

The International Eugenics Congresses (1912–1932)

The International Eugenics Congresses consisted of three scientific meetings held in London, England, in 1912 and at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, New York, in 1921 and 1932. Leonard Darwin, son of Charles Darwin, Henry Fairfield Osborn, the President of the American Museum of Natural History, and Charles Benedict Davenport, founder of the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, New York, presided over the Congresses. Scientists presented research in genetics and shared ideas for putting eugenics into practice, such as preventing people that eugenicists considered inferior from reproducing through forced sterilization. The three International Eugenics Congresses increased scientific and public support of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century, and established organizations to pursue eugenics agendas that contributed to the forced sterilization of tens of thousands of people in the US and hundreds of thousands in Nazi Germany.

Eugenics is a scientifically invalid movement based on the incorrect idea that fundamental genetic differences exist between humans that make people superior or inferior to each other, often depending on their race. 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 rather than a biological one and is not an effective way of categorizing or understanding genetic diversity between humans. Svante Pääbo, who studies genetics in Germany in the twenty-first century, explains that there are no distinct genetic boundaries between races at all. That means that there is no set of genes or traits that every person of a race has that can be used to categorize people into distinct groups. Additionally, all humans are over ninety-nine percent genetically similar to each other, meaning we are all more alike than we are different.

However, up until the mid-twentieth century, eugenicists argued that certain lineages of people are supposedly more genetically pure than others. Eugenicists often used that argument to push legislation that separated people of different races through anti-immigration laws, segregation policies, and anti-miscegenation laws, or laws against people of different races being allowed to marry. Organizations and conferences like the International Eugenics Congresses established scientific credibility for inaccurate eugenics concepts by recruiting influential scientists and professionals who agreed with and would back up eugenicist views. According to Jonathan Spiro, who is an author of several books on the history of eugenics and, as of 2021, the interim President of Castleton University in Castleton, Vermont, Adolf Hitler adopted ideas he learned from US eugenicists and implemented them throughout Nazi Germany in the 1930s. That resulted 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, scientists began to debunk widespread eugenicist claims and showed that eugenics was not based in science.

Francis Galton, the half-cousin of the naturalist Charles Darwin, first coined the term eugenics, Greek for "well-born," in 1883. Galton and other eugenics proponents believed that the human species could be improved through selective breeding that restricted who could have children. Galton advocated for increasing reproduction among people that eugenicists considered superior, an approach that Galton named positive eugenics. Negative eugenics, in contrast, attempted to prevent the reproduction of people eugenicists judged to be inferior, weak, or defective. While some eugenicists supported birth control as a method for negative eugenics, many eugenicists who participated in the Congresses argued that compulsory sterilization, or sterilizing people without their consent, was a more dependable and permanent solution.

The First International Eugenics Congress was held at the University of London in London, United

Kingdom, from 24 to 30 July 1912. The Eugenics Education Society of Great Britain organized the First Congress. Sybil Neville-Rolfe, a women's rights and eugenics activist in the United Kingdom, founded the Eugenics Education Society in 1907. The directors of the Eugenics Education Society renamed the organization to the British Eugenics Society in 1926 and the Galton Institute in 1989. Neville-Rolfe, as Honorary Secretary, assumed a lead role in organizing the First Congress with the goal of widely sharing scientific research on eugenics and educating the public about its alleged benefits. Leonard Darwin presided over the First Congress. The organizers gave thirty-seven members the honorary title of vice president, including inventor Alexander Graham Bell and Winston Churchill, who served as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955.

Committees from the United Kingdom, United States, Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy each nominated speakers to present scientific papers at the meeting. The organizers invited the members of numerous eugenics and hereditary organizations in Europe and the United States to attend. They also extended invitations to individuals known to have an interest in eugenics. In addition, various institutions and organizations, such as the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, the Royal Society of Medicine, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the American Philosophical Society, among many others, sent representatives to the First Congress.

Following a Presidential Address by Darwin where he defined eugenics as the practical application of evolution, the invited speakers presented a total of thirty-two papers across five sessions titled Biology and Eugenics, Practical Eugenics, Education and Eugenics, Sociology and Eugenics, and Medicine and Eugenics. Paper titles included "The Cause of the Inferiority of Physical and Mental Characters in the Lower Social Classes," and "Heredity and Eugenics in Relation to Insanity." Members of the First International Eugenics Congress also created a specific committee to discuss sterilization called the Committee on Sterilization. Harry H. Laughlin, one of the most active eugenicists in the US, published the Committee on Sterilization's final report in 1914. The final report put forth largely American models for sterilizing people eugenicists considered to be weak or of inferior genetics. According to Edwin Black, who studies the history of eugenics, the Committee on Sterilization's final report was overwhelmingly accepted and even admired by other members of the congress.

Since the presenters did not speak the same languages, the Eugenics Education Society chose to publish the papers in advance of the meeting for the attendees' reference in *Problems in Eugenics: Papers Communicated to the First International Eugenics Congress*. The organizers published a second volume in 1913, *Problems in Eugenics: Report of Proceedings of the First International Eugenics Congress*, that summarized the participant discussions and included a few papers that were not submitted in time to be printed in the first volume. The Congress also published a *Catalogue of the Exhibition* that detailed the contents of the public eugenics exhibition. The exhibit included portraits of the Darwin family, heritability studies of animals such as fire salamanders, comparisons of national birth and death rates, pedigrees of famous families, photographs that allegedly illustrated racial differences in facial features, and charts that traced the frequency of traits thought to be heritable in families.

According to reviews of the event published in *Science and Nature*, the organizers considered the First International Eugenics Congress to be a great success. Approximately 800 people attended the First Congress, exceeding the organizers' expectations. However, the reviewers conceded that the high attendance may have been due, in part, to the numerous social events with British socialites, including receptions that the Duchess of Marlborough and the Lord Mayor of London hosted. Nevertheless, the reviewers concluded that the First Congress achieved its goal of widely promoting the aims of eugenics and providing an opportunity to share research internationally. In *Problems in Eugenics: Reports of the Proceedings of the First International Eugenics Congress*, Darwin expresses that one of the most important outcomes of the First Congress was the establishment of a permanent International Eugenics Committee responsible for planning future Congresses.

The Second International Eugenics Congress was originally planned to be held in New York City in 1915 but was delayed until the following decade due to the start of World War I in 1914. After the National Research Council, a unit of the US National Academy of Sciences, officially authorized the Second Congress, a general committee of about 100 members began organizing the event under

the direction of Henry Fairfield Osborn and Charles Benedict Davenport. The US State Department mailed letters of invitation to the participants but excluded scholars from Germany due to postwar tensions. With assistance from the Eugenics Record Office and the Eugenics Research Association, the American Museum of Natural History, or AMNH, in New York City hosted the Second International Eugenics Congress from 22 to 28 September 1921. Henry Fairfield Osborn, the president of the AMNH, presided over the Second Congress with Alexander Graham Bell as Honorary President. Sybil Neville-Rolfe, by then remarried and known as Sybil Gotto, served again as Honorary Secretary. Clarence Cook Little, a genetics and cancer researcher, served as Secretary General and Chairman of the Executive Committee. The organizers bestowed the title of vice president upon numerous scholars, including Darwin, who traveled to New York City from outside the United States.

The attendees of the Second Congress participated in social events throughout New York, including receptions at Osborn's Hudson River estate and the Piping Rock Country Club. The organizers led field trips to the Department of Genetics of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. The Department of Genetics contained the Station for Experimental Evolution and Eugenics Record Office at what is now the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory at Cold Spring Harbor, New York. The Eugenics Record Office collected heredity data and family pedigrees for thousands of Americans and trained eugenics specialists and field workers. The Carnegie Institution of Washington donated \$400 towards entertainment expenses and \$2000 to defray travel expenses for presenters from Europe.

On the first night of the Second Congress, Osborn, Darwin, and Davenport delivered opening addresses to approximately 600 attendees. Osborn called on scientists to educate governments about eugenics so they could prevent the reproduction of members of society that Osborn called worthless. Science magazine published both Osborn and Darwin's addresses in full. Over the next week, scholars from Europe, North America, and South America presented 105 scientific presentations in four sessions titled Human and Comparative Heredity, Eugenics and the Human Family, Human Racial Differences, and Eugenics and the State. In contrast to the First Congress that scholars from Europe dominated, scientists from the US presented the most presentations in 1921. No scholars from Germany attended due to international tensions following World War I.

According to researcher Little, the organizers intentionally began the Second Congress with numerous presentations about genetics to combat criticism from the press that eugenics was an unscientific fad. To further cultivate the appearance that eugenics was an objective science, the organizers supposedly discouraged speakers from making what they considered sensational or radical claims. Presentation titles included "Darwinian Evolution by Mutation," "The Inheritance of Cancer in Mice," "The Effects of Inbreeding on Guinea Pigs," "The Problem of Negro-White Intermixture and Inter-marriage," and "Preventative Eugenics: the Protection of Parenthood from the Racial Poisons."

Like the First Congress, the Second Congress also featured a public exhibition. Mary Williamson Averell Harriman, the wealthy widow of a railroad magnate, donated \$2500 towards the exhibition, the equivalent of about \$38,000 in 2021. Harriman was a regular benefactor of US eugenics organizations such as the Galton Society and Eugenics Record Office. Laughlin and the curators of the AMNH designed two new exhibits for the Second Congress. The first exhibition, the Archaeology and Anthropology Exhibition, was located in the Hall of the Age of Man, the primary location of the Second Congress sessions, and depicted the evolution of the human species and displayed artifacts from different cultures.

The second exhibition, the Eugenics and Allied Sciences Exhibition, located in the Forestry and Darwin Halls, contained exhibits that 131 individuals and organizations from sixteen countries, including members of the Second Congress, scientific societies, life insurance companies, and the US Census Bureau and Department of Labor, donated. Exhibit topics spanned general genetics, embryology, human heredity, family histories and pedigrees, and alleged racial differences in humans. The AMNH estimated that between 5,000 to 10,000 visitors attended the free exhibition in its first month, and 821 signed the exhibition register to demonstrate their interest in eugenics. The House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the United States Congress requested that the International Eugenics Congress display a section of the exhibit pertaining to immigration in congressional hearing rooms in Washington, D.C. Laughlin served as the House Committee's Ex-

port Eugenics Agent and contributed to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 that significantly reduced immigration from countries that eugenicists considered undesirable to the US until 1965.

Davenport and the Committee on Publication compiled the presentations, discussion summaries, and selected exhibition photographs in *The Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics*, published in two volumes titled *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family* and *Eugenics in Race and State* in 1923. In the preface, the organizers boasted that the proceedings contained the work of some of the most advanced and best-known scientists in genetics and thanked them for sharing genetics research methods with those attempting to practically apply eugenic principles. Laughlin published a separate monograph in 1923 that catalogued the full list of exhibits and compiled the exhibition photographs into a single volume. The organizers considered the Second Congress to be a complete success, with Osborn claiming that it was the most important scientific meeting to be held at the AMNH. In addition to the 393 members who registered for the Second Congress, over 900 people claimed admission tickets that permitted the general public to attend the scientific presentations, thereby achieving the organizers' goal of increasing public understanding of eugenics.

The Second Congress also resulted in the formation of two new eugenics organizations. Osborn established an interim committee to promote public eugenics education in the US. The committee, that the economist Irving Fisher headed, became the American Eugenics Society in 1926. The American Eugenics Society supported eugenic programs and policies throughout the US and co-sponsored the Third International Congress. Additionally, Congress members re-established an International Eugenics Commission, with Darwin and Osborn as chairman and vice chairman, respectively, to determine the time and location of the Third International Eugenics Congress. Germany was initially excluded from the list of cooperating countries that the Commission represented. The Commission met annually in Europe from 1922 to 1930. In 1925, The Commission changed its name to the International Federation of Eugenics Organizations, or IFEO, and established the journal *Eugenical News* in 1929 to publicize the organization's activities. In 1930, the IFEO agreed to hold the Third International Congress in New York City.

The American Museum of Natural History hosted the Third, and final, International Eugenics Congress from 21 to 23 August 1932. The AMNH, Eugenics Record Office, Eugenics Research Association, and the Galton Society co-sponsored the Third Congress. Davenport served as President and Laughlin served as Secretary and as Exhibition Chairman. The Third Congress began with a field trip to the Department of Genetics of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Cold Spring Harbor. After returning to the AMNH, Davenport gave a Presidential Address that traced the development of eugenics since the First and Second Congresses, listing achievements such as the creation of numerous eugenics organizations and the adoption of sterilization programs and immigration restriction in several countries. Davenport speculated that the eugenics movement, which the press once ridiculed, would soon be regarded as the most important factor in social progress.

Osborn's keynote, titled "Distinction Between Birth Control and Birth Selection" argued that the eugenics principle of birth selection was the best option to remedy social issues such as overpopulation and unemployment. Osborn defined birth selection as methods that encourage reproduction among people he believed to be the fittest members of society. While birth control could be used to prevent reproduction among people eugenicists deemed unfit, Osborn lamented that birth control could end up harming superior races as well. According to Osborn, the use of birth control among families he believed to be superior was unnatural, a betrayal to one's race, and a danger to society.

Following the opening addresses, scholars presented sixty-five scientific papers in eight sessions titled Anthropometric Methods and Tests; Race Amalgamation; Education and Eugenics, Society and Eugenics; Positive and Negative Eugenics; Selection, Disease, Infertility; Differential Fecundity; and Human Genetics. Paper titles included "Control of Immigration," "Virginia's Effort to Preserve Racial Integrity," "Evidence of the Rapidly Decreasing Birth Rate in Families in which Highly Intelligent Children Occur," and "Is Eugenics Half-Baked?" The proceedings were published in *A Decade of Progress in Eugenics: Scientific Papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics* in 1934. The book described the history of the Congresses and included an extensive accounting

of the accompanying public eugenics exhibit. The Publication Committee dedicated the volume to the memory of Harriman who died shortly after the Third Congress.

The Exhibit of Eugenics, consisting of 267 exhibits, received over 15,000 visitors in the six weeks it was open to the public. William K. Gregory, who studied evolution at the AMNH, designed an exhibit called an "Introduction to Human and Comparative Anatomy" in the Hall of the Natural History of Man that opened in concert with the eugenics exhibit. The exhibits were designed to complement each other, with the AMNH exhibits detailing the past evolution of humans and the eugenics exhibits purporting to illustrate current and future trends of evolution. The entrance hall contained pedigree charts of prominent men, including the families of Galton and Darwin, and US presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. The first booth compared photographs, casts, and skeletal material of Native Americans and peoples from Africa and Asia to illustrate the since-discredited claim that human races are distinct and can be distinguished using physical traits. The subsequent booths displayed a variety of instruments and tools that anthropologists and eugenicists used to measure purported physical and mental differences in humans. The majority of the exhibit consisted of statistical charts and graphs about the inheritance of various traits and diseases and rates of birth, death, and crime in different populations, often according to race.

Despite the success of the public exhibit, attendance of the Third Congress was poor compared to the previous meetings. Over four times as many delegates attended both the First and Second Congresses. Davenport blamed the low attendance of European scholars, especially scholars from Germany, on political tensions and limited funding due to the global economic depression. A review in the *New York Times* suggests that the Third Congress was overshadowed by the Sixth International Congress of Genetics that immediately followed in Ithaca, New York, from 24 to 31 August 1932. While the *New York Times* reviewed the Congress of Genetics favorably, it described eugenics as a disguise for racial prejudice and a discredited doctrine that lacked any scientific basis.

On the final day of the Third Congress, the IFEO elected Ernst Rüdin as President of the organization. The following year, Rüdin co-authored the 1933 Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring 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. Following the war, many scientists attempted to distance themselves from the eugenic programs and genocide that the Nazi regime committed and therefore a fourth international congress was never convened.

The three International Eugenics Congresses in 1912, 1921, and 1932 allowed scientists from Europe and the Americas to share research and recommendations about eugenics. The involvement of scientists, politicians, and institutions such as the National Research Council and the American Museum of Natural History bolstered the scientific legitimacy of eugenics, while the educational exhibits garnered public support for the eugenics movement. The individuals and organizations that planned the three Congresses, including the new eugenics societies established during the Congresses, used their scientific and political influence to pass laws around the world that restricted immigration and legalized forced sterilization throughout the twentieth century.

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