

The First Measured Century

Lesson Plan 3, Handout 1

Debating scientific racism

Instructions

Read the background information for both sides of the scientific racism debate. Conduct additional research and prepare your own argument supported with a poster that includes a visual representation of the data you will use to support your argument.

Read the procedures for conducting the argument as a Senator representing that side of the opinion.

Background Information

The Eugenicist Position

The idea of eugenics is to improve the human race or some smaller group by selective breeding. Believers in eugenics, called “eugenicists,” think that there are many separate human races, with distinct physical and moral characteristics. Some “races” are morally superior, mentally superior, physically superior, harder-working, less criminal, etc. Conversely, there are races which are sexually depraved, given to criminality and sloth, and filled with people of low intelligence. Very importantly, these positive and negative aspects of the races are fixed and unchangeable characteristics that a person inherits from their parents.

Prior to 1880, immigration to America was mostly from Northern and Western Europe. The eugenicists thought that the better races lived there, so the American race had good ancestors. After 1880, immigration to America came increasingly from Southern and Eastern Europe—home of lower races. The eugenicists believed that immigrants to America in the period from 1880 to 1924 were people from the lower races, who had low intelligence, low morals, and a weak work ethics. They also thought that the immigrants would bring more crime and poverty to America. The characteristics—good and bad—for each race were believed to be fixed and unchangeable.

The Anthropologists Position

Some early scientists in a discipline called “anthropology” (meaning: the science of man) thought that the eugenicists were wrong on two points. First, the anthropologists were not sure that the distinct races that the eugenicists perceived actually existed. It was obvious that human beings who came from different parts of the world had somewhat different physical appearances. But it was not obvious that the human population could be neatly divided into separate racial categories. The groups appeared to just blend into to one another.

Second, many anthropologists doubted that the “fixed and unchangeable” characteristics were really fixed and unchangeable. The eugenicists’ claim was that people inherited their morality, their intelligence, their work ethic, and so forth, from

Name: _____ Date: _____

their parents. But many anthropologists said, wait a minute, maybe people aren't born good or bad, smart or stupid, lazy or hard-working, maybe they grow up a certain way and maybe people may free choices to work hard or to commit crimes. Maybe the "fixed traits" are actually caused by a mixture of environment and individual decisions.

Research Conducted by the Anthropologists

The eugenicists' theory was put to the test in 1907. In the early 1900's, the U.S. Congress commissioned a study of immigration, immigrants, their children, and their effect on America. One part of the study was a survey of the physical bodies of 18,000 immigrants and their children in America. Franz Boas (who is known today as the father of American anthropology) and a large team of researchers gathered data on the physical shape and size of these immigrants' bodies. One measurement that Boas and his team gathered was the head size and shape of each immigrant and their children.

If the eugenicists are correct, then Boas should find that the length of time that an immigrant has been in America should not change their "fixed and unchangeable" traits. The children of immigrants should have the same physical characteristics as their parents. If the anthropologists are correct, then some of the "fixed and unchangeable" traits will in fact change over time. Immigrants' children will differ from their parents because they have grown up in a different environment—the American environment. And the longer the child has been in America, the more the child will look like other American children.

Boas' Discovery: Franz Boas discovered that the immigrants' children's bodies were actually changing right before his very eyes. The longer a child had been in America and the longer the child's parents had been in America, the more the child's body was like a native-born child's body. Even "traits" like head size and shape turned out to depend on the environment. The eugenicists were wrong, at least about bodily form. But what about morality and the work ethic? The anthropologists claimed that if head shape is not a "fixed and unchangeable" trait, then why should anyone believe that laziness is a "fixed and unchangeable" trait?

Research Conducted by the Eugenicists

The Eugenicists strike back with the IQ test: The eugenicists began using an early version of the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test to label immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as mentally defective. Eugenicists thought that these defectives would bring the nation down. In the Great War (World War I) almost two million draftees took one of the two IQ tests. Eugenicists testified to Congress that about 75% of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were mentally defective.

But were the tests valid? The test questioned required knowledge of American popular culture. Could immigrants be expected to know about the game of tennis? Would you consider yourself unintelligent if you looked at a strange game from rural China and did not know which piece was missing from the board?

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Argument Procedures

The two groups of senators (students) debate the question of restricting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe using the information provided by arguments by the eugenicists and anthropologists. The teacher plays the role of presiding officer of the Senate, controlling the debate. Each side gets to present their case in turn, with rebuttals. Each student should speak at least once and present supporting data and other information using posters.

One of the groups of senators will propose a quota system for immigrants from various countries such as the one presented by the Johnson-Reed Act, the National Origins Act of 1924. In this act, each country would get a share of the total immigration to America based on 2% of that country's contribution to the American population in 1890. Immigrants would only be able to come to America in large numbers from the countries that had already contributed large numbers of people to America before 1890. England and Germany could send immigrants, but very few would be allowed from Greece, Italy, Russia, etc.

The other group of senators will present a proposal for an Act based on the National Origins Act of 1924, but which argues in support of the anthropologists. This Act must have a name and supporting arguments and be presented using posters.

With the information provided by the two groups, each senator should then vote on the questions:

Should the Johnson-Reed National Origins Act be passed?

Senate votes are recorded (they are not by secret ballot). For dramatic purposes, the teacher can conduct an actual roll call vote. The teacher reads the roll of Senators as it is actually done in the U.S. Senate, by calling on each Senator in alphabetical order, hearing the Senator, and then repeating the Senator's name and vote, and marking the vote on paper. For example,

Teacher: "Mr. Adams?"

Senator Adams: "Aye"

Teacher: "Mr. Adams, aye. Ms. Brown?"

Senator Brown: "Nay"

Teacher: "Ms. Brown, nay. Mr. Clark?"

[and so on through the entire class]