Today's Issues Readings for October 27

The Today's Issues group will not meet on October 20, it will resume on Sunday, October 27 to discuss two essays from the New York Review of Books.

From page 53 of the September 26 issue, Sarah Churchwell, "American Immigration: A Century of Racism," about the history of immigration of America.

From page 9 of the October 10 issue, Sean Wilentz, "The Culmination of Republican Decay, about the political dynamics of the Republican Party and the fate of the "never Trumpers".

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the Church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

The Wilentz article can be read on the NYR web site without a password, click here. A copy of the Churchwell article follows:

American Immigration: A Century of Racism
Sarah ChurchwellSEPTEMBER 26, 2019 ISSUE
The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America
by Daniel Okrent
Scribner, 478 pp., $32.00
Cartoon 'The High Tide of Immigration—A National Menace' by Louis Dalrymple, 1903
The Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum
'The High Tide of Immigration—A National Menace'; cartoon by Louis Dalrymple from Judge magazine, August 1903
1.
In May 1921 The Saturday Evening Post, America's most popular magazine, warned its readers of the grave "immigration problem" threatening to bring about "racial degeneration" in the United States. Yet happily, scientific advances based on the discoveries of Gregor Mendel would ensure Americans need never "forfeit their high estate and join the lowly ranks of the mongrel races." Poor Mendel, quietly cultivating his peas sixty years earlier, never said a word about racial degeneration, but that didn't stop anti-immigration campaigners like the Post's editor, George Horace Lorimer, from claiming that Mendel's work on heredity corroborated a new science validating ancient bigotries—namely, eugenics. In offering a supposedly scientific foundation for nativism, eugenics kicked off a national epidemic of confirmation bias.

"Nordicism," as American scientific racism was known, held that people of Northern European "stock" were biologically superior to everyone else. "The mental ability of the Southeastern European is below that of the Northern and Western European," readers were instructed, in typical terms. "Northern and Western Europeans govern themselves better than Southern and Eastern Europeans govern themselves." Every few weeks, Lorimer used his bully pulpit to

hammer the same restrictionist message, railing against “our policy of putting the alien and his interests first,” in editorials such as “America Last.” The Post’s two million readers in 1922 would have recognized in that title a clear allusion to a familiar, belligerently nativist slogan—“America First.”

Lorimer also hired a mouthpiece named Kenneth L. Roberts and sent him to Europe to issue scaremongering diatribes from the immigration front lines, expounding upon “certain biological laws which govern the crossing of different breeds, whether the breeds be dogs or horses or men.” In “Plain Remarks on Immigration for Plain Americans,” Roberts claimed that stopping immigration was “a matter of life and death for America,” repeating the same ominous phrase four times in the essay’s first five paragraphs. He acknowledged that millions of Europeans were living in abject misery after World War I, only to rhetorically shrug his shoulders:

The economic distress of these wretched people, for one reason or another, has always been so close to the extreme limit, that they were dulled to distress’s finer points. If they lived on beans and beets in 1912 their distress didn’t increase if the beans were moldy and the beets decayed in 1920.

The people too dull to appreciate the finer points of their own misery were, Roberts explains, “Hebrews” from Poland and Russia.

Such arguments borrowed their authority primarily from two hugely influential books, Madison Grant’s The Passing of the Great Race (1916) and Lothrop Stoddard’s The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy (1920), both heralded as offering scientific proof, thanks to “recent advances in the study of heredity and other life sciences,” of white supremacy. In fact, Grant and Stoddard were simply repackaging old ideas in scientistic new containers. The word “nativism” had been coined to make the same argument in the mid-1840s, urging “native Americans” (i.e., descendants of earlier European settlers) to defend against the legions of Irish and German immigrants invading the nation.

The federal government, however, did not begin restricting immigration until the 1880s. There were local and state laws to control it, but they were rarely enforced. Immigrants who arrived before 1880 for the most part did so in the absence of any meaningful restrictions, or disregarded them and were permitted to stay. Claiming ancestry on the basis of “legal” immigration to the United States before the 1880s and 1890s is to all intents and purposes nonsense; the vast majority of immigrants just came.*

By 1882, the threat from Chinese “coolie” labor led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, placing a ten-year moratorium on the immigration of Chinese laborers. The following year, Emma Lazarus invited the world’s tired and poor, its wretched refuse, to America’s shores. She was raising money for the Statue of Liberty, which arrived in New York harbor in 1885—the same year Congress passed the Alien Contract Labor Law, forbidding the importation of foreign workers.

And so it went, as Americans kept finding that the new kind of immigrant was, oddly enough, always the wrong kind. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, immigration from Northern Europe precipitously declined as standards of living there rose, while immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe skyrocketed. The decade between 1880 and 1890 became a watershed for nativists, a mystical juncture they harked back to repeatedly: it was after 1890, as Lorimer privately remarked to Roberts, that “the low-grade stuff” began to “come to us in volume.”

It was also the moment in which the term “eugenics” (from the Greek for “well born”) was coined, in 1883, offering seemingly scientific evidence to the privileged justifying their privilege. Its inventor was a cousin of Charles Darwin, Francis Galton, who applied to human beings Darwin’s theories of natural selection in the name of perfecting mankind through selective breeding. “Positive eugenics,” as it was known, claimed progressive ideals of ameliorating human existence—but its implementation usually relied on “negative eugenics,” which violently suppressed those who had not been selected. This included the enforced sterilization enacted in over thirty American states, for the most part well into the 1970s, and disproportionately visited upon black citizens. (In North Carolina, of the 7,686 people forcibly sterilized between 1933 and the early 1960s, five thousand were black.) However exalted eugenicist claims about human perfection might sound, they aggressively hunted for human imperfection, relying on passive constructions about those who “had been selected” to evade the question of who did the selecting. One restrictionist argued, for example, that America “was founded by picked men and women,” making historical determinism the harbinger of selective breeding. The hubris of the eugenicist project is stupefying: man in God’s image, “picking” his chosen people.

It was obvious who would do the picking, of course: the Nordic “master race,” a phrase popularized in America by Madison Grant, who used “Nordic” to denote a muddled category of Anglo-Saxons, Caucasians, Teutonics, Jutes, Danes, Varangians, and other impressive-sounding tribes—but anything vaguely Northern would do. Grant warned of “the long-suppressed, conquered servile classes rising against the master race”: if only the conquered servile classes would know their places, long-suffering overlords like Grant might have been spared the effort of writing bogus histories to shore up their power.

As its title suggests, Grant’s Passing of the Great Race was a nostalgic lamentation of decline and fall, the kind always predicated on a lost Eden. Grant’s paradise was the peaceful days before 1880, when America lived in democratic harmony thanks to its “homogeneous population of Nordic blood,” as he wrote in his introduction to Stoddard’s Rising Tide, dispensing with millions of indigenous and African-Americans, not to mention the entirety of the Civil War, in a single preposterous assertion. The Civil War, Grant complained, “shattered the prestige of the white race and it will take several generations and perhaps wars to recover its former control.”

The chillingly dismissive phrase “perhaps wars” is what makes his message fundamentally fascist—welcoming violence to safeguard racial prerogatives. Other fascists agreed: Hitler told Grant in a letter that The Passing of the Great Race was “my bible,” and the book was entered

into the Nuremberg trials by the defense as evidence that the United States had engaged in the crimes for which they were prosecuting Nazi doctors, including forced sterilization and experimental surgery. As Stefan Kühl showed in The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism (1994), the Nazis derived their eugenicist ideas from American theories, just as they used American race laws to legitimate the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. When Charles Lindbergh gave his first national radio broadcast in 1939, urging America to stay out of World War II, he quoted Grant almost verbatim, a few months before becoming the spokesman for the isolationist America First Committee.

One of the many ironies of the implacable defense of class prerogative is the way nativists insist privilege is theirs by right, while tacitly recognizing that it requires ruthless suppression of others. If their superiority is so natural, why do they have to fight so hard to maintain it? Eugenics provided the "sanctification" that, as Max Weber once observed, entitled groups always seek, desiring "a cosmos of acquired rights" above the mere brute fact of the power they enjoy. George Bernard Shaw declared in 1904, "Nothing but a eugenic religion can save our civilization." Galton agreed that eugenics should be a belief system, urging it as "the orthodox religious tenet of the future, for eugenics cooperates with the workings of nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races." God may have made white people superior, but their power was anointed by science.

These ideas have acquired different names and valences over the years (Saxonism, Anglo-Saxonism, Nordicism, white supremacism, alt-right, white genocide) and different slogans (America First, 100 Percent American, Make America Great Again, You Will Not Replace Us). But they have always relied on a misrecognition of the origins of power, and amounted to the same thing: some people deserve better, while others are untroubled by moldy beans and wretched misery. If they're thirsty, they can drink from toilet bowls.

2.

The last few decades have brought a resurgence of interest in the history of eugenics in America, including not only The Nazi Connection but also Alexandra Minna Stern's Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America (2005), Edwin Black's War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race (2003), and Jonathan Spiro's resourceful biography of Madison Grant, Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant (2009). Now Daniel Okrent has added to the list with his carefully researched, spiritedly written, and protractedly subtitled The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America. Okrent's interest is in the unholy alliance created when American nativism weaponized eugenics for the anti-immigrant cause.

The supposedly scientific agenda almost immediately began to reinforce a social one; Okrent argues that it was only when eugenics met xenophobia that all hell broke loose, but eugenics, as practiced by Galton and his epigones, was never distinct from racial and ethnic stratification. Galton himself was a comprehensive racist, his publications and correspondence littered with

references to the inadequacy of Africans, Jews, and other lesser people. “There exists a sentiment,” Galton complained, “for the most part quite unreasonable, against the gradual extinction of an inferior race.” Such mawkishness would need to be eradicated, as a fascistic logic again betrays itself, touting the rational conclusions of science over the “sentimental” ideals of democracy. Galton said it more than once: “It is in the most unqualified manner that I object to pretensions of natural equality.”

The Guarded Gate focuses narrowly on the turn of the twentieth century, when the interests of three intersecting social circles converged: a cohort of American (pseudo)scientists dedicated to pursuing Galton’s ideas; the writers, academics, and editors popularizing and legitimating them; and the American patricians working behind the scenes to finance the pursuit of these ideas and lobby them into law. Elite universities played a significant part in disseminating eugenicist theories, using them to vindicate and perpetuate institutional entitlement. Even infrastructure was mobilized to the eugenicist cause: the supervising architect of Princeton’s “collegiate Gothic” buildings invoked “the call of inextinguishable race memory” and “ethnic continuity.”

A presentation at a Kansas fair on the eugenic superiority of native-born white Americans, circa 1925
American Philosophical Society Library
A presentation at a Kansas fair on the eugenic superiority of native-born white Americans, circa 1925
Okrent painstakingly shows the asininity of eugenicists’ pseudoscientific, hopelessly subjective, and frankly bigoted theories. One “study,” based on interviews collated by young women who underwent a mere six weeks’ “training,” relied on anecdotal interviews measuring, for example, “frankness,” “fraud,” “freckling,” “friends, capacity for making,” “frigidness,” “frivolousness,” and “frowns.” Restrictionists further rigged the game by seeking support from “public opinion” derived exclusively from propertied white men with Anglo-Saxon surnames. Circular logic and casuistry abounded: when Madison Grant found his claims about Italian genetic inferiority difficult to reconcile with the genius of Leonardo and Michelangelo, he solved the problem by fiat, declaring they were actually Nordics.

The new science inspired a new language. In his best-selling 1912 The Kallikak Family (purporting to trace the heredity of one family from a slapdash mixture of appearance, stereotyping, anecdote, and hearsay), Henry H. Goddard offered the new coinage “moron,” from the Greek for “stupid.” Edward A. Ross bequeathed to us “race suicide,” which Okrent reads as primarily a theory of white degeneracy. But Ross himself blamed “democracy,” “low grade aliens,” and falling birthrates driven by women’s rights—an aspect of the story Okrent neglects. To avoid “brain famine in the race,” Ross called for women to put maternity before “individualism,” and for the government to “shield the American stock by restricting immigration.” This, too, is a fascist line of reasoning, calling on the authority of the state to protect the purity of völkisch bloodlines.

One student encountering these half-baked ideas was a young F. Scott Fitzgerald, who attended Ross's lectures at Princeton, where Goddard would also speak a few years later. It's likely that Goddard and Lothrop Stoddard together inspired the racist book that Tom Buchanan advocates for in the opening pages of The Great Gatsby—"'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard"—and from which Buchanan spouts eugenicist gibberish: "The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved…It's up to us, who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things." Mocked by his wife, Daisy, Tom tries lamely to defend his theories: "We're Nordics. I am, and you are, and you are…and we've produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that." A few pages later, Jordan Baker reads to Tom from the Saturday Evening Post; by novel's end he's fulminating about the breakdown of civilization and "intermarriage between black and white."

Fitzgerald noted later that this portrait of the Buchanans was inspired by memories of "the Rumseys" on Long Island. The Fitzgeralds attended several parties at the home of Mary Harriman Rumsey, widow of a polo-playing sculptor and daughter of railroad tycoon E.H. Harriman, one of the richest men in America. As a student at Barnard she became so interested in eugenics that her classmates nicknamed her "Eugenia"; she convinced her widowed mother to generously bankroll the newly established Station for Experimental Evolution at nearby Cold Spring Harbor. One of the scientists there was Goddard; another was Charles Davenport, a fanatical Galtonian apostle who takes a leading role in Okrent's tale. He emphasizes the crucial part played by Mary Harriman, while remarking that Fitzgerald makes Tom Buchanan a Nordicist, without connecting the two. But Buchanan's Nordicism isn't casual, it's definitional: that was how white American plutocratic power in the early 1920s spoke.

Meanwhile Gatsby's editor, Max Perkins, also published, and championed, Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard. History does not record what Perkins thought of Fitzgerald's satirizing Nordicist ideas, but the point is how mainstream they had become, thanks largely to the spurious legitimacy provided by cultural institutions including publishers, popular magazines, and university professors. In February 1921 an article appeared in Good Housekeeping called "Whose Country Is This?" written by Vice President Calvin Coolidge, in which he proclaimed, "Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides…observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law." The restrictionists sought to equate the two, making immigration law enforce "ethnic law." After instructing the housewives of America in eugenicist racial doctrine, Coolidge took his message back to Congress. "America must be kept American," he declared when he became president in 1923, promising to pass the legislation to make it so.

3.

Although eugenics provided a rationale, restrictionists still needed a means for distinguishing fit from unfit; their first pretext was literacy. Though they carefully couched public claims in euphemistically neutral language, in private correspondence nativist leaders candidly discussed

their real motives, giving Okrent his smoking gun. One restrictionist admitted the literacy test was designed to keep out “the southern and eastern Europeans,” but was “doubtful whether it pays” to make that case publicly; he advised “going easy on” it. Another endorsed a stratagem enabling them to “eliminate Japanese and other Orientals without the use of any words” saying so. Proxies, codes, and equivocation concealed their strategies; plausible deniability isn’t new, either. Ironically, however, using education as a surrogate for desirability helped drive toward education the very immigrants they wanted to discourage—thus undermining nativists’ claim that illiteracy was biologically, rather than environmentally, determined: literacy proved the opposite of what they wanted it to prove, while incentivizing the wrong outcome by improving the lot of “inferior” people.

Soon after winning a thirty-year fight to pass a literacy test as a means to immigration restriction, therefore, restrictionists found themselves seeking a more permanent solution. The answer they hit upon was national quotas—based on the number of descendants from a given country already in the US. In other words, they turned the demographic status quo into law, conflating religion, race, ethnicity, and nationality in one blow. (This had the added advantage of stopping “the spread of elementary education in the backward countries of Europe and western Asia.”) The 1921 Emergency Immigration Act slashed immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe by around 75 percent. But that only preserved the ethnic status quo of 1921, already far too polluted for their tastes, instead of turning the demographic clock back to the magic year of 1880. To restore their ideal population—a clear majority of white people of Northern European extraction—they based new quotas on population figures from the 1890 census, before the mass arrival of all “the low grade stuff.” Madison Grant worked tirelessly to shape the National Origins Act of 1924, which cut immigration by over 90 percent. Popular support for the bill was enormous, as articles and lectures with titles like “Lo, the Poor Nordic!” swept the country, arguing for “the right of the State to safeguard the character and integrity of the race or races on which its future depends.”

The Johnson-Reed Act sailed triumphantly into law in 1924, its restrictions so stringent that, an article noted at the time, even “the most nordicky of Nordics” might find themselves falling foul of it. Remaining in force for forty years, until it was reversed by Lyndon B. Johnson’s Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the 1924 Immigration Act was praised by Senator Jeff Sessions in 2015 for slowing down immigration “significantly.” That it did. It also led, among other consequences, to the American refusal to save tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from the Holocaust.

Okrent’s research into the convergence of nativism and eugenicism in America during these years is deep and comprehensive, but he pushes to the peripheries aspects some might think are central. He mentions in passing that America First was Warren G. Harding’s 1920 campaign slogan; in fact it was rampant in American political discourse from 1915 to 1941, appearing in virtually all of the contexts Okrent discusses, a pervasive code for aggressive nativism and restrictionism. It’s also surprising that Okrent, the author of an equally fine history of Prohibition, ignores altogether the role of anti-immigration sentiment in passing the Volstead Act, which was

partly a way to criminalize the customs of Europeans who came from drinking cultures. Northern Puritan and Southern Baptist communities didn't agree on much, but they did share an antipathy to alcohol. Arguably a far more serious oversight is giving short shrift to the Ku Klux Klan, mentioned only once. But the Klan represented the most vicious form of precisely the same ideas. What elites cloaked in discreet rhetorical veils, at least in public, the Klan revealed in all its howling rage. If eugenics was the putative scientific foundation of the American Nordicist movement, and Okrent's patricians its leaders, the Klan was its paramilitary arm.

The Guarded Gate is a book about fake science, but fake history played a crucial part in the story too. Okrent credits Madison Grant with producing the term "Nordic" more or less from thin air: Grant, he says, "miraculously transformed" the earlier "Teutonics" into Nordics. But this way of describing Americans of Northern European descent goes back at least to Emerson, who helped popularize the conflation of "the Northmen" with myths of Saxons, Norse, Jutes, Scandinavians, and Anglo-Saxons in English Traits (1856). Emerson was in turn extending the racialist mythologies of Thomas Jefferson, who tried to install the mythical leaders of the Saxon kingdom, Hengist and Horsa, on the Great Seal of the United States. Grant was using pseudoscience to legitimate these much older cultural mythologies, all steeped in a notion of "Saxon" or "Nordic" superiority.

Nor does Okrent remark on the way Galtonian social Darwinist ideas influenced the invention of the concentration camp during the period he examines. The term "concentration camps," as Okrent surely knows but doesn't say, was previously used to describe the camps set up during the Boer War for forcibly displaced Africans whose rights the state did not wish to recognize. Their high concentration of people within small enclosures led to their name: an estimated 115,000 Africans were interned in sixty-six camps, some 20,000 to 50,000 of whom are estimated to have died. In fact, the term "concentration camps" was also used as early as 1897 by the American press to describe the internment camps, with their "concentration of misery," forcibly established in Cuba in the run-up to the Spanish-American War for civilians labeled reconcentrados. These policies of displacing "undesirable" colonial people whose rights the imperial state did not wish to recognize into systems of coercion and control developed at the same time that Galton's theories took hold. Given that Okrent opens his book with his Jewish ancestors arriving in America and closes it with the Holocaust, it seems a missed opportunity.

He also leaves unspoken the obvious connections between the history he's relating and the American political situation today, doubtless because they are so flagrant, but this leaves open the possibility of reading his account as an earlier echo, rather than origin story. America First nativism, immigration restriction, racial violence, derailing democratic equality, assaults on birthright citizenship, shouting that the white race is endangered even as it puts "undesirable" other groups in concentration camps: all are symptoms of the same worldview.

Discussions of eugenics and other fascistic ideas in American history tend to provoke the defense that, while such arguments have been made, they never took root. But if they never took root, why do they keep flowering? In January 2018 Trump told advisers he didn't want

immigrants from “shithole” Caribbean and African countries to come to the US, and would prefer more immigrants from Norway. This March Paul Krugman tweeted a thread responding to the Economic Report of the President, and what he viewed as its “weird,” “creepy” focus on the economic success of “Americans of Nordic ancestry” and an emphasis on “Nordic culture.” Krugman asked if someone could explain how this wasn’t racist, without his seeming to recognize it as the latest iteration in a long history of American Nordicism. Trump has often espoused what he calls “gene theory,” arguing that superior types produce other superior types. Perhaps we should recall that Trump’s father grew up during the years Okrent describes, when eugenicist arguments for white supremacy suffused American cultural discourse. History matters, as was made all too clear when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was lambasted for her entirely accurate description of the prison camps on the southern US border as “concentration camps.” Hitler is not fascism’s only test case: he was neither its beginning nor its ending.

Those with power have a vested interest in misreading it, viewing the social rules that benefit them as reflecting the natural order of things, an order their dominance lets them replicate and justify. As Okrent quotes one opponent to restrictionism aptly commenting, the world has “suffered more from the vices of the rich than from those of the poor.” The Guarded Gate sharply reminds us that nativism has never been limited to its most savage enforcers, like the Klan or neo-Nazis. It always has its “civilized” voices, too, with lobbyists, funders, and advocates giving it respectable cover, domesticating it, putting it in Good Housekeeping rather than in Der Stürmer. But it keeps turning back to the same old-time religion, singing the same sad lament: “Lo, the Poor Nordic!”

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See Hidetaka Hirota, Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy (Oxford University Press, 2017). ↩