

# Imbeciles by Adam Cohen Book

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## Eugenics, Human Progress, and the Argument of Imbeciles

Man has always sought to provide a brighter future for generations to come. The survival of humanity is one of the fundamental components of our daily struggle to ensure the troubles of today are not a concern to future generations. However, in the accomplishment of this unattainable feat, it is quite clear that man has often crossed the line by playing God. Such is mainly evidenced by technological, medical, or scientific advancement that has enabled man to accomplish what would otherwise be unthinkable in the recent past (Dawson, 2017). The idea of a man trying to play God is well illustrated in the book *Imbeciles* by Adam Cohen.

In his book, Cohen brings to light the height of man's disgrace or, rather, that of the Supreme Court of the United States. The book talks about a particular Supreme Court ruling that led to the sterilization of an innocent young woman. Carrie Buck was the victim of the inhumane act of sterilization that was legalized through a Supreme Court ruling (Cohen, 2017). At the time of the ruling, the United States was in a craze of eugenics, which saw to it that the intellectual elite took part in activities purposed to eliminate feeble-minded and defective people from society. The height of the craze was the ruling made by the Supreme Court that justified the sterilization of an innocent young lady to prevent her from passing on her defective genes through sexual reproduction.

Unbeknownst to the young lady, this decision affected one of her most vital human functions: reproducing. The origin of the issues that led to the sterilization of Carrie Buck is well illustrated in the book by the author Cohen (2017). Ideally, the author sought to bring to light some of the lowest moments in the history of the Supreme Court and that of human existence. Placing such judgment upon a given individual who had no criminal intent can be viewed as one of the most inhumane things that can happen with the strong support of the highest court of law in the land.

On the specific issue of playing God, the author depicts the arrogance with which the intellectual elite placed inhumane judgments on innocent individuals through their explicit definition of what was wrong and right in the nature of human existence. Just as defective animals and plants, those with abnormal articular features, are put down to stop any further reproduction of defective genes, the doctors and scientists argued that it was fit to carry out similar exercises upon the human population. Their focus is the American population of that time. As such, the author was intent on providing his specific views and facts on the ruling placed forth by the Supreme Court on the specific decision of sterilizing Carrie Buck (Kelty, 2018).

# Immigration Anxiety and the Rise of American Eugenic Thought

The story of the craze of eugenics is well documented in this book. At the time of the ruling, the Native American population was very anxious about the dilution of cultural heritage and ethnicity. This anxiety was brought about by the increased urbanization and industrialization that was currently going on in America, which was received by the increasing number of immigrants entering the country to seize emerging opportunities (Dawson, 2017). The already established American population was worried that the increasing number of immigrants would lead to a mixture of religion, culture, and ethnicities that would tarnish the existing aspects of the established population (Cohen, 2017). As such, this gave support to the issue of eugenics, which sought to provide scientific evidence that controlled breeding would be necessary to ensure the survival of all humanity. In view of this, politicians, scientists, doctors, and other intellectual elite of the country sought to take measures that aimed at preventing the degrading of America's gene pool by preventing people with mental and physical hereditary defects from sexually reproducing any offspring.

The craze of eugenics was noted when scientific evidence in support of the theory of eugenics was presented to Congress. Ideally, it became a political and legal issue that got the attention of the majority of state governments. In an effort to respond to the scientific evidence of inferior genetics, Congress decided to pass laws that prevented immigrants from contaminating the American genetic pool (Dawson, 2017). The main aim of the laws established by Congress was to largely influence activities that prevented the contamination of the established American population by the increasing number of immigrants in the country. Many states followed suit by encouraging the adoption of laws that favoured the theory of eugenics (Nourse, 2016). These laws were meant to prevent the marriages of the established American population with the immigrant population. Other laws saw fit to enable the segregation of these two populations from one another to prevent contamination. However, these laws were majorly ineffective. For instance, the expenses of segregation made it largely impossible to adopt such laws (Kelty, 2018).

After a time, eugenics found their solace in sterilization. States adopted into laws Acts that allowed forced sterilization of individuals deemed to have hereditary defects. Ten years after the first law of sterilization was established in a state in America, a dozen other states followed suit. The nature of defects that were viewed to be controlled included alcoholism, epilepsy, and dependency, which was another word for poverty and criminality (Cohen, 2017). Ideally, the book depicted feeble-minded people, those with mental challenges and intellectually below average, to be the greatest target of supporters of eugenics and the laws established therein. Back to the book, the author puts forth clearly the issues that were affecting American society through the story of the innocent young lady who was pronounced to have hereditary defects, which justified her to undergo forced sterilization.

# Carrie Buck and the Injustice of Forced Sterilization

The Case of Carrie Buck was one of misfortune that was created by the craze of eugenics that was affecting American society at the time. In this story, the highly disgraceful moment was the involvement of the top four professions in the United States in deciding the case against Carrie Buck. These professions, which include academia, medicine, judiciary and law, came together to form a series of decisions that determined the nature of the hereditary defects that Carrie Buck was associated with (Dawson, 2017). Due to the hereditary defects present as per the analysis and evaluation of the four professionals from the four professions, who were men with significant influence in determining matters concerning eugenics, Carrie Buck was branded to be feeble-minded and such an appropriate candidate for forced sterilization.

Many factors made Carrie Buck determined to be an individual who fit the description of a feeble-minded individual. First, Carrie Buck was born of a mother who was named to be feeble-minded along with other family members. Secondly, the family she was raised by was poor, in addition to the poor education she received as a child. Thirdly, at the tender age of seventeen, Carrie Buck gave birth to a child out of wedlock (Kelty, 2018). As such, the harsh circumstances that she endured throughout her life and her low-income family background with family members who were feeble-minded made her be sent to Virginia's colony of epileptics and Feeble-minded (Cohen, 2017). All these factors, in addition to her failure of the eugenics test that was administered to her in the colony, made her subject to forced sterilization under Virginia's new sterilization law. The culmination of the harsh circumstances she endured, her low-income family background, and her failure of the eugenics test characterized her as a feeble-minded individual, making her subject to controlling her fertility under the provisions of the law of the state of Virginia. It was a depiction of the height of the craze of eugenics on the American population of that time. The author succeeded in depicting the basis of the fundamental principles that made eugenics perceived as a necessary activity that preserved America's genetic pool.

The book illustrates further notions that were being held by the most influential individuals of that time. Notions included that eugenics was a proper and necessary way of improving and preserving the dominant or rather preferred groups within the already established American population. Carrie Buck was a victim of an unending trail of unfortunate circumstances, including her arrival at the colony at a time when politicians and scientists were pursuing an air-tight legal avenue to support their aspiration of eugenics in controlling a given group of people who were characterized to be the lowest part of the population (Cohen, 2017). The culmination of their aspiration was the establishment of a statute that enabled them to perform compulsory sterilization of individuals who were deemed to be undesirable citizens after being determined to be in possession of hereditary defects.

# Law, Scientific Authority, and the Cruelty of Eugenic Policy

The book has successfully illustrated the cruelty of the people who pushed for the sterilization law to be implemented across different states in America. While the main purpose of the author was to depict the disgraceful nature of the Supreme Court ruling that was made in favour of the forced sterilization of Carrie Buck, he also focuses on the motives of the individuals who fought for the adoption of the sterilization law into effect and the turmoil of society in the progressive era. As the author illustrates, the cause of the rise of the eugenics movement was the fear of the Anglo-Saxon middle and upper class of the changing America due to the increased number of immigrants who were attracted by the rise of urbanization and industrialization (Nourse, 2016).

The changing nature of the American population brought about a suitable environment that allowed the theory of eugenics to thrive. The most educated individuals in America, who were, in addition, the most influential, were worried about the sanctity of America due to the increasing number of immigrants who brought about different religions and multiple ethnicities (Cohen, 2017). These men turned to eugenics to help protect the sanctity of America. The science of eugenics, therefore, became a particularly appropriate way of protecting the authenticity of the American genetic pool from contamination. The book presents the ideologies and school of thought of some influential individuals as mini-biographies to illustrate their encounters with the issue of eugenics.

Ideally, the book presents some key individuals who were directly involved in the case of forced sterilization of Carrie Buck. First, the foster family that raised Carrie Buck pushed for her to be admitted to Virginia's colony for epileptics and feeble-mindedness. Secondly, Dr. Albert Priddy was a superintendent at the Colony where Carrie Buck was confined. Dr. Albert Priddy is shown to have used Carrie Buck as a specimen to provide specific evidence that allowed the sterilization law to be passed into effect. In addition, he was the key lobbyist of the legislation on sterilization and a crucial witness of the defence in support of forced sterilization in the case against Carrie Buck (Cohen, 2017). Other key individuals are mentioned in the book, whose influence was critical in the sterilization legislation and the case against Carrie Buck in the Supreme Court.

## Historical Evidence and the Moral Achievement of Cohen's Book

The author was successful in putting across the main themes of the book by providing facts about the story of the forced sterilization of an innocent young woman. The author not only illustrated the turmoil in society at the time but also the ineffectiveness of the Supreme Court in providing radical reasoning to the legal judgment that was made on the issue of forced sterilization. Ideally, the purpose of the book was well accomplished, with a specific instance of appropriate and crucial

illustration provided to support a comprehensive understanding of the issues presented in the book.

The author perfected the art of providing a concise detail of the events that unravelled following the determination that she was, in fact, feeble-minded after she failed to pass the eugenics test administered to her by the colony staff (Kelty, 2018). There is a specific instance in which the author presents the ruling of the Supreme Court as disgraceful. The author categorically explored all the causes of the turmoil in society at the time. The book presented essential information that paints a clear picture of the specific causes that led society to think in a certain way, making them behave the way they did with regard to the legalization of acts and laws concerning sterilization from their understanding and support of eugenics.

Indeed, the book is an ideal depiction of the underlying issues that affected society at the time of the craze of eugenics, which corrupted almost every profession in American society. Influential people deemed themselves protectors of the sanctity of America due to the fear of the changing American society. An increase in the number of immigrants and the potential for the diversification of ethnicity, religion, and culture within the American society was posing a significant threat to the established American population. The fear gave rise to a suitable environment where the theory of eugenics thrived well enough to be adopted into a legal framework which proposed to control the integration of the established American society with the immigrant population. Ideally, the ruling of the Supreme Court was based upon a number of critical understandings of the issues facing society at the time with regard to the changing nature of the American population due to increased urbanization and industrialization.

## References

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