

American eugenics movement saw babies' fitness judged at state fairs

Eugenics became a popular ideology in the United States beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century. Concerned with producing a stronger and fitter population through the careful and often coercive control of reproductive behavior, eugenics captured the attention of a citizenry eager to use science to solve its social problems.

Many scholars divide the early eugenics movement into two branches: "positive" and "negative" eugenics. Positive eugenics was the encouragement of reproduction for those believed to be of superior hereditary stock, in contrast to "negative" eugenics, the discouragement or prevention of reproduction for those deemed hereditarily "unfit." Many eugenicists, as eugenic advocates were known, believed that the goals of positive eugenics could be achieved voluntarily through education campaigns, while negative eugenic aims would require more coercive means for attainment, such as mass sterilization and immigration quotas.

Baby health contests at agricultural and state fairs perhaps most vividly exemplify popular campaigns for positive eugenics. Judges at these contests examined infant contestants according to a set of criteria for physical health and intelligence that included factors such as shape of the head, width between the eyes, condition of tonsils, strength of spine, and ability to walk or crawl. They quite tellingly employed scorecards derived from those used to judge livestock. First begun in 1908 at the Louisiana State Fair, baby health contests spread to forty states within just a few years.

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: Forgotten Stories of the Eugenic Age #1: How "Better Babies" Became "Fitter Families"