



Eugenics today

Thought eugenics died with the Nazis? Think again: California, Australia and India saw eugenic sterilisation this decade

Robert A Wilson

Eugenics was a mixture of science and social movement that aimed to improve the human race over generations. Those of good stock were to produce more children, and those of bad stock were to produce fewer (or no) children. The English polymath Francis Galton coined the term 'eugenics' in his *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883), and by the early 20th century the eugenics movement was gaining steam on both sides of the North Atlantic.

Both in popular culture and in academia, eugenics is thought of as long-past, going extinct shortly after 1945 due to the extreme forms it took in fascist Germany. The Nazi enthusiasm for eugenics led to concentration camps, involuntary euthanasia, and genocide. Once the rest of the world recognised this, eugenics was done – not simply as a social movement with state support, but as an endorsable idea guiding social policy.

But this view doesn't capture what eugenics feels like from where I have stood for the past 20 years.

For most of the past two decades, I have lived in the Canadian province of Alberta, which practiced legal eugenic sterilisation. The Sexual Sterilization Act, passed in 1928, was robustly used by the government until its repeal in 1972. The Act called for a four-person Eugenics Board, which was empowered to approve the sterilisation of people living in designated state institutions, often mental hospitals. In this practice, they joined a small number of the 32 American states that passed eugenic sterilisation laws prior to 1939: North Carolina, Georgia and Oregon. Those states continued to sterilise their citizens on the basis of those laws into the 1960s and '70s

But there was a more direct reason for my feeling of proximity to eugenics. I found myself working in a university department whose first head – a university-employed academic philosopher, like me – served for the last third of his long life as chair of the Alberta Eugenics Board from 1928 until 1965. John MacEachran was a long-serving provost at the University of Alberta and among the institution's most celebrated administrative leaders. During his time on the Eugenics Board, MacEachran's signature authorised 2,832 sterilisation orders. Roughly half of these sterilisation-approvals were given during the post-eugenics era that, on the standard view, began with the fall of the Nazis.

This history and MacEachran's role in it had come to light shortly before I moved to Alberta, through a series of lawsuits filed by eugenics survivors against the Province of Alberta during the 1990s. In my workplace, I met people who had been professionally involved as expert witnesses in these legal actions. More importantly, I met and befriended a small number of the eugenics survivors who had filed those actions.

Foremost among these was Leilani Muir (1944-2016), whose story came to public attention in Canada through the National Film Board documentary *The Sterilization of Leilani Muir* (1996). Once institutionalised at a what was euphemistically called a training school for 'mental defectives' at the age of 11, Leilani entered the eugenics pipeline in Alberta. She did not, however, have any 'mental defect'. In fact, there was

evidence available to those who recommended and authorised Leilani's sterilisation that she was 'normal'. Rather, she was an unwanted child of a cruel parent looking to move on with her life. 'My mother threw me out of the car like a piece of garbage she didn't want,' Leilani said. 'And that's how I became a trainee at the institution.'

Leilani's journey through the eugenics pipeline was not unusual. Alberta's eugenics programme targeted vulnerable people, especially children, in the name of eugenics. Her successful lawsuit for wrongful confinement and sterilisation in the mid-1990s paved the way for more than 800 similar lawsuits. 'I will go to the end of this Earth to make sure that it doesn't happen to other children that cannot speak for themselves,' she said.

The concern behind Leilani's resolve – that 'this eugenics thing, it may not be to the extent of what I had gone through, and others have gone through, but they could start sterilising people again under a different guise' – is no abstract fantasy. Recent revelations of ongoing practices of sterilisation of girls and women with intellectual disabilities in Australia in 2012, and of African-American and Latina women in the California State prison system in 2013, bring that feeling of eugenics very close to home.

Leilani's larger sense of the rights of all, particularly children, to live free from abuse and institutional injustice also spurred others in Alberta to act and organise beyond the legal realm. I became one of those people, and I linked together with others likewise moved to act against eugenics. Over the years, we built a local network of survivors, activists, academics and regular community members to take a closer look at eugenics in western Canada and more generally, and the broader significance of eugenics today.

From this standpoint, eugenics does not feel so distant. The Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta had been repealed quickly by a new provincial government in 1972. Most of those falling within the reach of the Act were long dead. Yet many others were still alive and with us. It turned out that some of them, inspired by Leilani's courage and resilience, also had lots to say about their eugenics past.

Glenn George Sinclair was institutionalised at the Provincial Training School in Alberta at age seven. His file indicates that he was a 'half-breed', a Métis person, with one indigenous aboriginal parent. Glenn was sterilised without his knowledge as a teenager. In explaining what life was like at the training school, he said that 'you felt like you were being ordered around like a dog, like an animal, in a cage sort of thing, you know. You didn't feel human at all. You just feel as if you exist. Like you feel nothing.'

Judy Lytton tells us that she was put away in 1951, also aged seven, because ‘my eye was badly crossed, and that was against me ... I was a little freaky because I looked different and acted different because I could hardly see with my other eye. Therefore I was deemed retarded because I couldn’t see and I was half blind.’ Unlike Glenn and Leilani, Judy knew of her sterilisation at that time. She later reflected that ‘I won’t be able to enjoy the children I would have had ... We don’t know these things. But had I had children, I would have loved them, and they would have loved me back, and they would have been a support system and a family ... I’m missing that. I missed that.’ MacEachran, my university department’s chair, personally signed off on Judy Lytton’s sterilisation.

Over the years, the stories of eugenics survivors wormed their way into my own narrative, fed by emotions that shifted over time. My initial, detached puzzlement about Alberta’s local eugenics history, for which my philosophical training had prepared me, was replaced with deeper gut feelings of distaste, disgust and disbelief at what had happened. Card-carrying philosophers are meant to put such gut feelings aside. But I couldn’t.

Eugenic interventions typically begin with being categorised as less than fully human

A survivor is someone who has lived through a traumatic experience or series of experiences. Those experiences might result from war, sexual assault or having witnessed atrocities such as genocide. Individuals traumatised in these ways are not simply victims, defined by what they had been put through. They are survivors, people who had moved, or were continuing to move, beyond their traumatic past, as the psychiatrist Judith Herman underscored in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992).

Eugenics survivors are those who have lived through eugenic interventions, which typically begin with being categorised as less than fully human – as ‘feeble-minded’, as belonging to a racialised ethnic group assumed to be inferior, or as having a medical condition, such as epilepsy, presumed to be heritable. That categorisation enters them into a eugenics pipeline.

Each such pipeline has a distinctive shape. The Alberta pipeline involved institutionalisation at training schools for the ‘feeble-minded’ or mentally deficient, followed by a recommendation of sterilisation by a medical superintendent, which was then approved by the Eugenics Board, and executed without consent. Alberta’s

introduction of guidance clinics also allowed eugenic sterilisation to reach into the non-institutionalised population, particularly schools.

What roles have the stories of eugenics survivors played in understanding eugenics? For the most part and until recently, these first-person narratives have been absent from the historical study of eugenics. On its traditional view, according to which eugenics ended around 1945, this is entirely understandable. The number of survivors dwindles over time, and those who survived often chose, as did many in Alberta, to bracket off rather than re-live their past. Yet the limited presence of survivor narratives in the study of eugenics also stems from a corresponding limit in the safe and receptive audience for those narratives.

In Scandinavia, active eugenic sterilisation was practised until the early to mid-1970s, as in Alberta. When this was revealed in sensational fashion during the 1990s, there was a major effort made by the governments of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland to promote rigorous historical work on eugenics in each country. This resulted in standard academic works that revealed much about those histories that had not been previously known.

The most readily available information in English is contained in *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (1996), a collection of essays edited by Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen. I vividly remember talking with one contributor to that book early in our own exploration of Alberta's eugenics past. After seeming a little puzzled about the centrality of survivor stories to what we were doing, he noted that, although there were many eugenics survivors in Scandinavia, the historians involved there focused exclusively on the traditional documentary and archival base. He said that, although the records made clear there were many survivors of eugenics still alive in all four countries, historians and others didn't think to talk to eugenics survivors in exploring the Scandinavian eugenics past.

They were 'incapable of intelligent parenthood', a phrase found in sterilisation-approval orders

In Alberta, hundreds of eugenics survivors alive in the late 1990s shared their stories through legal cases filed against the province. A much smaller number were subsequently prepared to share more publicly, more extensively and more intimately as part of the project I led, which resulted in the stories posted at the website [EugenicsArchives.ca](https://eugenicsarchives.ca). The stories and the survivors who told them introduced an unexpected dimension to our collective work, one that expanded our idea of eugenics

survivorship. In the open and public forums in which survivors could testify were listeners who connected those stories with their own life histories, such as people living with disability. The stories they were hearing from Leilani, Judy and Glenn, as well as from fellow survivors of the Provincial Training School of Alberta Roy Skoreyko and Ken Nelson, were a source of identification stronger than mere empathy typically allows.

Visitors to our site were living in the same supposedly post-eugenics era. As one might expect, they readily entertained versions of the thought: ‘If I had been born during the eugenics era ...’ They also came to see much in the lives of eugenics survivors in their own lives. They or their children had been dismissed and dehumanised. They had sometimes been told that they were ‘incapable of intelligent parenthood’, a phrase often found on the sterilisation-approval orders for older eugenics survivors. Some even had their children removed from them primarily because they were parenting with disability, and without adequate social support.

So we came to think of a second kind of eugenics survivor. This was not someone who had lived through the explicit postwar eugenics era in Alberta – as Leilani, Judy, Glenn, Roy and Ken had – but someone living with disability in more than the shadow of a local eugenics past. Someone facing ongoing eugenic attitudes, kindred policies of reproductive exclusion and restriction, and parallel dehumanising treatment. For these people, the feeling of eugenics was close. The stories of this second type of eugenics survivor became part of the collective memory of eugenics we were constructing.

Perhaps the strongest reason for rejecting the standard view of our distance from a eugenics past comes from a third kind of eugenics survivor: one who survived sexual sterilisation in the present decade. The stories of these survivors remain to be told.

In 2012, the Senate of Australia launched an inquiry into contemporary, often non-consensual sterilisation of girls and women with disabilities. Unlike Canada and the United States, Australia never passed eugenic sterilisation laws. Despite that, the affinity between what was happening in Australia and the broader eugenic sterilising past got the Senate’s attention. Floating free of explicit state-sanctioned policy, the practice of sterilising women and girls with disabilities ‘for their own good’ often rested on eugenic arguments. It also sat uneasily with Australia’s formal human-rights commitments.

It was not that Australia had no eugenics pipeline. It was just that it flowed through cultural rather than surgical means. Australia’s eugenics past chiefly targeted

Aboriginal people through child-removal practices, and otherwise controlled the ethnicity of future populations through the immigration policy informally known as the White Australia Policy. This is cultural eugenics. Still, the revelation of eugenic sterilisation now in Australia caused much consternation, as it should have.

Australia was not alone. During the summer of 2013, across the Pacific in California, Corey Johnson of the Center for Investigative Reporting revealed that women in the state prison system had been recently sterilised under conditions of missing or dubious consent, and sometimes without their knowledge. Johnson's reporting re-vealed that about 150 Latina and African-American women were sterilised between 2006 and 2010.

Many of California's legislators were aware of the need to acknowledge the legacy of eugenics. In the early 2000s, the then governor Gray Davis's formal apology for California's eugenics history, together with California's Senate Resolution No 20, had expressed 'profound regret' over the state's extensive involvement in eugenics. The resolution urged 'every citizen of the state to become familiar with the history of the eugenics movement'. The hope was 'that a more educated and tolerant populace will reject any similar abhorrent pseudoscientific movement should it arise in the future'. In the wake of ongoing sterilisations, however, what was needed was more than acknowledgment by the citizens of California of a eugenics past. California needed to address the eugenics *present*, made vivid through the actions of its own state employees.

According to UN statistics from 2006, in India 37 per cent of women have undergone sexual sterilisation

At the end of 2014, at least a dozen women in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh died after undergoing sexual sterilisation as part of a paid incentive programme aimed to control poverty through population containment. These typically low-caste women died of blood poisoning or haemorrhagic shock following their sterilisation. The news spread worldwide because few outside India knew just how extensive and routine this sterilisation programme was. According to United Nations statistics compiled in 2006, as many as 37 per cent of Indian women have undergone sexual sterilisation. Many of those did so as part of incentive programmes such as that in Chhattisgarh, which offer women free sterilisation, or even pay many of them an incentive of \$10-\$20, amounting to more than a week's salary.

And even these cases are far from isolated. Just before the turn of the 21st century, the government of the Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori approved use of sexual

sterilisation to curtail Peru's indigenous population. This resulted in approximately 300,000 sterilisations. There are also continuing reports of Romani women in countries from the former Eastern Bloc being sexually sterilised without consent. And in late 2015 and early 2016, Canada's national network, the Canadian Broadcasting Commission, issued several reports detailing cases in which First Nations women had recently been sterilised without, or with dubious, consent in Alberta's neighbouring province of Saskatchewan.

The ongoing eugenic sterilisation of people with disabilities, prisoners, poor people, people from certain racialised ethnic groups and indigenous people (especially women) affects precisely the same sorts of people explicitly targeted by eugenics before 1945. These sterilisations are not a reminder of a eugenics past. They result from continuing and new eugenics pipelines. And they bring that feeling of eugenics ever closer.

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