

# The Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man (1918–1935)

Charles Benedict Davenport, Madison Grant, and Henry Fairfield Osborn founded the Galton Society for the Study of the Origin and Evolution of Man, or the Galton Society, in New York City, New York, in 1918. The Galton Society was a scientific society that promoted the study of humans in terms of race in service to the US eugenics movement. The Galton Society was named in honor of Francis Galton who first coined the term eugenics in 1883. Galton and other eugenics proponents claimed that the human species could improve through selective breeding that restricted who could have children. Some of the society members were scientists from a wide range of disciplines who supported the now disproven notion that fundamental biological differences exist between races that may justify the control of human reproduction. The Galton Society drew on the scientific credibility and influence of its members to advocate for eugenics programs, such as immigration restriction laws, in the US.

Eugenics is a scientifically invalid movement based on the incorrect idea that fundamental genetic differences exist in humans that make people superior or inferior to each other. According to Megan Gannon, a science writer for the magazine *Scientific American*, most biologists and anthropologists in 2021 agree that race is a social construct and not an effective way of categorizing or understanding genetic diversity between humans. However, up until the mid-twentieth century, eugenicists argued that certain lineages of people are supposedly more genetically pure than others, often emphasizing the separation of people of different races. While humans are incredibly diverse, Svante Pääbo, who studies genetics in Germany in the twenty-first century, explains that there are no distinct genetic boundaries between races at all. To illustrate, Pääbo explains there is no single variation of any gene that all Africans carry or that all Europeans carry, for example, that distinguishes them from each other or any other group.

In fact, according to Morris Foster and Richard Sharp, who research anthropology and medicine in the twenty-first century, modern genome sequencing technology, or technology that allows researchers to read an organism's DNA sequence, has shown that there is a higher percentage of genetic variation between individuals within a race than there is between individuals of separate races. Foster and Sharp explain that ninety-three to ninety-five percent of genetic differences that occur between humans can be detected within individuals of the same race. On the other hand, Foster and Sharp explain that if a scientist were to compare the genomes of two people of different races, only about three percent of the observable genetic differences would actually be due to race. Therefore, scientists like Pääbo, Foster, and Sharp stress that it is erroneous to make assumptions about a person's biology based on what race they are.

However, organizations like the Galton Society established scientific credibility for inaccurate eugenics concepts that emphasized differences between races by recruiting influential scientists and professionals who agreed with their views. According to Grant's biographer Jonathan Spiro, those scientists conducted biased research that supposedly confirmed eugenics. By doing this, eugenics organizations were able to push for the passage of prejudiced laws in the US based on eugenics principles. Such laws restricted immigration of people of certain nationalities or permitted the sterilization of people deemed unhealthy or biologically inferior against their will. According to Spiro, in the 1930s, Adolf Hitler adopted ideas he learned from Grant and other US eugenicists and implemented them throughout Nazi Germany, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of people while he was in power. After seeing how eugenics was used in Nazi Germany, people in the US began to denounce the field. Around the same time, physical anthropologists, or formally trained

researchers concerned with the evolution of biological and behavioral aspects of human beings, debunked widespread eugenicist claims and showed that eugenics was not based in science.

The three founders of the Galton Society were all involved in the US eugenics movement. Davenport was a zoologist who, in 1910, founded the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, to train eugenics field workers to collect data on US citizens' family histories to construct pedigrees. Grant was a lawyer and wildlife conservationist who argued that Northern Europeans were biologically superior to all other humans in his 1916 book *The Passing of the Great Race: or, The Racial Basis of European History*. Grant proposed an extensive eugenics program to prevent Northern Europeans, who he called the Nordic race, from going extinct. Adolf Hitler wrote in a letter to Grant that the German translation of Grant's book was his Bible. Osborn was a paleontologist and the director of the American Museum of Natural History, or AMNH, in New York City, New York, from 1908 to 1930. Osborn helped secure the Galton Society's affiliation with the AMNH, which according to Spiro, lent scientific legitimacy to the Galton Society. Harry Hamilton Laughlin, a eugenicist whose 1922 book titled *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* contained a sterilization model that became the blueprint for US laws that legalized sterilizing people against their will, referred to Davenport, Grant, and Osborn as the three great leaders who pushed eugenics to be seen as a legitimate biological science in the US.

The founders established the Galton Society to provide a space for like-minded scientists to promote racial anthropology, or the study of human races based on the scientifically invalid claim that humans can be grouped into distinct, pure, races and ranked in terms of alleged biological superiority. However, there were also many physical anthropologists who rejected the race concept and eugenicist viewpoints at the time. Franz Boas, an anthropology researcher of the early twentieth century, and his students at Columbia University in New York City, New York, led anthropology's shift in focus from race to culture. Boas was a Jewish immigrant from Germany and his students included women, immigrants, and Jewish people. Boas and his students rejected the existence of distinct biological races and instead emphasized the importance of culture and developmental environment for understanding human diversity. According to Spiro, Boas and his followers held many high-ranking positions within US anthropology and were dominant voices in the largest professional anthropology organization, the American Anthropological Association, by 1920. Spiro articulates that Grant, Davenport, and Osborn founded the Galton Society in direct opposition to Boas and the American Anthropological Association. In a letter to Osborn, Grant expressed his desire for an alternative anthropology organization that only accepted members born in the US and required certain political and scientific views to join. Galton Society members argued that anthropologists in the US had been focusing on learning about the culture of Native Americans for too long and should instead focus on race in order to inform pressing social issues such as immigration and war.

Davenport, Grant, and Osborn adopted the Galton Society charter on 2 April 1918 and held the first meeting with charter fellows at Osborn's house on 7 April 1918. In addition to the three founders, charter fellows included biologist Edwin G. Conklin of Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey, paleontologist, or a scientist who studies the history of life on earth through fossils, John C. Merriam of University of California, Berkeley, in Berkeley, California, and paleontologist William K. Gregory of the AMNH. Charter fellows from Columbia University included anatomist and medical doctor George S. Huntington, psychologist Edward L. Thorndike, and zoologist J. Howard McGregor. None of the charter fellows had any formal anthropology schooling. The charter fellows elected Davenport as chairman and Gregory as secretary.

Many of the Galton Society's members were reputable scientific professionals in positions of power or prestige. During the first meeting, the charter fellows inducted seven more fellows into the Galton Society, including anthropologists Clark Wissler of the AMNH and Earnest A. Hooton of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the time of its founding, the Galton Society was limited to sixteen members, though the number of members later doubled to thirty-two. The members came from a diverse range of scientific disciplines, and many had backgrounds in wildlife conservation like Grant, Osborn, and Davenport. At its peak in the 1920s, over half of the Galton Society members were also members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or AAAS, now the world's largest scientific society. Three Galton Society members served as President of the AAAS. Half were also members of the American Philosophical Society, the oldest scholarly society in the

US, and one third were members of the highly selective National Academy of Sciences, an organization responsible for providing advice to the US about science-related issues. Spiro suggests that some members of the Galton Society may not have been strong proponents of eugenics but joined for the professional benefits that came with access to many of the country's leading scientists.

The society met at the AMNH roughly every month except during the summer from 1918 to 1935. Most meetings began with a luncheon hosted by Grant and Osborn followed by a presentation and discussion in the Osborn Library, amounting to ninety-eight meetings and 130 scientific talks. The Galton Society meetings were funded by Grant, Osborn, and two patrons, Moses Taylor Pyne and Mary Williamson Averell Harriman. Pyne was one of the greatest benefactors of Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. Harriman was the widow of a former president of the Union Pacific Railroad, and used her fortune to fund many eugenics organizations, including the Eugenics Record Office.

As a result of their connections, members of the Galton Society were able to exert considerable influence in scientific and political arenas to shape the trajectory of scientific research at a national level. For example, in 1916, the National Academy of Sciences established the National Research Council, or NRC, to coordinate scientific research on a national scale in preparation for the US's entry into World War I. The Galton Society was so interconnected that the executive council of the NRC rejected all proposed members for the Committee on Anthropology until Davenport and Grant were recommended in 1917, despite their lack of training in anthropology. The Committee on Anthropology ended up only containing two actual anthropologists at its start. Beginning in 1918, Davenport oversaw a project for the Committee on Anthropology that collected physical measurements from men drafted into the US military that he later published in his 1921 report *Army Anthropology*, in which he compared and ranked soldiers' body types according to race. Meanwhile, Galton Society member Robert M. Yerkes chaired the NRC Committee on Psychology and administered intelligence tests to the US Army.

The NRC also authorized the Committee on Anthropology to establish the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* to serve as its official publication outlet. The committee's secretary Alš Hrdlička, Curator of the Division of Physical Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., founded the journal in 1918. Hrdlička appointed several Galton Society members, including Davenport and Grant, as associate editors of the journal. However, after Grant declined to help finance the journal, Hrdlička replaced Grant with his rival Boas and largely shut out Galton Society members from publishing in the journal. The Galton Society instead turned to posting announcements and meeting minutes in the much smaller newsletter shared by various US eugenics societies, *Eugenical News*. *Eugenical News* was founded in 1916 to report the Eugenics Record Office's research activities. The newsletter published articles promoting eugenics concepts such as sterilization and immigration restriction, including some that praised Nazi Germany's sterilization programs that began in 1933.

When World War I ended in 1918, the NRC transitioned to a permanent scientific institution. Galton Society charter fellow Merriam became the chairman of the NRC in 1919. Soon after, the NRC Division of Anthropology and Psychology, now combined, established a Committee on Scientific Problems of Human Migration to fund scientific research that supported immigration restriction laws. According to Elazar Barkan, a twenty-first century researcher of human rights and history, the committee sponsored numerous research projects related to eugenics while in operation from 1922 to 1929, with an annual budget of approximately \$50,000 per year. Since Yerkes, Merriam, and Wissler directed the committee, many of the funded projects were led by Galton Society members. The projects produced approximately fifty scientific publications that further bolstered the scientific legitimacy of eugenics. Barkan explains that Galton Society members serving on committees at the NRC and other institutions prevented other scientists from receiving funding if their research did not focus on race.

Even though many other organizations were already in place to conduct eugenics research, Grant attempted, but ultimately failed, to complete three research projects as part of the NRC's Committee on Anthropology. The first two proposed projects, the establishment of a Galton Laboratory for eugenics research at AMNH and a major taxonomic reclassification of human and primate species, failed due to a lack of funding likely related to the Great Depression. The third proposed project

was a long-term study of Australian Aboriginals. The Rockefeller Foundation funded the research on the condition that the project was run by scientists in Australia, who quickly abandoned the racial anthropology aim of Grant and the Galton Society.

In addition to their membership in scientific societies, many Galton Society members also held leading roles in organizations that lobbied for immigration restriction, such as the Immigration Restriction League and the American Defense Society. For example, Congressman Albert Johnson was appointed chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the United States Congress after lobbying from the Immigration Restriction League and was made a member of the Galton Society soon after his appointment. Johnson appointed Laughlin, Galton Society member and Eugenics Record Office assistant director, as the committee's Expert Eugenics Agent from 1920 to 1931. Laughlin practiced his testimony for the committee during the Galton Society's monthly meetings. Furthermore, Grant helped Johnson draft the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, known as the Johnson-Reed Act, that established strict quotas for immigration based on nationality. According to Paul Lombardo, who researches legal history in the twenty-first century, the law was consciously designed to limit the numbers of Italians and eastern European Jewish people that could enter the US. The quotas established by the 1924 Act remained in place throughout World War II when many Jewish people were seeking refuge in the US, but the US turned many of them away. The Act was not repealed until 1965.

The Galton Society helped organize the Second and Third International Congress of Eugenics held at the AMNH in 1921 and 1932, respectively. Osborn presided over the Second Congress. One hundred and eight scientific papers were published in two volumes of conference proceedings titled *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family* and *Eugenics in Race and State* in 1923. During the Congress, Osborn established an interim committee to promote public eugenics education in the US. The committee, headed by the economist Irving Fisher, became the American Eugenics Society in 1926 with Grant, Osborn, and Laughlin among its founding members. The American Eugenics Society supported eugenics programs and policies throughout the US. Davenport presided over the Third, and final, Congress. Over three hundred active members attended. Sixty-five scientific papers were published in *A Decade of Progress in Eugenics* in 1934.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, more scientists began to distance themselves from eugenics as new genetics research began to complicate ideas of inheritance and demonstrate that biological races do not exist. Public criticism of eugenics intensified as Nazi Germany put eugenics principles into practice, beginning with the 1933 Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases in Germany. According to Ruth Clifford Engs, who studied public health science in the twentieth century, that law was based on the sterilization model Laughlin put forth in his 1922 book about eugenics in the United States. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum states that the German sterilization law permitted the Nazi Regime to sterilize at least 400,000 people against their will. Around the same time as when Nazis began gaining political control over Germany, the Galton Society began to lose its leaders. Osborn resigned from the AMNH in 1933 and died in 1935. Davenport retired in 1934. The Galton Society dissolved in 1935 and the Eugenics Record Office followed soon after in 1939.

The scientific and political influence of Galton Society members promoted racist scientific research on race during the early twentieth century. Galton Society members held leadership positions across a broad range of scientific institutions and shaped research in anthropology by controlling access to funding. Furthermore, the academic credentials of society members afforded eugenics with the scientific legitimacy necessary for widespread public acceptance. The simultaneous involvement of society members in many other eugenics organizations and lobbying groups created a broad network of support to implement eugenics programs such immigration restriction laws in the US.

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