

Gerald O'Brien

*Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-Mindedness in the American Eugenic Era*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. 163 pp. £65.00 (hbk). ISBN 9780719087097

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*Framing the Moron* is a detailed book about the use and deployment of metaphors in framing the emergent threat within the nation as it was perceived by eugenicists in the Eugenic Era. Rather than providing a historicized account of eugenic thinking and practices in the Progressive Era in the US, the book sets out to describe how those who have articulated eugenic thinking have 'framed' the concept of 'feeble-mindedness' or 'moronity' to justify the development of social control policies that would adversely impact on the rights of groups of individuals who today might be seen as having a learning disability or who were merely outside the moral regulatory framework because of their sexual compartment.

The book provides an introduction within which the author carefully maps out the use of terminology and the intents of the book. It is made clear here that the author does not wish to provide 'another book on eugenics' but to examine the variety of metaphors that have been deployed by those working with eugenic ideas and by those providing the scientific thinking at the time. In doing so O'Brien provides a brief overview of American eugenics whilst indicating that he will be drawing attention to German publications: in fact he also draws substantially on the British literature. The considerable attention beyond the boundaries of the US is justified on the basis of the rise of National Socialist policies on eugenics in the 1930s when they overtook those of the nation that was hitherto the most prolific policy maker on eugenics, the US.

The book is organized into seven chapters of which five are organized around sets of metaphors that the author identifies within eugenic discourses. These five chapters are preceded by a conceptual chapter within which the author sets out a framework to consider metaphors and how they have been used in the dehumanization of marginalized groups. Mapping out how both linguistic metaphors and conceptual metaphors work in creating and consolidating knowledge about particular groups of people, O'Brien points to Susan Sontag's notion that metaphors have been widely used as a basis for most kinds of understanding and that they are an organizing device enabling us to understand the world.

Having set out both the purpose and mechanics of metaphors, O'Brien goes on to look with considerable detail at how eugenics ideas were formulated within this 'alarm movement'. He is careful not to argue that he is providing a complete set of metaphors and considers that some of these meta-

phors overlap and collide. What is set out in this book, which consists mostly of work previously published (bar Chapter 4), are: the organism metaphor, the animal or subhuman metaphor, the war and natural catastrophe metaphor, the religious and altruistic metaphor and the object metaphor. Chapters 2–4 convincingly detail, by discussing excerpts from the era under consideration, how individuals or families were presented as threatening to the health of the social body and the nation, how they were presented as less than human, and how defensive mechanisms were needed to defend the nation from the dysgenic effects these groups were framed as having. For instance, the dysgenic potential of certain groups was frequently characterized by describing them as germs, bacteria or viruses that are capable of infecting the whole social body. Chapters 5 and 6, on religious and object metaphors respectively, outline how religious rhetoric was used in eugenic literature and how groups were objectified. In these later chapters the idea of metaphors is still present and claimed but rather less concisely worked with. It is, thus, not clear why the objectification of groups is equated to an object metaphor especially when attention is also drawn to the photographic representations that were deployed by eugenicists to mark out and marginalize parts of the population. Similarly, O'Brien subsumes the gardening metaphor into the discussion here, which may have deserved a discussion of its own.

Relevant to those interested in critical social policy, metaphors were (and are) an important mechanism in the framing process as well as a tool to popularize and educate the wider population about the need for exclusionary practices and policies, in this case eugenics. In focusing merely on how groups are marginalized by metaphors, the book neglects, however, to consider how others are included in the social body. On occasions *Framing the Moron* might also have benefited from more organization around specific policies, clear locales and clear personnel, instead of what amounts to a search for metaphors across time periods, countries and professionals from social workers to scientists. The book remains, however, an important collection on the use of metaphors in exclusionary and marginalizing practices.