

## **Not Fit to Breed: Eugenics in Sweden, 1900 to Present**

Susan Danielsson

*American Military University*

### ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, the Swedish government enacted eugenic policies that permitted the forced sterilization of individuals the government deemed unfit to reproduce, often targeting them with accusations of mental illness. When officials passed the Sterilization Acts, they kept socioeconomic benefits in mind, but the eugenics movement in Sweden had deep roots in race-based science. Charles Darwin and his famous works on evolution inspired Swedish scholars to promote social hygiene within their own population, and they used political parties and the elite to push their agenda into social policy. Officials implemented sterilization laws that were intended to improve the gene pool of the Swedish population as a way to ensure the affordability of their welfare system. In the 1950s, the Swedish government started to prioritize the rights and wants of the individual, instead of making them second to the wellbeing of society.

*Keywords:* Sweden, Scandinavia, eugenics, race, social policy, biology, Nordic, racial hygiene, mental illness

## **No apto para la raza: eugenesia en Suecia, 1900 hasta el presente**

### RESUMEN

En la década de 1930, el gobierno sueco promulgó políticas eugenésicas que permitían la esterilización forzada de aquellos individuos que el gobierno consideraba incapaces de reproducir, a menudo atacándolos con enfermedades mentales. Cuando los funcionarios aprobaron las Leyes de esterilización, tuvieron en cuenta los beneficios socioeconómicos, pero el movimiento eugenésico en Suecia tenía profundas raíces en la ciencia basada en la raza. Charles Darwin y sus famosos trabajos sobre la evolución inspiraron a los académicos suecos en la promoción de la higiene social dentro

de su propia población, y utilizaron los partidos políticos y la élite para impulsar su agenda en la política social. Los funcionarios implementaron las leyes de esterilización para mejorar el acervo genético de la población sueca con el fin de garantizar la asequibilidad de su sistema de bienestar. En la década de 1950, el gobierno sueco comenzó a priorizar los derechos y las necesidades del individuo, en lugar de hacer que fueran secundarios para el bienestar de la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** Suecia, Escandinavia, eugenesia, raza, política social, biología, nórdico, higiene racial, enfermedad mental

## 不适合生育：1990年到现在的瑞典优生学

### 摘要

20世纪30年代，瑞典政府通过了优生政策，允许对那些被政府认为不适合生育的个人进行强制绝育，这些个人通常患有精神疾病。当政府官员通过绝育法时，他们考虑的是社会经济利益，但瑞典的优生运动根植于基于种族的科学。查尔斯·达尔文及其在进化论方面的名著启发了瑞典学者在本国人口中推动社会卫生学，并且他们利用政党与精英推动其议程融入社会政策。政府官员落实绝育法以提升瑞典人口基因库，进而确保其福利体系的可负担性。瑞典政府在20世纪50年代开始优先考虑个人的权利和需求，而不是让其次于社会福祉。

关键词：瑞典，斯堪的纳维亚半岛，优生学，种族，社会政策，生物学，北欧，种族卫生学，精神疾病

**O**n August 20, 1997, *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Sweden's largest newspapers, published an article about the country's little-known sterilization practices involving the mentally and physically disabled, drawing harsh comparisons to the horrors of Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup> The article sparked

a national debate, with some claiming that the welfare state promoted sterilization laws, while others argued that social policies had eliminated them. When Maciej Zaremba wrote his article, most Swedes had never heard of the forced sterilizations that were performed within their borders, and little scholarly re-

search had been conducted at the time. International news outlets picked up on the national debate and echoed Zaremba's comparisons to Nazi Germany. In 1997, *The Economist* stated, "The Nazis were not alone in viewing Nordic peoples as the ideal biological 'type.' A lot of Nordics, it now seems, immodestly felt the same way."<sup>2</sup> The *Independent* claimed "The Swedish government could face thousands of legal claims for compensation because of a Nazi-style campaign of forced sterilization of women that historians say has been hushed for years."<sup>3</sup> These statements promoted Nazi imagery in the public's mind, but it also captivated the interest of scholars who produced new research on the matter, providing valuable insight into how the eugenics movement had developed within Sweden.

At the turn of the twentieth century, eugenics movements emerged in Europe and the United States, as the concept of selective breeding in humans garnered public support. Between 1935 and 1975, 62,888 sterilizations were performed in Sweden, based on a law passed in 1934 and a modified version that passed in 1941. Both versions of the law permitted officials to sterilize individuals without consent in certain situations. Under the Sterilization Act of 1934, officials could sterilize those who did not have the mental capacity to understand the meaning of sterilization and its consequences. The 1941 version promoted consensual sterilization, but officials still had the means to perform forced sterilizations, without physical violence or restraint.<sup>4</sup> These laws mostly targeted women who had mental

disabilities or hereditary diseases, and they have left a black stain on Sweden's past. Today, Sweden is renowned for its policies protecting and supporting human rights, so how could these types of laws develop in a country like Sweden? Social Darwinism was a prominent belief within the academic community and factors such as mass emigration to the United States worried scholars that a decline of the Swedish people might occur. Eugenacists relied on the support of political parties and the social elite to promote and incorporate their ideologies into social policy.

Race-based science flourished in academic circles across Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, and eugenacists sought to define what made one race superior over another, while trying to improve gene pools. Herman Lundborg (1868–1943), a Swedish eugenacist, argued that racial purity ensured that specific traits continued to appear in subsequent generations, while new variations in the population derived from the mixing of races. If strong, racially pure individuals procreated within their own population, then they would continue the superior line, ensuring the development of the nation-state. On the other hand, he argued that populations of mixed races made society sluggish and weak, eventually leading to the death of the nation.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, eugenacists acknowledged that undesirable traits such as mental illness existed in their own native populations and they sought to eliminate these characteristics through social policies. Before Swedish eugenacists could pursue any form of social policy, they

had to define the characteristics that made individuals superior or inferior.

Swedish eugenicists defined the perfect Swede in terms of physical and national characteristics. They argued that the Swedish race originated from ancient Germanic peoples, and their blood connection ensured they inherited numerous positive characteristics. Lundborg described the racially pure Swede as “tall and strong. The head and face were relatively long, the complexion fair and ruddy, the hair fair, and the nose most often short and straight ... light eyes.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Swedish national character portrayed Swedes as heroic, courageous, hardworking, compassionate, and hospitable, especially toward strangers. Scholars acknowledged that Swedes derived from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but diligent Swedes ensured they kept themselves well dressed and clean no matter their station. Most importantly, Swedes sought to further their education through continuous reading and used their knowledge to pursue noble endeavors. Swedes were not lazy, but hardworking, independent workers who ensured success in whatever ventures they set their minds to.<sup>7</sup> Even though scholars had different ideas of the perfect Swede, they used these general ideas to draw comparisons between other racial groups, defining inferior and superior characteristics within the population.

Historically, the terms “Swede” and “Swedish” described the native population of Sweden, but excluded minority groups such as the Sami, pre-

viously known as the Lapps or Laplanders, and Finns that lived within the same territory. For thousands of years, the Sami, an indigenous population, lived in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and their culture centered around reindeer herding. Although they were an indigenous population of the same state, Swedes regarded them as a backwards minority that produced weakened offspring with undesirable traits. Officials wanted to keep Sami and Swedes separate and so the Sami had their own education and judicial systems. Moreover, the Swedish government forbade the Sami from settling outside certain jurisdictions and they had to remain reindeer herders as they were barred from all other occupations. To promote racially pure children, Swedes and Sami could not intermarry.<sup>8</sup> Lundborg described the Sami as short, dark-skinned, and unable to grow proper beards. He also noted that the Sami lived in independent communities throughout northern Scandinavia, with a meager population that never united to form a great nation.<sup>9</sup> If the Sami reproduced with racially pure Swedes, then their offspring would inherit undesirable characteristics, weakening the superior traits of the Swedish parent.

For hundreds of years, Finland and Sweden shared a common monarch and government, but Finns and Swedes remained two distinct groups, with Swedes considering the Finns to be inferior. Lundborg described the Finns as “short in stature, thick set and strongly built. He is fair and, as a rule, has light eyes, his hair is straight and

coarse, his complexion is fair and often of a somewhat dirty grey color .... The nose is very clumsy with a concave bridge.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, scholars claimed that Swedes had the ability to take on leadership roles and to take on subordinate positions without any issues. However, Finnish blood made mixed Swedes defiant and undisciplined.<sup>11</sup> Finland and Sweden’s long history together ensured that their native populations intermarried, and many of these marriages occurred in the lower socio-economic class. Eugenacists often attacked the lower class for their laziness and other undesirable traits, blaming intermarriages for producing weakened offspring. The Finns and Sami made up most minorities living in Sweden, but Lundborg also briefly mentioned several other “alien races” that lived among the Swedes, including Jews and Romani.<sup>12</sup> Lundborg’s prejudices against the Sami, Finns, Jews, and Romani were compatible with a variety of political viewpoints and scientific fields. Most proponents of eugenics were academics, with the main aim of protecting the biology of the Swedish population from outside genetic threats. On the other hand, Social Democrat officials argued that eugenic policies made it affordable for the welfare state to ensure lifelong security for its citizens.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, scholars acknowledged that the native Swedish population had abnormal individuals that could pass on inferior characteristics to future generations. Swedish eugenacists condemned alcoholics and those infected with venereal diseases, describing them as “racial poisons.” Al-

coholics were not productive members of society, while sufferers of venereal diseases supposedly had numerous other hereditary diseases. Hereditary and venereal diseases were claimed to cause sterility, miscarriage, and inferior offspring. Along with mental illness, all these elements weakened the Swedish race. Eugenacists sought to improve the superior Swedish race through eugenic social policies that helped prevent inferior individuals from procreating with those deemed superior, while eliminating inferior characteristics, such as mental illness.

On November 24, 1859, Charles Darwin published his groundbreaking work *On the Origin of Species*, which introduced the concept of evolution. He argued that through natural selection, organisms that are better adapted to their environment tend to survive and produce more offspring. Subsequent generations remain well adapted and strong because the best stock of the species presumably reproduces. In 1871, Darwin published *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, which applied evolutionary theory to humans, including its impact on society. Darwin argued that people developed the capacity for sympathy, especially towards the hardships of others, and a moral obligation to help those who need it, even though it may be detrimental to the helper. He wrote:

The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts .... Nor could we check

our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature. The surgeon may harden himself whilst performing an operation, for he knows that he is acting for the good of his patient; but if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with an overwhelming present evil. We must therefore bear the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind.<sup>14</sup>

Basically, it was a moral obligation to help those who needed it, even if it was a person of “poor quality,” and helping him or her risked the possibility of him or her reproducing, lowering the quality of the next generation. Adding to the problem, the weaker and unhealthier individuals were left at home to reproduce, while the government conscripted or enlisted the most able-bodied men for their standing militaries, lowering the stock of the population. He believed that it was vital for any society to have a group of wealthy, highly educated men that had the time to dedicate to business, philosophical, or scientific endeavors because progress occurred through their efforts.<sup>15</sup> Darwin’s argument essentially separated people into “poor” and “good” breeding stock. He emphasized the importance of limiting the “poor” breeding stock from marrying and reproducing, while encouraging the “good” stock.

Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), an English cleric and economist, pub-

lished his *Essay on the Principles of Population* in 1798 and travelled to Scandinavia in the summer of 1799 to gather material for a revised edition. He believed there was a relationship between the available land and resources and the size of a population. If the population size were to exceed the amount of land and resources available, then poverty and misery would result. On his journeys through Scandinavia, he concluded that Norwegians enjoyed a better standard of living than the Swedes because their smaller population lowered the pressure on the land. He credited this to Norwegians marrying later than Swedes, which delayed children.<sup>16</sup> Populations could build strong, thriving societies if their size remained equal to the available land. He regarded those who could procure foods and other necessities the strongest of society, since they would survive the struggle against other people. In other words, the impoverished low class was weak, while the rich upper class was superior. These ideas were highly influential in academic circles. Scholars from around the world applied these ideas to their own countries’ circumstances.

Darwin’s scientific theory of evolution reached Sweden’s academic circles in the late nineteenth century, and began to appear in the writings of prominent Swedish scholars such as Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895). Rydberg was a famous Swedish writer and member of the Swedish Academy, and was highly active academically and politically. He worried about the future quality of the Swedish people, believing it was in steep decline, which he ex-

<https://digitaltmuseum.se/021015978474/herman-lundborg>

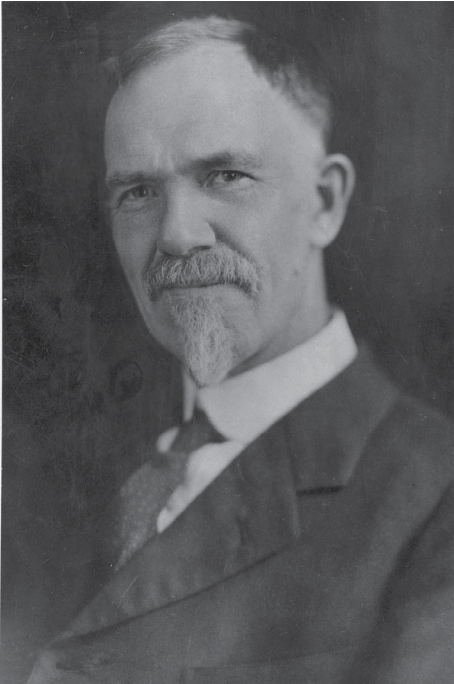
Herman Lundborg, 1920,  
photographed by Calla Sundbeck,  
Grenna Museum



VIKTOR RYDBERG

<https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/mobil/Artikel/6269>

Viktor Rydberg, 1876, Riksarkivet



[https://www.si.edu/object/charles-benedict-davenport-1866-1944:siris\\_arc\\_296652](https://www.si.edu/object/charles-benedict-davenport-1866-1944:siris_arc_296652)

Charles Benedict Davenport, 1866-1944,  
Smithsonian Institution Archives

Fisher girl from Skåne, Nordic  
Type, photographed by Alfred  
Nilson, from Herman Lundborg's  
*Svenska Folktyper*, 1919.



Fiskarflicka från Skåne. Nordisk typ.

Foto. Alf. B. Nilson. Malmö.

pressed in 1895 in his essay “The Future of the White Race.” In this essay, Rydberg compares Europeans to Asians, expressing his fears of the decline of European populations while the supposedly inferior Asians were on the rise. One of his major worries stemmed from mass emigration to the United States. He wrote,

In addition, European emigration also contributes to America and Australia. For what the white race loses in Europe, it gains in the colonies on the other side .... And yet here in this country (Sweden) we don't suffer from overpopulation, but from underpopulation.<sup>17</sup>

Population loss contributed to the worry of scholars who embraced social Darwinism, especially since it meant that there were fewer healthy able-bodied men and women to create the next generation. Sweden underwent several major blows to their population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Between 1850 and 1930, an estimated 1.3 million Swedes emigrated to the United States, with most settling in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Many of these Swedes sought to escape the hardships that plagued their homeland for golden opportunities promised across the Atlantic. For instance, between 1866 and 1868, Sweden's weather turned extremely cold, causing lakes and rivers to remain frozen until June; in the spring, crops could not be planted. Temperatures remained cold throughout the summer and autumn months,

ensuring crop failures and severe food shortages throughout the country. High inflation left many people unable to afford food. The Swedish Famine killed 270,000 people, or about 15 percent of the Swedish population.<sup>18</sup> Many families received letters from family and friends in the United States boasting about the goodness of the new land, where “golden opportunities held out to rich and poor alike.”<sup>19</sup> Curious about these wonderful claims, families sent their young men to visit and decide if they were true. If they decided that the United States promised a better future, then whole families would emigrate. For a small country like Sweden, these losses in population were significant. Moreover, US public health officials scrutinized immigrants at entry ports for infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, mental impairments, and epilepsy. Officials deported those deemed unfit or too sick, forcing these individuals to return home. Scholars such as Rydberg worried that the loss of so many young healthy men and women to emigration, starvation, and disease would lower the quality of the Swedish population.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, scholars worried that massive immigration would flood the country with inferior races that would populate the country, mixing their inferior elements into the general population. Professor Johan Hultkrantz (1862–1938) claimed,

Immigration to Sweden implies not so seldom a danger for the future of the Swedish race and above all because especially during the latest years an invasion has been taking place from the

East, where the human material, in respect to the mental and physical qualities of the race, can hardly match itself against the ancient Swedish population.<sup>20</sup>

Even though Sweden remained neutral during the First World War, the influx of asylum seekers stirred fear in eugenicists. They worried that immigrants would reduce the quality of the Swedish character through inbreeding. The war helped to fuel the flames to push for eugenics-based legislation that stemmed the flow of undesirable groups of people into the country.

Officially, Sweden's last war ended August 14, 1814 with the signing of the Convention of Moss, a peace agreement between Norway and Sweden. Under the agreement, Norway and Sweden entered a union where they shared a common monarch but had separate parliaments and institutions. In 1905, the union dissolved peacefully, as Norway declared its independence. Some Swedes wanted to take up arms and force Norway back into the Union, especially since they felt that Sweden as a country lacked any form of strength or power. Ever since 1814, the Swedish government has opted for the peaceful route or neutrality. Gustaf Sundbärg (1857–1914), a Swedish statistician, was outraged with the "Swedish national character," believing it to be too timid and low in self-esteem.<sup>21</sup> These factors played into the idea that the Swedish society was in decline, and some scholars, such as eugenicists, and officials believed that something had to be done to improve its outlook.

In the 1860s, an Austrian scholar named Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) introduced the scientific theory of inheritance, which proposed that people inherit a single gene from each of their parents to create a pairing of two genes. Genes express themselves through a variety of characteristics, such as eye and hair color. On December 10, 1910, the Mendelian Society was founded in Lund, Sweden, with the primary purpose of stimulating hereditary research. One of its members was Herman Nilsson-Ehle (1873–1949), Sweden's first professor of genetics.<sup>22</sup> Nilsson-Ehle was well known for his genetic research in plants, discovering how to breed a form of wheat resistant to the winter cold. Research showed that specific breeding could strengthen and alter the targeted genes. Although Nilsson-Ehle worked primarily with plants, he was an advocate of eugenics, believing that his research could be applied to human beings.<sup>23</sup> Other members of the Mendelian Society were zoologists, botanists, biologists, and medical students, and they frequently discussed eugenics. The idea of eugenics spread throughout the academic community, with advocates from a variety of scientific fields.

The Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene, established in 1909, advocated Mendelian-based research, especially if it promoted eugenic social reform. The society's main goal was to influence social policy and public opinion by spreading information about eugenics and supporting genetic research. Like the Mendelian Society, it had a diverse group of scholars, with each member having his own interpretation

of eugenics and political affiliation. Its members understood that biology and social reforms were above their political and scientific differences, so they sought to work together to push for eugenic social policies. Several members, such as Johan Hultkrantz, had strong left-leaning tendencies, while others, such as Herman Lundborg and Herman Nilsson-Ehle, were rightwing conservatives. Members selected Lundborg as the institute's director, which is why the society promoted rightwing eugenic policies.<sup>24</sup> Despite their political and scientific differences, members were deeply committed to the cause of eugenics-based social reforms. Moreover, the various academic circles worked together toward their common goal to form a type of eugenics network.

Swedish academics wanted the establishment of genetics to formally recognize eugenics as a legitimate academic discipline, and they accomplished this by establishing a position and institute for inheritance research for Nilsson-Ehle. Moreover, they strengthened the academic credentials of genetics by founding the scientific journal *Hereditas*. Societies invited scholars to lecture on racial hygiene and eugenics policies, spreading information on eugenics throughout the academic community.<sup>25</sup> Besides the academic community, scholars had to educate the public of the benefits of eugenics, and they realized this was a delicate task. Public opinion would have an impact on any potential social reform, so it had to sway the voting population toward pro-eugenics.

Scholars raised public awareness through exhibitions and the publications of books and pamphlets on eugenics. In 1919, the Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene hosted an exhibition held in major cities such as Stockholm, Visby, and Gothenburg, featuring photographs of people labeled as high- or low-quality. Lundborg published pamphlets that provided an overview of the exhibit. He reported that more than 40,000 people attended the exhibit and that it successfully influenced many of its visitors from various associations to support eugenics-based research and reforms. Moreover, he claimed that remote municipalities would conduct their own research on local biological features to further the field's understanding of Swedish physical characteristics.<sup>26</sup> Lundborg published books containing essays about different aspects of genetics and eugenics written by well-respected scholars, such as Nilsson-Ehle. In "The Struggle for Race Improvement in Sweden," Johan Hultkrantz and Emanuel Bergman argued that it was useless to improve the social environment in order to protect the race from deterioration. They favored social reform that enabled the favorable selection of parents who could transmit their superior genes to the next generation. Hultkrantz and Bergman wrote, "Thus it is of importance to seek to hinder, as far as possible, the reproduction of inferior individuals, and to increase the nativity among the better stock instead, as well as prevent immigration of inferior, and emigration of the fittest individuals."<sup>27</sup> The promotion of eugenics involved a wide range

of topics, including marriage and immigration; forced sterilizations were a minor subsection of the larger picture. Eugenicists wanted the fittest people to have more children, but they realized that large families placed an enormous financial burden on the breadwinner. It was argued that state policy should help lighten the financial burden of large families by helping them secure a home, supplementing wages, and providing a reduction in rates and taxes. They believed that placing these types of families in a stronger financial position would help them prosper. With the promise of financial and housing security, it was hoped that family of good stock would continue to grow their families.<sup>28</sup> Through their promotional efforts, more scholars, government officials, and the public started to accept some of the ideas arising from eugenics.

News articles from 1997 focused on the idea that the Swedish eugenics movement was about forced sterilizations and the laws that permitted them, but this is a misconception within the general international community. Sterilization of the mentally disabled and others deemed unfit for reproduction was a topic of interest to the eugenics movement, but supporters of eugenics sought social reforms in a variety of areas, including marriage and childcare laws. In 1919, the Swedish Parliament provided a minor grant to the University of Uppsala to establish a small race-biological institution, but a group of physicians and economists wanted to create an entire school dedicated to research on race biology and eugenics. At first, Parliament disagreed with

these sentiments, but in 1921, they agreed to a fully state-funded institution. In the following year, the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology was established, with Lundborg as its first director.<sup>29</sup> Its primary aim was to conduct research on topics related to eugenics and human genetics. Policymakers formally recognized eugenics as a legitimate field of science through the establishment of the institution, and they sought advice from eugenicists on relevant policies and social reforms. In 1910, Charles Davenport (1866–1944), an American biologist, established the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory's Eugenic Record Office, which carried out surveys on hereditary conditions. Harry McLaughlin (1880–1943), an American sociologist, was its director and spoke in favor of implementing sterilization laws and restricting immigration of undesirable populations to Congress.<sup>30</sup> American politicians listened to the arguments of specialists on eugenic policies from these programs, but their connection to the state was limited. In Sweden, the Institute was the first fully state-funded school in the world dedicated to racial policy, so there was deep connection with the school and government officials.

Social policy that was based on eugenics had the basic principle of strengthening the Swedish race while weeding out elements that weakened it. Like their counterparts in the United States and Germany, Swedish academics promoted both “negative” and “positive” measures to achieve these ends. Positive measures increased reproduction among the fit elements of the pop-

ulation, while negative measures sought to prevent the procreation of those who were unfit.<sup>31</sup> An old marriage law from 1734 prevented anyone with epilepsy or any mental impairment or venereal disease from marrying, and developing a disease after marriage was enough reason to annul the marriage. In the early twentieth century, the Swedish Parliament wanted to revise the old law and sought the advice of the Institute. Doctors recommended that those with epilepsy or mental illnesses not caused by external factors or venereal diseases should not be allowed to marry. However, those with epilepsy or mental illness could receive a health certificate from a physician, proving they were fit for marriage. Doctors wanted to add restrictions on those suffering from leprosy, advanced tuberculosis, alcoholism, or physical impairments, but they felt it was pushing too much, too soon. After considering the advice from the Institute, Parliament revised the marriage law, stating that the both parties had to sign an agreement that they did not suffer from any of the mentioned ailments. If in the last three years they had suffered from them, then they had to have a doctor's certificate declaring there were no current signs of illness.<sup>32</sup> Although Parliament did not follow the Institution's recommendation down to the letter, this example shows how the government took eugenics into consideration in their final decision on the marriage law. They actively sought advice from eugenics experts and incorporated their ideology into law. Marriage often led to the creation of families, theoretically reducing the risk

of "unfit" people from reproducing. Hultkrantz and Bergman admitted that marriage laws helped to hinder undesirable people from reproducing, but it was not foolproof. Further laws involving sterilization and segregation were vital components of increasing racial hygiene.

Eugenicists argued that Sweden's prison and asylum laws were not harsh enough and advocated that sentences for criminals and the severely mentally impaired should be lengthened. Those who committed sexual offenses should remain locked up in institutions. Separating these "worthless individuals" from the general population would lower the risk of them procreating and passing down their undesirable traits to the next generation.<sup>33</sup> Hultkrantz and Bergman briefly write about sterilization in their essay "The Struggle for Race Improvement in Sweden." They wrote,

The Medical Faculty touched on this question also but considered that regulations respecting the sterilization of physical and mental degenerates by means of operating, ought not to be introduced before public opinion has been well-prepared to support it. The question has been discussed among doctors and one or another of these have, with the consent of the patient, sometimes performed an operation for sterilization on account of eugenic indications. Sterilization is a necessary complement to prohibition of marriage, and it is therefore to be hoped that the

general public will be brought gradually, by means of continued efforts for their enlightenment to a right understanding of this weighty question.<sup>34</sup>

Scholars had firmly established eugenics and race biology as a legitimate field of science, especially with the Institute and politicians seeking the advice of its doctors on social policy. By the 1930s, there was a grand shift in Swedish society, where individual rights were sidelined for an efficient, productive welfare state that cared for the majority. Swedish politicians started to seek out welfare policies that benefited the state.

During the interwar period, Sweden entered into the modern era through rapid industrialization, inducing people to move from rural to urban areas. Urbanization created numerous social problems such as poor housing conditions and healthcare.<sup>35</sup> Hultkrantz states, "Above all the circumstances that people dwell so closely packed together, the greater extent of inebriety and sexual diseases, and, as a rule, the more unhygienic work in the towns act unfavorably on their inhabitants. A danger that is underrated is the strong mixture of blood which usually occurs in industrial centers which flourish rapidly."<sup>36</sup> Officials noted these poor conditions and wanted to use active welfare and population policies to improve the general population's living conditions. Sociopolitical and economic perspectives started to influence social policy, as politicians wanted to encourage productivity in the welfare state. In 1922, the Swedish Parliament argued that in-

stitutional care for the mentally handicapped placed a heavy economic strain on society. Moreover, they argued about the eugenic issue of them procreating, especially since they were deemed unfit to raise children. Children from unfit families had to be taken away and raised in proper homes to hopefully turn them into productive citizens. Under the proposed bill, the mentally impaired, epileptics, and sex offenders would be sterilized voluntarily; members of the Social Democrat, Liberal, and Agrarian parties supported the proposition.<sup>37</sup> Despite agreeing with the arguments and claiming it was of national interest to keep the race healthy, Parliament set up the Commission on Sterilization in 1927 to investigate the issue further, without putting the bill to a vote. Scholars continued to push the interest of eugenics through the publication of books, pamphlets, and lectures, but nothing further happened with respect to the sterilization question until the following decade.

In 1933, Parliament revisited the sterilization question, but decided to abandon the idea of voluntary sterilization. They turned their attention to the forced sterilization of individuals who were legally incompetent, or those unable to make a legal decision on their own. It was also suggested that minors could be sterilized regardless of their parents' wishes, since the needs of society were considered more important. Officials emphasized that physical violence and restraint were illegal, and it was best to prepare the mentally ill for the operation through private discussions with their doctor. Doctors were

encouraged to persuade patients to accept sterilization and freely undergo the operation.<sup>38</sup> Under these conditions, Parliament passed the first Sterilization Act in 1934, which went into effect on January 1, 1935. When the Sterilization Act of 1941 was discussed by the Swedish Parliament, the Minister of Justice Karl Gustaf Westman claimed, “an important step in the direction of a purification of the Swedish stock, freeing it from the transmission of genetic material which would produce, in future generations, such as individuals as are undesirable among a sound a healthy people.”<sup>39</sup> Despite politicians viewing sterilization from an economic standpoint, race rhetoric continued in the discussions. The revised bill was passed.

Sweden’s sterilization program continued into the 1970s, but sterilization on eugenic grounds slowly decreased in the 1950s. One of the primary reasons for the shift in attitudes toward eugenics was due to the shift from the state to the individual. Social policies started to focus on the specific needs of the individual, such as their housing and family situations. Sterilization policies reflected the needs and desires of the state, completely neglecting the rights of the individual. When the public started to care about the rights of the individual, forced sterilization practices fell out of favor. Sterilization was a personal matter and choice and not to be used as a tool of the state for population policy.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, rapid economic growth in Sweden raised the standard of living for almost everyone, granting individuals greater autonomy and freedom. Finally, the general level

of education improved, permitting the average person to speak out in debates and discussions, so their opinions and experiences were heard. Average citizens took part in political discourse, rather than only politicians and academics.<sup>41</sup> These social shifts reinforced the rights of the individual above the wellbeing of the state.

After Charles Darwin published his famous works on natural selection and its application to human beings, the eugenics movement started to take root, as more and more scholars worried about racial hygiene. Academics with different scientific and political backgrounds worked together towards the common goal of eugenics reform by educating the public on the benefits of population policies. Through their continuous promotional efforts, eugenics became an established and legitimate science in the field of genetics. Government officials accepted and supported racial doctrine, fully funding the first race biological institution in the world. They based their ideas on the core principle that fit persons should be encouraged to procreate, while lowering the risk of the unfit reproducing through policies such as sterilization and segregation. Parliament regularly sought the advice of its doctors on social policies, implementing some of their recommendations into law.

By the 1930s, the needs of the welfare state took precedence over individual rights, as Sweden sought to improve social conditions, such as housing and healthcare, through policies that benefited society, regardless of their impact on specific individuals. Thousands

of forced sterilizations were carried out on the mentally ill for eugenic reasons, but these numbers started to decline as public sentiments reversed. Individual rights became more important than the wellbeing of the state. Eugenics-based policies impacted a variety of social policies, including marriage, childcare, and immigration, and this could not have occurred without the tireless efforts of scholars campaigning to teach the public about its supposed benefits.

## Bibliography

- Bergfors, Georg. "The Swedish National Character." In *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*. Edited by Herman Lundborg and John Runnström, 34–38. Stockholm: Hasse W. Tullberg Co., 1921.
- Bjorkman, Maria and Sven Widmalm. "Selling Eugenics: The Case of Sweden." *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 64 (2010): 379–400. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25802126>.
- Broberg, Gunnar and Mattias Tyden. "Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care." In *Eugenics and the Welfare State*. Edited by Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, 77–149. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005.
- Buchanan, Allen, Dan Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler. *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Collins, Francis. "Foreword: This Past Must Not Prologue." In *Medicine After the Holocaust*. Edited by Sheldon Rubinfeld, xix–xx. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.
- Crandall, Rosa. *The Neil Family, Sweden-America, 1718–1908*. London: A.M. Eddy Press, 1908.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, UK: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1890.
- Dianda, Bas. *Political Routes to Starvation: Why Does Famine Kill?* Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019.
- Hoglund, Mattias and Bengt Bentsson. "The Origin of the Mendelian Society in Lund and the State of Hereditas." *Hereditas* 151 (2014): 110–14. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/hrd2.00078>.
- Hultkrantz, Johan and Emanuel Bergman. "The Struggle for Race Improvement in Sweden." In *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*. Edited by Herman Lundborg and John Runnström, 71–80. Stockholm: Hasse W. Tullberg Co., 1921.
- Lundborg, Herman. "The More Important Racial Elements That Form a Part of the Present Swedish Nation." In *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*. Edited by Herman Lundborg and John Runnström, 23–33. Stockholm: Hasse W. Tullberg Co., 1921.
- Lundborg, Herman. *Svenska Folktyper*. Translated by Susan Danielsson. Stock-

- holm: AB Hasse W. Tullbergs, 1919. [https://coffe.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/svenska\\_folktyper.pdf](https://coffe.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/svenska_folktyper.pdf).
- Lundborg, Herman and Frans Linders. *The Racial Characters of the Swedish Nation*. Stockholm: Almqvist Wiksell Printing Company, 1926.
- Magnusson, Lars. *An Economic History of Sweden*. London, UK: Routledge, 2000.
- Mattson, Greggor. "Nation-State Science: Lappology and Sweden's Ethnoracial Purity." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 2 (April, 2014): 320–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908505>.
- "Nordic Eugenics – Here, of all places." *The Economist*. August 28, 1997. <https://www.economist.com/europe/1997/08/28/here-of-all-places>.
- Rydberg, Viktor. "Den Hvita Rasens Framtid." <http://runeberg.org/rydvaria/hvita.html>.
- Spektorowski, Alberto. "The Eugenic Temptation in Socialism: Sweden, Germany, and the Soviet Union." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 1 (Jan., 2004): 84–106. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879414>.
- "Steriliseringsfrågan i Sverige 1935–1975 Historisk belysning - Kartläggning – Intervjuer." *Regeringskansliet*. March 1, 2000. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2000/03/sou-200020/>.
- "Sweden admits to racial purification." *Independent*. August 25, 1997. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/sweden-admits-to-racial-purification-1247261.html>.
- Zaremba, Maciej. "Rasren i Valfärden. Folkhemmets Förträngda arv." *Dagens Nyheter*. August 20, 1997. <https://www.dn.se/arkiv/kultur/rasren-i-valfarden-folkhemmets-fortrangda-arv/>.

## Notes

- 1 Maciej Zaremba, "Rasren i Valfärden. Folkhemmets Förträngda arv," *Dagens Nyheter*, August 20, 1997, <https://www.dn.se/arkiv/kultur/rasren-i-valfarden-folkhemmets-fortrangda-arv/>.
- 2 "Nordic Eugenics – Here, of All Places" *The Economist*, August 28, 1997, <https://www.economist.com/europe/1997/08/28/here-of-all-places>.
- 3 "Sweden Admits to Racial Purification," *Independent*, August 25, 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/sweden-admits-to-racial-purification-1247261.html>.

- 4 “Steriliseringsfrågan i Sverige 1935–1975 Historisk belysning - Kartläggning – Intervjuer,” *Regeringskansliet*, March 1, 2000, <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2000/03/sou-200020/>
- 5 Herman Lundborg, “The More Important Racial Elements That Form a Part of the Present Swedish Nation,” in *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*, ed. Herman Lundborg and John Runnström (Stockholm: Hasse W. Tullberg Co., 1921), 25.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 7 Georg Bergfors, “The Swedish National Character,” in *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*, ed. Herman Lundborg and John Runnström (Stockholm: Hasse W. Tullberg Co., 1921), 36–37.
- 8 Greggor Mattson, “Nation-State Science: Lappology and Sweden’s Ethnoracial Purity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 2 (April, 2014): 337, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908505>.
- 9 Lundborg, “The More Important Racial Elements,” 31.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Georg Bergfors, “The Swedish National Character,” 35.
- 12 Lundborg, “The More Important Racial Elements,” 33.
- 13 Allen Buchanan, Dan Brock, Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler, *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32.
- 14 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: John Marray, Albemarle Street, 1890), 134.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 16 Lars Magnusson, *An Economic History of Sweden* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), 15–16.
- 17 Viktor Rydberg, “Den Hvita Rasens Framtid,” accessed January 8, 2020, <http://runeberg.org/rydvaria/hvita.html>.
- 18 Bas Dianda, *Political Routes to Starvation: Why Does Famine Kill?* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019), 271.
- 19 Rosa Crandall, *The Neil Family, Sweden-America, 1718–1908* (London, UK: A.M. Eddy Press, 1908), 8.
- 20 Johan Hultkrantz and Emanuel Bergman, “The Struggle for Race Improvement in Sweden,” in *The Swedish Nation in Word and Picture*, ed. Herman Lundborg and John Runnström (Stockholm: Hasse W. Tullberg Co., 1921), 74.
- 21 Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tyden, “Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care,” in *Eugenics and the Welfare State*, ed. Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 78.

- 22 Mattias Hoglund and Bengt Bentsson, "The Origin of the Mendelian Society in Lund and the State of Hereditas," *Hereditas* 151 (2014): 111–12, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/hrd2.00078>.
- 23 Maria Bjorkman and Sven Widmalm, "Selling Eugenics: The Case of Sweden," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society* 64 (2010): 380, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25802126>.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 382.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Herman Lundborg, *Svenska Folktyper*, trans. Susan Danielsson (Stockholm: AB Hasse W. Tullbergs, 1919), 1, [https://coffe.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/svenska\\_folktyper.pdf](https://coffe.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/svenska_folktyper.pdf).
- 27 Hultkrantz and Bergman, "The Struggle for Race Improvement in Sweden," 71.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 29 Herman Lundborg and Frans Linders, *The Racial Characters of the Swedish Nation* (Stockholm: Almqvist Wiksell Printing Company, 1926), 7–8.
- 30 Francis Collins, "Foreword: This Past Must Not Prologue," in *Medicine After the Holocaust*, ed. Sheldon Rubinfeld (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), xix.
- 31 Bjorkman and Widmalm, "Selling Eugenics," 381–82.
- 32 Hultkrantz and Bergman, 73.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Alberto Spektorowski, "The Eugenic Temptation in Socialism: Sweden, Germany, and the Soviet Union," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 1 (Jan., 2004): 93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879414>.
- 36 Hultkrantz and Bergman, 75.
- 37 Broberg and Tyden, "Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care," 101.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 102.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 134.
- 41 *Ibid.*