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Collectivist legacy of eugenics

Last week, it was revealed that Sweden had imposed forced sterilization for 40 years, a practice that ended only in 1976. During this period, some 62,000 Swedes were sterilized in an effort to improve the quality of the Swedish people. Those of mixed race, low intelligence or with physical defects underwent forced sterilization by the state in order to prevent such qualities from being passed on. However, there is evidence that sterilization extended even to those who were merely rebellious or promiscuous or did not fit in somehow.

The philosophy underlying the Swedish policy, which has raised a storm of condemnation, is known as eugenics. Eugenics grew out of scientific advances in the field of genetics in the 19th century. As it became clear that many physical qualities are inherited, advocates of eugenics favored efforts to ensure that positive human qualities were fostered and negative ones suppressed. This was to be done by encouraging men and women with

positive qualities to intermarry, while those considered defective were to be segregated or sterilized.

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only were 6 million Jews murdered in the process but thousands of gypsies, homosexuals and others deemed to be inferior. At the same time, the Nazis encouraged selective breeding of those considered to be outstanding examples of the Aryan race.

When the facts about Nazi atrocities became known after World War II, there was a revulsion against eugenics for having given

birth to such horrors. That is why the news that Sweden was still practicing eugenics as recently as 1976 has led to such an outcry. It also came as a shock that Sweden, long known as a liberal paradise, rather than some fascistic state, should have behaved in such a patently illiberal manner. Since World War II, it has been assumed that eugenics was part of the far right's philosophy, not that of the liberal left.

But in fact, eugenics has always been part of the left's collectivist agenda. In "The Open Society and Its Enemies," philosopher Karl Popper pointed out that Plato believed strongly in eugenics and urged that humans be bred like dogs to develop superior qualities. By the early 1900s, eugenics was something of a fad among liberals in the United States, leading a number of states to pass laws requiring compulsory sterilization of those with hereditary defects. In 1927, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of such laws in the case of Buck vs. Bell. It was in this case that liberal Justice Oliver Wen-

dell Holmes Jr. said, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

In his book "Social Darwinism," liberal historian Richard Hofstadter conceded that eugenics was indeed part of the liberal reform agenda. "In spite of its fundamental conservatism," Mr. Hofstadter wrote, "the eugenics craze had about it the air of a 'reform.' Like the reform movements, it accepted the principle of state action toward a common end and spoke in terms of the collective destiny of the group rather than individual success."

But as the Nazi and Swedish examples show, it is too easy to use eugenics not just to improve the physical quality of humans but as a tool of social control. As Aldous Huxley wrote in the forward to his utopian horror, "Brave New World," eugenics can be used to control those with "dangerous thoughts about the social system" who "infect others with their discontents." After all, parents not only pass on their genes to their children but also their knowledge, values and opinions. That is why eugenics and totalitarianism go together.

Bruce Bartlett is a nationally syndicated columnist.