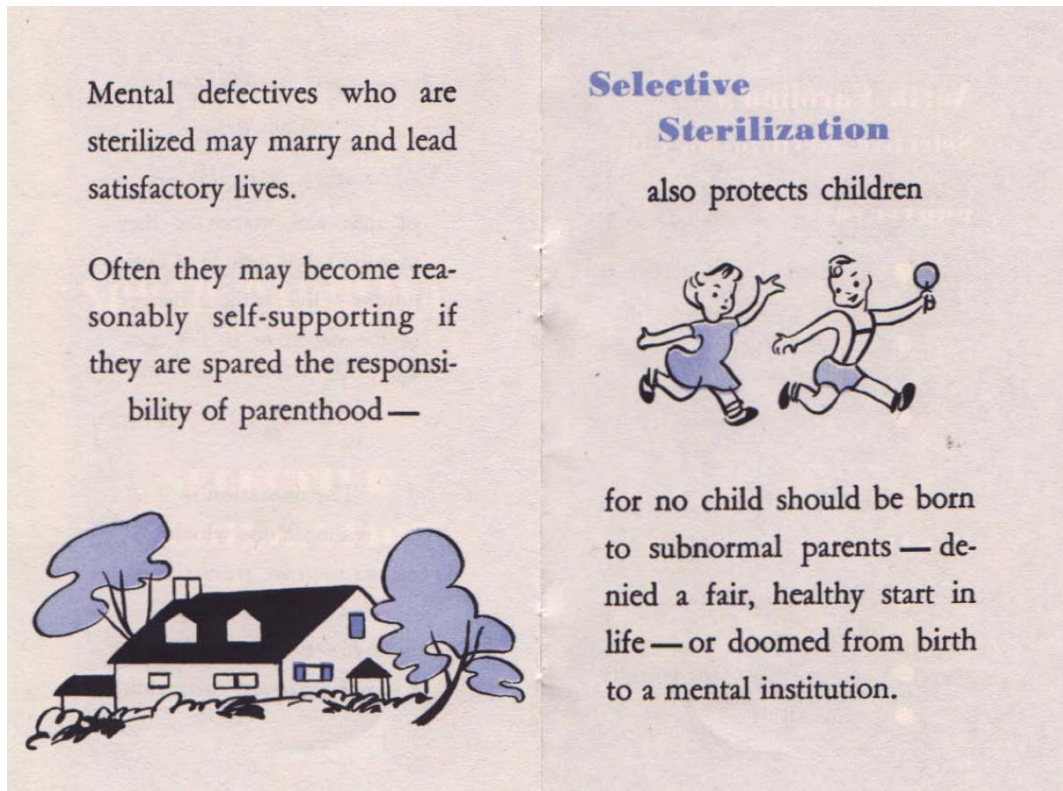


Figure 7: Human Betterment League of North Carolina “You Wouldn’t Expect...” 1950, 8. <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p249901coll37/id/14969> (Accessed June 30, 2017).

The most famous of these cases was *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. The Laughlin lawyers tested a Richmond, Virginia, statute under which Carrie Buck had been charged with promiscuity, after she was raped and sent to an asylum. Buck was then sterilized for her genetic predisposition toward promiscuity, just as were thousands of other women. The case made it to the Supreme Court, where an eight-to-one decision ruled that it was constitutional. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously quoted: “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”⁴ Here you have embedded through a scientific process, a legal mechanism by which you can improve society.

I have now passed out of the zone of my historical knowledge into observations of contemporary events. We have an equal capacity to form opinions about white nationalism and whether we believe that nativism and eugenics caused white nationalism, or whether there is a casual historical relationship among these aspects of our nation. The organization is racist, and sees itself as the victim of multiculturalism and the demographic changes that continue to reshape our nation. Again, protection of native soil is protection of white races. (See Figure 8.)

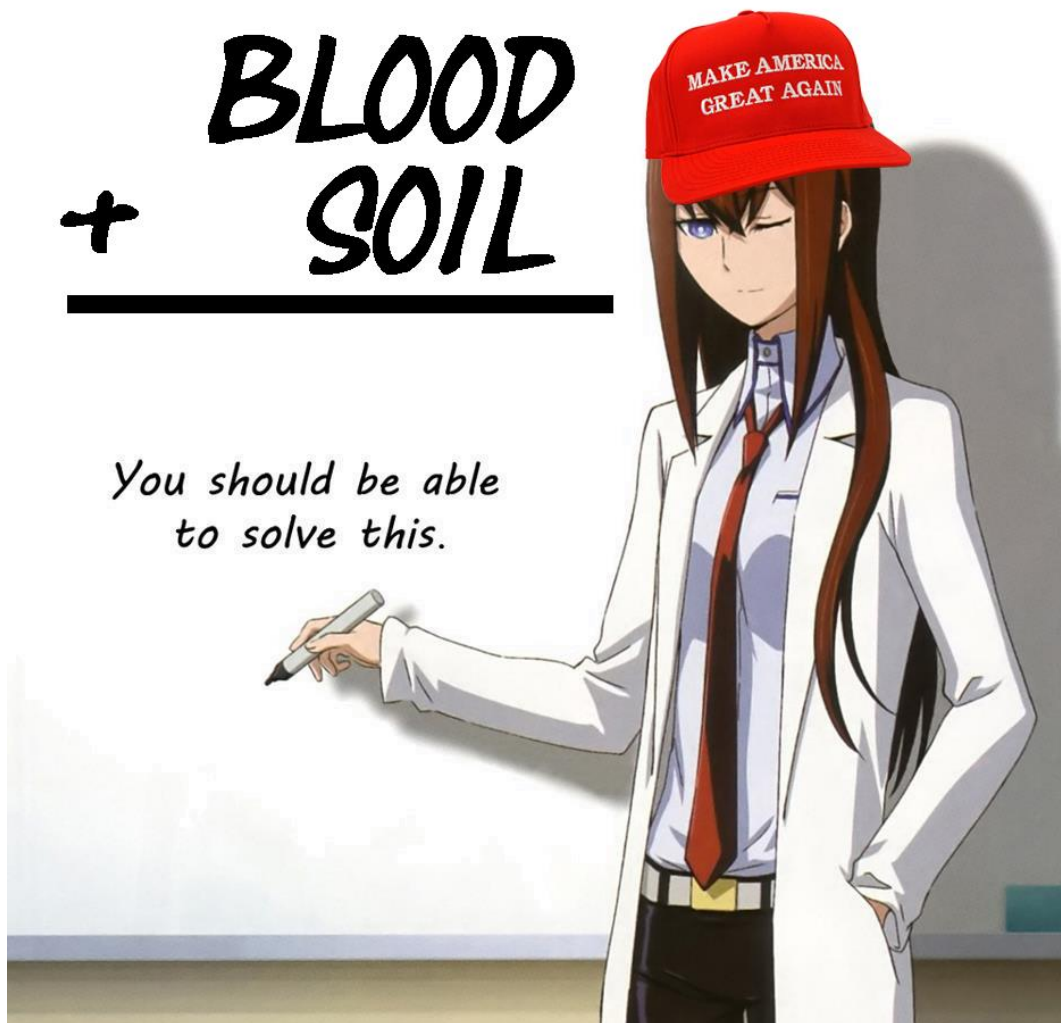


Figure 8: Image as appeared in Lawrence Murray, “White Nationalism FAQ,” *The Right Stuff (blog)*, April 14, 2016. <http://therightstuff.biz/2016/04/14/white-nationalism-faq/> (Accessed June 30, 2017).

In this view, the history of immigration is the history of the decline of the white race in the United States. (See Figure 9.) Immigration progressively reduces the white character of the population, leading to a point of “white genocide” as seen in South Africa. White nationalists claim that they do not want to dominate anyone else; in fact, white nationalists think that they have been dominated. They have been forced to leave urban and suburban areas. Aggressors do not flee, the oppressed do. They have data. The best indication of racism is the number of non-economically motivated attacks against a group of people. White nationalists argue that the systemic violence that takes place is against themselves, not people of color.⁵ You should judge the merits of these opinions.

THE MELTING POT

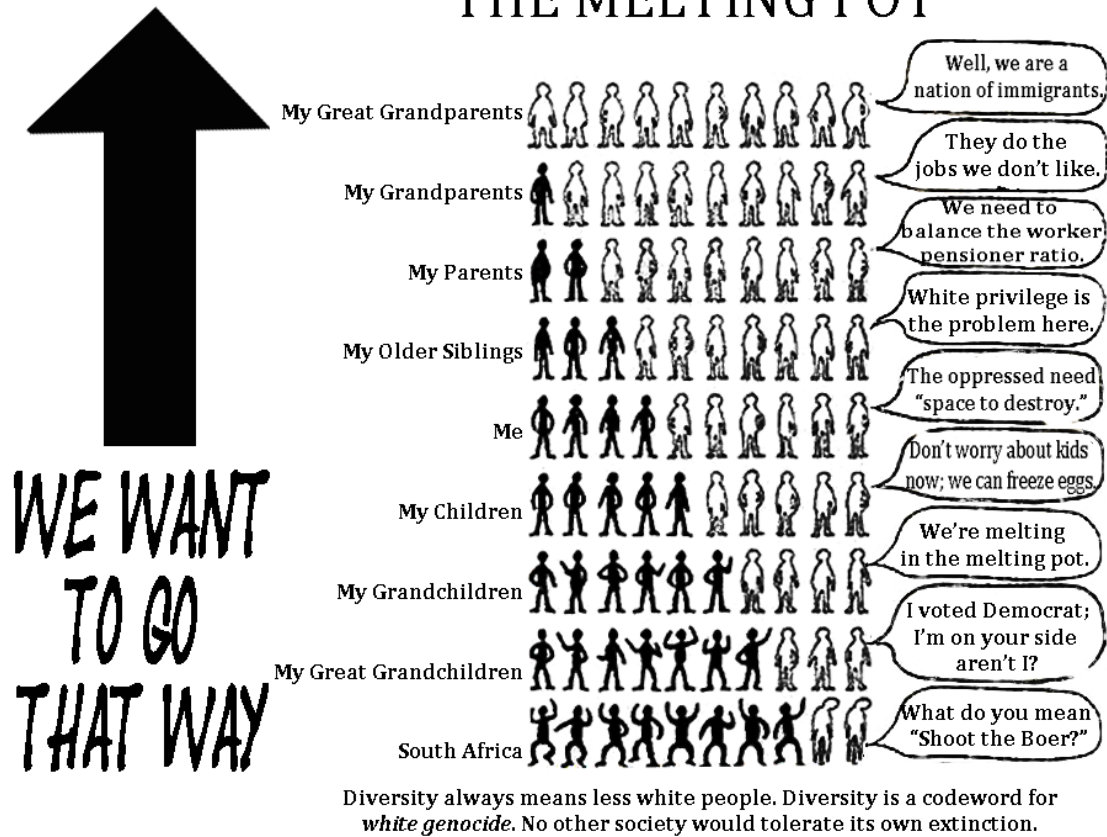


Figure 9: Image as appeared in Lawrence Murray, "White Nationalism FAQ," *The Right Stuff (blog)*, April 14, 2016. <http://therightstuff.biz/2016/04/14/white-nationalism-faq/> (Accessed July 14, 2017).

At this stage, my opinions of the casual or causal relationships between nativism, the eugenics movement, and white nationalism should be clear. The roots of racism in our country are deep, and a legitimate argument can be made that we have been inherently racist since the early days of British settlement. African-Americans—either enslaved or free—have been the victims of structural and socioeconomic racism since the time that “Plymouth Rock landed on them.” Amplification of the racist other underpinned the nativist movement, was inherent in the ideology of eugenics, and is integral to white nationalism. The causal relationship here rests on racism. But, did the eugenics movement lead to white nationalism? Not in my mind. The kind of white nationalism in our contemporary society is historically specific and a post-civil rights phenomenon. Just as nativism ignored socioeconomic factors in favor of racist cultural ideals, so too is white nationalism uncritical of the contemporary condition, and it ignores a scientific understanding of race as heredity and biology upon which eugenic analysis rested. Darwin, Galton, and Davenport would have been shocked at the claims of white nationalists and their refusal to incorporate scientific analysis into their belief system. The causal relationship is to be found in racism, not in nativism or eugenics.

NOTES

1. Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed, Springfield, Illinois August 24, 1855. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/speed.htm>, accessed June 21, 2017.
2. Nancy Stephan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (London: The McMillan Press, 1982), p. xx.
3. Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), pp. 444-45.
4. “Eugenics in Virginia: *Buck v. Bell* and Forced Sterilization,” as cited at <http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/eugenics/>, accessed June 23, 2017.
5. For a recent analysis see David Marcus, “How Anti-White Rhetoric is Fueling White Nationalism,” *The Federalist*, May 23, 2016. <http://thefederalist.com/2016/05/23/how-anti-white-rhetoric-is-fueling-white-nationalism/> (Accessed June 29, 2017).