

# “In Women’s Hands”: Feminism, Eugenics, and Race in Interwar Denmark

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## Abstract

Eugenics had popular appeal and expressions in early 20th-century Denmark. This article tells two stories of what eugenics looked like ‘in the hands’ of bourgeois Danish women as they promoted ‘racial hygiene’ through cultural production. The first story highlights the eugenic feminism of nationally acclaimed women’s rights advocate Thit Jensen through a reading of her play *The Stork* (1929). The second tells of the Copenhagen Housewife Association’s engagement with new media technology and race science through their eugenics radio Listener Group (1934). Read through a lens that pays especially close attention to race and class, I argue that this work identifies them as significant proponents of eugenic ideology and as contributors to the targeting of the poor and working class in the name of ‘racial hygiene’ – a decidedly racist project.

**KEYWORDS:** Race, class, eugenics, popular culture, feminism, media history

“We stand apparently at the dawn of a new and grand human leap forward, which will unfold with the exact science [of eugenics] as a guide and motherhood as a means,” proclaimed Jensine Thorgils in the national magazine of the prominent bourgeois women’s rights organization the Danish Women’s Society (Dansk Kvindesamfund) on September 30, 1916. Thorgils was a midwife who professed great faith in Francis Galton’s assertion that the laws of inheritance which governed plants also applied to humans. Therefore, she thought it “only fitting that a movement [had] arisen in order to begin a rational effort towards transforming the contemporary human being into a new and higher species.” Along this path, she believed that “human destiny would, at one of the most crucial points, rest in women’s hands” (Thorgils 1916, 221).<sup>1</sup>

This article examines eugenics ideology in the hands of bourgeois women in interwar Denmark.<sup>2</sup> I tell two stories about the cultural work of white bourgeois women’s organizers to spread eugenic ideas to the Danish masses. The first story emphasizes the eugenic feminism of nationally acclaimed author and women’s rights advocate Thit Jensen through a reading of her play about ‘racial hygiene’, *The Stork* (*Storken*) (1929). The second examines a lecture series on eugenics aired by the Danish National Radio Station (Den Danske Statsradiofoni) and analyzes the Copenhagen Housewife Association’s (Københavns Husmoderforening) cutting-edge engagement with new media technology and race science through their corresponding radio Listener Group in 1934. Read through a lens that pays especially close attention to race and class, I argue that this work identifies them as significant proponents of eugenic ideology and as contributors to the targeting of the poor and working class in the name of ‘racial hygiene’ – a decidedly racist project.<sup>3</sup>

While Thit Jensen stands as a central figure in Danish women’s rights history, the Housewife Association occupies the sidelines.<sup>4</sup> Jensen was eccentric and outspoken and her relationship with the leading women’s rights organization, the Danish Women’s Society, was not always friendly. Nevertheless, the society repeatedly invited Jensen to speak at their events and she continues to be

popularly viewed as a central figure in the history of the women’s movement. In contrast, the Copenhagen Housewife Association, which facilitated mutual help between housewives and education in home economics, cooking, handcrafts, and child-rearing, might conventionally be discounted from the history of the women’s movement proper. Yet the Housewife Association was committed to the advancement of bourgeois women, and the women involved were often also engaged in the formal bourgeois women’s movement. This was the case for Thit Jensen, playwright of *The Stork*, and for Caja Rude, leader of the Housewife Association’s Listener Group. The association’s founding underscores its bourgeois feminist agenda: in 1916 Thit Jensen had rallied the housewives in a direct rebuff to the rising tide of women servants organizing for better working conditions in Denmark (Andersen 1990, 187). Born as a union-busting formation intent on placing the housewives’ needs above those of their servants, the association was decidedly anti-working class. It advocated for the empowerment of housewives in their homes and beyond – to the exclusion of their servants – and got involved in numerous political debates of the day. Crucially, one of the association’s causes was the so-called “sanitation of society” (Rude 1934a, 6; Atlung 1942, 66).

Thit Jensen and the Housewife Association were not alone in viewing what they considered to be women’s interests in line with race science. Merle Weßel has brilliantly demonstrated that “eugenic feminism” was present across the Nordic countries (Ziegler 2008; Weßel 2018). Weßel’s research highlights the work of Danish feminists Dr Dida Dederding (1889-1955) and Jo Jacobsen (1884-1963), both of whom organized around sexual education and ‘racial hygiene’ in the early 20th century (Weßel 2018). This article extends the history of eugenic feminism to include the cultural work of Thit Jensen and the Copenhagen Housewife Association. It demonstrates bourgeois white women’s significant investment in race science and underlines the symbiotic relationship between bourgeois feminism and eugenics in the early 20th century. Men in the eugenics movement believed that women were especially

well suited to propagandize to other women, so they relied on them for the realization of their project (Kevles 1985, 64-65; Rembis 2006, 91). Conversely, eugenics gave "scientific credence" to the women's rights movement by providing an appropriate avenue for bourgeois women to take the stage in the public square and preach about birth control (Roberts 1998, 72-76). Yet eugenics and white bourgeois feminism went hand in hand not only because of this strategic alliance. The movements also joined in ideological allegiance to the advancement of 'white civilization'. Modern science and media were crucial tools for eugenicists and white bourgeois feminists alike.

## Re-viewing Eugenics in Denmark

Eugenics developed first as a scientific and then a popular ideology that was concerned with optimizing human reproduction according to very specific aesthetic and social ideals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Building on Darwinian evolutionary theory and asserting that biology is destiny, eugenics was presented as a program for human 'betterment', wherein 'human' meant the white middle and upper classes. While a national eugenic discourse did not strive towards the Nazis' fascistically imagined 'übermensch', eugenics remained a racist, classist, anti-gay, gender essentialist, and ableist project. It was an accepted science with "international currency" that manifested in diverse iterations throughout the world, but common to them all was a concern for managing populations who were deemed obstructive to social progress and likely to be an economic burden (Kevles 1985, 58-69; Stepan 1991, 5-9; Paul 1998, 96-99). According to eugenicists, the population had to be managed through either 'negative eugenics' (i.e. removal, sterilization, imprisonment, and death) or 'positive eugenics' (i.e. encouragement of increased reproduction of the so-called 'fit').

Writing about eugenics in Denmark is a struggle against what Bolette Blaagaard and Rikke Andreassen (2012, 84) have identified as the persistent "non-memory" of Denmark's violent

past. The prevailing tale of how the Danish welfare state was conceived in the interwar period by social democratic reformism that effected social and economic leaps for all is evidence of this. It is a story that spurs national pride, but a handful of scholars, notably Lene Koch, Gunnar Broberg, Nils Roll-Hansen, Bent Sigurd Hansen, and Birgit Kirkebæk, have shown that the modernization of the Danish state was intimately tied up with the science of eugenics.<sup>5</sup>

The most striking eugenic policies of the period were those concerning sterilization that were implemented between 1929 and 1935 under Social Democratic Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning. The 1929 Sterilization Law legalized "voluntary" castration and sterilization of people who were institutionalized, because they were understood as dangerous to society and as posing a threat to "racial hygiene" (Koch 2000, 131). In 1934, the net for those who could be considered 'defective' was widened and forced sterilization of those viewed as such was legalized, even though, as Koch (1996, 75) writes, volition had been entirely illusory in the years prior. The sterilization policies enabled around 13,000 surgeries up to the late 1960s (Koch 1996; 2000). Depending on the year, 24-60 percent of them were rationalized as necessary "eugenic" procedures (Koch 2000, 131).

People who were identified as a threat to the Danish genus – disproportionately poor and working class – were also at risk of internment. As Kirkebæk (2005, 204) reveals, the women's internment center on the island of Sprogø was a de facto poor-law administration "clearance-order project" designed to empty women's shelters and reformatories of "morally mentally deficient women." It also functioned as a general disciplining tool, demonstrating clearly what would happen to someone who was identified as one of "the worst ones" in Danish society (ibid., 197). Consequently, the benefits of the Danish welfare state came at the cost of especially poor and working-class people, who were violently criminalized and targeted for incarceration, internment, and involuntary medical treatment, sterilization, and castration (Koch 1996; 2000; Kirkebæk 2004; 2005; 2013; Broberg et al. 2005).

This crucial literature establishes the prevalence of eugenic thinking and its practices as fact in the medico-institutional and politico-legal spheres of modernizing Denmark. This work has been necessary, but is not sufficient. Although, as Bent Sigurd Hansen writes, some eugenic scientists and politicians wished primarily to discuss it among themselves, and Danish eugenics sterilization policy proceeded by way of what some would call "stealth" (Hansen 2005, 65), eugenics reached beyond parliament and medical institutions. Eugenic ideology did not manifest into a formal movement in Denmark, but it had popular expressions. Yet the "stealth" of eugenics has proven durable as its expressions in popular culture have flown largely under the radar in eugenics historiography thus far. My research indicates that we cannot fully understand eugenics in Denmark without paying close attention to its expressions in popular culture.

Existing literature demonstrates that Danish eugenics differed from the explicitly white supremacist Nazi eugenics.<sup>6</sup> It is in part this comparison with neighboring Third Reich Germany that leads Koch and Hansen to argue respectively, but in close relation, that Danish eugenics was neither "anti-Semitic" nor "racist" and that its Danish proponents "seemed fundamentally uninterested in race" (Koch 1996, 234; Broberg et al. 2005, 50). I am wary of using Nazism as the measure for racism: much racism pales in comparison to that espoused by Nazism, but using one extreme instance of racism as a defining measure for another elides the systemic relationship between racist articulations and racist violence. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022, 186) argues, racism functions in "distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies." Instead of looking for an equal, or in her words "average" or "original" racism, she urges us to "consider how fatal couplings of power and difference in one place develop and change," and then examine how these are globally interlinked (ibid., 187-188). The "fatal couplings" expressed in Danish eugenics were historically and culturally specific, but they joined in the international belief that 'white civilization' was under threat.

Danish eugenicists did not fervently spew the fascist myth that 'Aryans' were the ideal men, but they were not 'uninterested' in race, nor were they free from harboring racist views. While their eugenics often targeted the poor and working class rather than people of color, their desire to control the working class was informed by the contemporaneous international discourse on race in science. As Rikke Andreassen (2015, 74) explains, "race and class became increasingly intertwined" in European race science at the end of the 19th century. When the first International Eugenics Congress was held in London in 1912, the working class was singled out as the number one threat to the future of the white race because of their believed special propensity for harboring and transmitting "traits such as low intelligence, low morality, and aesthetic ugliness" (ibid., 79). In Denmark, this belief translated into a eugenic campaign led by the Danish Race Science Committee (Den Antropologiske Komite) to identify, study, and contain "less desirable individuals" among the poor and working classes for the sake of the "quality of the Danish race" (ibid., 77.) The goal of these efforts was to perfect the white Danish race. Consequently, even when expressed through class, Danish eugenics was a racial project. The significance of race in Danish eugenics becomes even more apparent when turning from politics and science to eugenic discourse in the popular cultural sphere – here, in the cultural productions of white bourgeois feminists.

The two sections below examine what Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell (2006) have called "popular eugenics" in the work of prominent bourgeois women's organizers and highlight their racial and class narratives. Together they draw attention to their significant efforts to spread eugenics – an ideology that shaped the understanding of 'welfare' and 'nation' – in Denmark in the interwar period (ibid.; Jensen 1929).

Early 20th-century Danish eugenics may appear 'stealthy' if we focus primarily on the sophistry of politicians and aspirations of scientists to exclusively direct its course, but when we turn to its contemporaneous cultural expressions, we find a fully pronounced vision of modern society based



on racist, classist, and ableist ideas. I make use of a variety of historical sources to support this account. Primary materials are sourced from KVINFO’s Print Press Project (KVINFO’s Tidsskriftsprojekt), the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Danish Women* (Dansk Kvindebiografisk Leksikon), and the Royal Danish Library’s collections including the database Mediestream and the Thit Jensen Archives. Newspapers frequently published identical or similar reports on the popular events of interest here. They have been selected according to a principle of relevance and representation. When appropriate, for example when stressing a popular opinion, several have been cited at once. Primary materials, such as *The Stork*’s playscript, provide an opportunity for close analysis of popular eugenic feminist messaging. In turn, the popular print pieces shed light on how this message was received.

### Thit Jensen and *The Stork* (1929)

In the quintessential Danish lexicon of the women’s movement, *The Women’s Movement’s Who-What-When*, Thit Jensen (b. Maria Kirstine Dorothea Jensen, 1876-1957) is described as “undoubtedly ... the most influential female author, beloved and hated” by all in early 20th-century Denmark (Ørum 1975, 160). In Gry Jexen’s recent tour de force, *Woman, Know Your History* (2021), she is portrayed alongside 49 other significant women. In the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Danish Women*, Jensen is commemorated as a key actor in the women’s movement who paved the way for the changing public opinion on women’s place in society (Zibrandtsen 2003).<sup>7</sup> These representations are illustrative of Jensen’s special standing in the national memory of Danish modernity, of Danish literature, and of the Danish women’s movement. This is why her involvement with eugenics and one of its manifestations – her popular play *The Stork* – serves as an important example of how women’s rights and eugenics ideology were intimately intertwined as they were reaching for an intersecting common goal of a particular vision of white modernization in Denmark.



**Figure 1:** Portrait of Thit Jensen ca. 1909.

Source: The Royal Danish Library.

Jensen wrote numerous novels and gave many lectures in her lifetime, but she is perhaps most known for propagandizing the concept she called ‘voluntary motherhood’, which she borrowed from the writings of the US eugenicist and white bourgeois feminist Margaret Sanger (Jensen 1924b). Jensen proclaimed herself as a pro-abortionist and the popular representations of her demonstrate that she is often remembered as such. But for Jensen abortion was not solely about choice, if even primarily so. She was concerned for the future of what she called ‘civilization’, and she fought hard against what she viewed as the moral decay of society. Abortion was one of the means through which she imagined ‘civilization’ could prevail and evolve.<sup>8</sup> She believed that only wanted children would be healthy children, and she wholeheartedly wanted what she understood as unhealthy children to remain unborn: children of the poor, of the sick, of the ‘morally corrupt’ would only become a burden on society, and

in the worst-case scenarios they too would procreate, leading to further ‘degeneration’ of the nation and by extension the world. In her view, if you were born of bad ‘stock’, you were destined to become it (Jensen 1929).

Jensen met Margaret Sanger in the United States and they served together on the International Birth Control Committee of 1925.<sup>9</sup> The committee promoted birth control as a eugenic technology that would enable women to commit themselves fully to “the great task of creating a better race” by encouraging the procreation of “fit off-spring” and the prevention of their perceived opposites (*The New York Herald* 1925, 6). Jensen translated Sanger’s *Women and the New Race* (1920) into Danish and toured Denmark presenting a lecture of its contents to overflowing lecture halls (Jexen 2021). Consequently, Jensen was a steadfast proponent of eugenic abortion and perhaps one of the most prolific in Denmark at the time.

This is not the representation of Thit Jensen that you encounter in contemporary popular culture. Neither the women’s movement lexicon nor the entry in the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Danish Women* mentions the words ‘eugenics’ or ‘racial hygiene’ (Ørum 1975; Zibrandtsen 2003). Jexen’s book (2021) does, but not until the penultimate page, and Jensen’s relationship with Sanger is left unexamined for eugenic ideology and solidarity rooted in white bourgeois feminism. Jensen’s museum in Farsø, Jutland, presents ‘racial hygiene’ as an opportunist tool that Jensen used to make the case for women’s rights and abortion, because it was a cutting-edge science at the time.<sup>10</sup> A critical reading of *The Stork* will demonstrate that this is in fact a representation of Jensen’s view in reverse. Rather than eugenics being a tool with which to advocate for abortion, abortion was a tool with which to execute eugenics and achieve what Jensen imagined as an optimized Danish population that could withstand ‘civilizational’ competition.

*The Stork* premiered at The People’s Theater (Folketeatret) on Friday, January 4, 1929, to a sold out theater. At curtain call, Thit Jensen and the actors received flowers and “minutes-long” applause (*Helsingør Avis* 1929, 2; *Vestsjællands*

*Social-Demokrat Slagelse* 1929, 3; *Lolland-Falster Social-Demokrat Nakskov* 1929, 4). The play was an instant success.<sup>11</sup> In an interview with a national newspaper a couple of days prior, Jensen had been asked about the play’s thematic and had proudly proclaimed:

*It is about racial hygiene! Life’s biggest problem! I think that we can easily improve the human race – school should make sure that this is imprinted onto the children, that they think thoroughly before they pick a partner for life.*

*... this is an attack on an existing law [the law against abortion] that hinders any effort to improve the nation. (Til Forsendelse Med de Kongelige Brevposter Privilegerede Berlingske Politiske Og Avertissementstidende 1929, 9)*

This was a controversial agenda that was met with both celebration and critique.<sup>12</sup> Some critique was rooted in blatant misogyny like that launched by the then-infamous anti-feminist public intellectual Dr Wieth-Knudsen, and some, such as the critique offered by Minister of Social Affairs Karl Kristian Steincke, demonstrated good faith engagement with the science of ‘racial hygiene’. Steincke expressed his opinion that Jensen had misrepresented (or perhaps misunderstood) the principles of inheritance (*Social-Demokraten* 1929, 6). Neither critique questioned the ethics of eugenics as such.

The play was performed at the People’s Theater in Copenhagen until mid-March. It was picked up by other theater troupes, toured in the following year in both Denmark and Sweden to “storming excitement,” and received a warm reception in Norway in 1935 (*Nordjyllands Social-Demokrat* 1930, 2; *Bornholms Tidende* 1930, 2; *Social-Demokraten* 1935, 10). Thus, it became a success that stands as one of the most significant but overlooked propagandizing efforts in the spread of eugenic ideology across Scandinavia.

*The Stork* centers on the consequences of the misdeeds of the scoundrel Henning Holk. Henning is the unruly adopted son of the town’s

well-respected attorney. Henning is a misogynist, he sexually assaults women, he lies, he cheats, he drinks, he is disrespectful of authorities, he is unemployed, and he is anti-social. 'Every man for themselves' appears to be Henning's motto as he makes his otherwise respectable family's life miserable by seducing young women and fathering children out of wedlock relentlessly. His indiscretions land him in multiple alimony cases, which his father works tirelessly to resolve. As a result, Henning's adoptive father is drained of his money and of his life-force.

The opening scene of *The Stork* invites the audience into the Holk family's dining room. Here, Henning's adoptive mother glances at her watch nervously. She is waiting for Henning, who has not yet gotten out of bed even though it is already lunch time. She calls out to him and in response he enters the room, proclaiming that he just awoke from "a lovely dream."

*"Oh," his mother answers. And Henning proceeds:*

*Yes, I dreamt that I was married to Josephine Baker and had gotten 9 little [N-word] children... And you were the sweetest [N-word] grandma... and you had become black in this occasion.*

The scene continues:

*Mrs. Holk (laughing): Oh, Henning, you're terrible!*

*Henning: Are you not happy that I cannot even dream without you being in it?*

*Mrs. Holk: Yes, but now, I'm mostly happy to have become white again. (Jensen 1929, 1)*

This opening dialogue establishes Henning as an unreliable joker who knows exactly which buttons to press, i.e. threatening to turn the racial order upside down, imagining his white mother as Black. Henning dreams of 'miscegenation', or more likely he enjoys making other people think that he does.

Evidently this racist jest is more entertaining than offensive to Henning's mother, as she laughs and plays along. The scene serves as a comedic entry into a serious matter. It is a cheap joke that provides white Danish audiences the opportunity to unite in laughter about something considered so uncontroversial as racial purity, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness, so that Jensen then can present them with something that may be viewed as less so: a story about sexual immorality and what radical measures society must take to prevent its spread.

Dylan Rodríguez (2021) describes white supremacy as "a *violence of aspiration*" that reproduces systemic anti-Black and colonial violence in support of what he calls "White Being" (emphasis in original). "White Being" refers to the project in which "white Man" is posited as the one who holds "the master code," i.e. the human ideal under which everyone and everything else is ordered and subordinated (Wynter, in Rodríguez 2021, 7-8). In addition to militarized and colonial violence, "White Being" uses continued "rearticulations" and "narrative structures" of white supremacy that can be disguised as reform and progress to sustain itself (ibid.). *The Stork's* opening scene deploys one of these anti-Black "narrative structures" – the racist common sense of the necessary separation of white and Black people – as a premise for its eugenic argument (ibid., 3). If white people can agree that 'contaminating' whiteness with Blackness is at once ridiculous and detrimental to Danish society, Jensen seems to suggest, they ought to agree that this other kind of 'contamination' of the Danish genus by way of 'dangerous' traits is equally perilous. When you follow this scene's denouncement of 'miscegenation' to its logical conclusion, the argument about 'white civilizational' advancement through eugenics emerges clearly and anti-Black racism becomes a pillar on which it rests.

The rest of the play goes like this: one of the unfortunate victims of Henning Holk is the young woman Bodil, Holk Senior's former secretary. Bodil is making her way to a new life with her true love, a reputable and educated man whose family is known for breeding good stock heritage

dogs. One day Henning deviously tells Bodil that he may not have "been so careful" during their sexual encounters. Now, Bodil is pregnant and desperate for an abortion. She seeks help from the local doctor, Dr Eigil Thomsen, who also happens to be Mr Holk Senior's best friend and incidentally the father of the teenage girl towards whom Henning has most recently directed his sexual attention. In a fortunate turn of events for Bodil, Dr Thomsen is a reasonable and wise man. He sees Henning for what eugenic ideology claims that he is: "a weed" in the garden of society (Jensen 1929, 125). When Bodil reveals to Dr Thomsen that Henning would be the father if the baby were to be born, the doctor comes to her aid and performs the procedure.

The play culminates in a dramatic courtroom third act, wherein Dr Thomsen sits charged with executing 'fetal removal' after an anonymous tip gave him up to the police. The prosecutor has still not identified the woman who received the alleged abortion. Dr Thomsen's mouth is sealed shut in silent martyrdom, except when it comes to explaining his motivations. He proudly delivers a five-and-a-half-page monologue on eugenics as the play comes to a close. Dr Thomsen begins by presenting the courtroom with a genealogical map of Henning's birth family that traces poverty, crime, and immorality in every single generational link leading up to the contemporary culprit, Henning.<sup>13</sup> Deploying monikers that are systematically used to scapegoat the poor, Dr Thomsen forcefully concludes that Henning's lineage consists of only "thieves, vagrants, lechers, thugs and imbeciles" and that this genetic line therefore must be terminated (Jensen 1929, 123).

Finally, he spells out his reasons for providing the abortion so that there can be no doubt:

*The anonymous woman came to me, she told me the source of her unhappiness, that it was Hjul-Volle the Younger [read: Henning] she could not have known, for he appeared to be the son of good parents.*

*I saw before me this lineage of weeds.*

*And that's when I stood... like the Gardener in front of a good herb bed, ready to be fertilized with good and useful seeds... and in the middle of this bed, a growing weed seedling that wanted to spread and suffocate all good seed.*

*What does a Gardener do.*

*He takes the seedling with a firm hand and uproots it.*

*Does anybody judge him for that.*

*What does a Gardener do, when he sees a weed appear in his garden? He beheads it before it goes to seed.*

*We want weeds, wherever they grow, to be cut before they go to seed.*

*We want, when parents send their sons and daughters, well-raised, of good heritage out into life, that they will find a partner, well-raised, of good heritage... and together they will raise the people's tribe up to heretofore unknown purity, greatness.*

*You've asked for my motive.*

*My motive was the welfare of society. (Jensen 1929, 125-126)*

Like the rest of the play, Dr Thomsen's monologue is full of eugenic imagery: the good seeds vs. bad seeds dichotomy that joins this gardener analogy, which at once posits eugenics as ruthless (beheading, uprooting), but also necessary and honorable, is embedded in eugenic logic. The monologue in its entirety is also a meta-element. It abruptly challenges the conventions of the dramatic genre and reads as a speech outside the play itself. One contemporaneous reviewer remarks – although regretfully – that they felt as if they had been transported from the courtroom scene to something more akin to a lecture hall (*Horsens Folkeblad* 1929, 1). The forceful syntax with which



Dr Thomsen delivers his speech is evocative of Jensen’s own rhetorical style. It is clear that this eugenic message is shared between Thit Jensen and Dr Thomsen in this moment when the veil between character and playwright dissipates. If a little crude, it is a powerful theatrical device that clearly conveys the play’s central message: Denmark has a problem with moral decay. This decay threatens future generations and the solution is to be found in the practice of eugenic abortion, which, according to the play and Jensen, will purify the nation.

*The Stork* presents abortion as a tool with which to achieve the well-kept garden, free of “weeds,” that Jensen imagines that Danish society should be. It advocates specifically for *eugenic* abortion, not abortion *in general*. Black people and poor people are vilified and construed as “bad seeds,” while white petty bourgeois women, like Bodil, are placed on a pedestal (although a misogynist one) as “good herb beds,” in need of protection so that they may be fertilized with “good seeds” for “the welfare of society” (Jensen 1929, 125-126).

As the play’s opening signals, Jensen’s conception of society had a particular racial order that depended upon a collective white agreement on the subordinate position of Black people to uphold its logic. In order to understand the racial logic that undergirded Jensen’s eugenics, it is helpful to look at her popular lecture on “Humanity and Laziness.” She toured with this lecture between 1912 and 1920 to packed rooms in Denmark (*Sorø Amts Dagblad* 1919, 3). Here, Jensen shares an anecdote about how her father had a carriage horse that would not mount a hill until one of her brothers whipped it. She forewarns:

*This is what will happen to society – it will come to a standstill because of pure laziness – the one does not want to [do anything], so the other does not want to [do anything] – and then maybe one day we’ll have a new coachman – perhaps a Yellow one – with a whip – and at that point we might regret not modernizing humanity, when the time was right. (Jensen 1912, 25)*

Echoing the so-called ‘yellow peril’ narrative that was spreading across Europe, Jensen declared that if white people did not pull themselves together, they were at risk of becoming enslaved by other races, specifically people in Asia.<sup>14</sup> She believed that ‘white civilization’ was in competition with and under threat from people racialized as non-white across the globe, and that purging laziness and ‘degeneration’ through eugenics would lead to a ‘white civilization’ that could withstand this pressure. This was a core belief of eugenicists internationally that only intensified with World War I as young, healthy, white men who were viewed as the future of society were killed by the millions. In Denmark this translated to white bourgeois anxiety about the degrading effects of industrialization on the poor and working class and the negative impacts of this on society as a whole. When race in ‘race-betterment’ was used as a stand-in for ‘the human race’, it did not necessarily refer to all people throughout the world. As Thit Jensen’s exclusion of Asian people from “humanity” demonstrates, human was always already understood as white within this discourse (Jensen 1912, 25).

When one takes seriously the opening that is made to function as a joke and reads the rest of *The Stork* in light of Jensen’s other writings, racism and classism emerge as two crucial drivers of eugenics as it spread in the popular sphere in Denmark in the interwar period. *The Stork* stands as a powerful reminder of the intersecting race and class interests of the bourgeois white women’s movement with eugenics ideology, and underlines the distinct role that cultural production played in furthering their common goals.

### The Housewife Association’s “Heritage and Race” Listener Group (1934)

On January 15, 1934 at around 7.15pm, members of the Copenhagen Housewife Association gathered in their office on Gammel mønt 1 in anticipation of a new lecture series on eugenics on Danish

National Radio. This was the first meeting of the association’s newly formed Listener Group that had as its purpose to listen to the radio series and discuss “the question of heritage and race” that was considered of “utmost importance” (Rude 1934a, 6).

At 7.30 that evening, they would hear Dr Øjvind Winge lecture on the founding laws of genetics over the airwaves. Winge, who today is known as ‘the Father of Yeast Genetics’, was part of what Lene Koch has called the “establishment” of eugenics in Denmark (Koch 1996, 115; Szybal-ski 2001). He was the first to speak in the new lecture series “Heritage and Race” which aired on national radio every other week in the winter and spring of 1934. Next in line were shellfish biologist Ragnar Spärck, pathologist Oluf Thomsen, psychiatrist August Wimmer, ethnographer Aage Gudmund Hatt, and Social Democratic Minister of Social Affairs Karl Kristian Steincke among others.

The series was a popular crash course in ‘racial hygiene’. It made the case for why this approach to population management was a necessary next step in the progression of the Danish nation. It was also a means through which Danish scientists distinguished their version of eugenics from the explicit white nationalism that was gaining traction in neighboring Germany. While each speaker focused on highlighting eugenics from their particular disciplinary field – biology, genetics, politics – they all took a stand against what the Nazis were calling ‘pure race’, debunking it as mythology rather than an actual scientific fact. Pure genetic lineage was impossible in the human race, they argued. Only plants which self-fertilized offered the kind of genetic purity that the Nazis foolishly pursued. The other point on which all of the lecturers agreed is presented by Dr Oluf Thomsen in the foreword to the book that contains the lecture manuscripts of the series:

*Also for conditions of inheritance, we are dealing with a kind of infection, for the dangerous and devastating traits infect the genealogy in a fateful way and threaten its demise or at the very least its increasing deterioration.*

*It is certainly a joyous sign of the times that all writers in these collected articles, wherein these questions are examined, agree that effective preventative measures are sorely needed. (Thomsen 1934, 8)*

The lecturers suggested four eugenic measures that were to protect the future generations: (1) popular education on “the nature of heritage and its significance for each person, as well as for society” through “enlightening literature, lectures, films etc.”; (2) the institutionalization of the science of genetically inherited diseases in humans at the university level; (3) the organization of Marriage Consultation Offices that could advise people about the “heritage that awaits their offspring, and which will be determining the happiness or unhappiness of the generation...”; and finally (4) “Easier access to direct hindrance of the fertilization of dangerous traits through the generation,” for which, Thomsen writes, the Sterilization Law of the past winter was “a step in the right direction” (Thomsen 1934, 8-9).

The backdrop against which these measures are suggested is painted vividly by Dr Gudmund Hatt in his lecture on “The Human Races” (Hatt 1934, 37-61). Having spent much time explaining that race is a human construction and not a biological fact, Hatt nevertheless concludes that white European world domination is under threat. Referencing historian Charles H. Pearson on the limits of the geographical domination of the white race, Hatt writes:

*The events to come, quickly offered [Pearson] support. Not only did certain exotic peoples begin to make themselves relevant militarily and politically. More important is the capacity to conduct peaceful competition with the white race that the Japanese, Chinese, Indian, yes, even the Negroes, are demonstrating.*

*Yet, it is neither Indians nor the Negroes that are threatening European world domination. The Asians are. Nothing is more dangerous for the white man’s influence in the tropics*

*and elsewhere than Asian immigration. East Asian people appear to be the most vital on Earth. This is especially true for the Chinese, who seem to be able to thrive and work in all climates and therefore are far superior in their ability to adapt than Europeans are. (Hatt 1934, 60-61)*

Like Thit Jensen, Hatt believed in the myth of ‘yellow peril’ and viewed Asia as a threat to ‘European civilization’ and imperial power. While the ‘eugenic establishment’ of Denmark did not endorse the race purification project in Germany, or the championing of the ‘Nordic race’, they were still working within an ideological framework that sought to reproduce “White Being” through sustained European imperialism (Rodríguez 2021). If China was threatening white Europe in part because the Chinese were considered superior workers, the



**Figure 2:** Portrait of Caja Rude, 1933.  
Source: The Royal Danish Library.

answer had to be, they suggested, to optimize the white race in response.

The first step towards salvaging the Danish nation was, as Oluf Thomsen laid it out, popular education through media. Thomsen and the other radio lecturers took the lead and the Copenhagen Housewife Association picked up the baton with the formation of their corresponding Listener Group.

Presenting “heritage and race” as one of “the most burning questions of the day,” Caja Rude had invited members to join the Listener Group in an article published in the Housewife Association’s magazine on January 5 (Rude 1934a, 6). This was a new experiment that combined modern media – radio, picture slides, and the magazine – in an intentional popular educational effort as the association took on the responsibility of dealing with what they saw as an equally modern problematic: the “sanitation of society” (ibid., 6). The excitement about modern communications technology and the pressing desire to engage emerging modern science is palpable in the writing. This was an experiment, Rude wrote, which “according to [them] had not previously taken place in this exact special form,” and which the magazine would later refer to as a transnational endeavor that was taking place in England and Sweden simultaneously (ibid., 6; *Københavns Husmoderforenings Blad* 1934, 19).

The invitation to join the Listener Group begins with an apparent paradox between endorsement and critique of Nazi eugenics. The first sentence references the immensely successful Nazi propagandist play *Hereditary Stream* (*Erbstrom*) that was being performed in Berlin (Teicher 2020, 125). A photograph from the performance and a celebratory review from a “respected German magazine” accompany it (Rude 1934a, 6). In immediate succession, Rude addresses the violent persecution of Jews that was ongoing in neighboring Germany:

*We are all familiar with the extraordinary weight that the Nazis place upon the question of race. The terrible persecutions of Jews are a result of an overextended theory*

*of race, which goes much too far. But from an unbiased point of view, we cannot forget that there’s something serious behind the immense energy and fanaticism with which the problems of race are discussed and revised in the Third Reich. (Ibid., 6. Italics mine)*

This paragraph makes it very clear that, for Rude, anti-Semitism is not, unlike the ‘sanitation’ of Danish society, the urgent issue at hand. In fact, she stresses to the reader that the Nazis may be onto something regarding “the problems of race” (ibid., 6). In a cowardly move, she swiftly proclaims: “We will not here discuss the Jewish problem, which in Germany has an entirely different background and a much more serious character than in our own little country” (ibid., 6). Here, Rude takes a page out of the book of the Danish eugenic ‘establishment’ in an attempt to separate the science from the Nazi applications of it. She places herself in what she calls an unbiased position, but it reads as studied neutrality that unequivocally adds up to anti-Semitic complicity. Crammed between a celebration of a Nazi play and a dismissal of the urgency of countering the mounting violence against Jews, Rude’s address of Nazi ‘fanaticism’ appears disingenuously strategic. The apparent paradox between endorsement and critique of Nazi eugenics is revealed to be none at all. Proceeding to make the case for the importance of discussing eugenics in tandem with the radio series (in spite of its Nazi association but also *because* of it), Rude encouraged members to take part and to gain useful experience in this new discussion format through trial and error.

The Listener Group’s first meeting would prove to be mostly in error. Winge was interrupted and almost “drowned out” by noise from interfering technology in the building that the Housewife Association shared with other organizations (Rude 1934b, 14). Yet the Listener Group remained committed to the lecture series. They immediately sought help from the National Radio’s “Noise Office,” and “took great leaps” to resolve the technical problems for future meetings by ordering a brand new antenna (ibid., 14). Over

the next five months, the Listener Group would meet every other week to study and discuss race and eugenics.

The group would keep everyone abreast of their progress in the members’ magazine. At the second meeting, 35 women had shown up to do “the work” (Rude 1934b, 14). Rude remarked in excitement on the group’s enthusiastic studiousness, highlighting how members were even engaging directly with primary texts borrowed through the library and “written by the expert – the scientist!” (ibid., 14). For Rude, this topic necessitated foundational knowledge that laymen did not necessarily hold, and it therefore required direct engagement with the accompanying literature. Yet, “...it is difficult,” Rude wrote, “to speak definitively about any one point at this time; it’ll come, when the series has been listened to to its full extent” (ibid., 14). However, a definitive opinion on eugenics did not appear in the Housewife Association’s magazine.

Instead, as the radio series was coming to an end, the Listener Group continued their work. Despite a minor drop in attendance, they added yet another educational element to their program: group excursions to various institutions across Denmark. In the last two months of their work together, the group toured Gamle Bakkehus – a “Treatment Institution for Idiotic, Feeble-minded, and Epileptic Children” – the Home for Physically Handicapped, and the Welander Homes that were treatment centers for children born with syphilis. The housewives were especially impressed with the “friendly and cozy” atmosphere at Gamle Bakkehus (*Københavns Husmoderforenings Blad* 1934, 6). As they witnessed children doing technical labor, specifically weaving and sewing, the warden highlighted the importance of the Sterilization Law (*Københavns Husmoderforenings Blad* 1934, 8). Sterilization, internment, and a pedagogy focused on industriousness were considered effective tools in turning the “feeble-minded” children into productive laborers.

It is in the write-up of this visit to Gamle Bakkehus that we come closest to what may be called the Housewife Association’s endorsement of negative eugenics, i.e. the prevention of the



birth of people deemed 'unfit'. Concluding that the group was in agreement "that these had been enlightening hours, which deepened the interest for the most impacted members of society," the magazine presented a couple of paragraphs by August Wimmer on "Modern Racial Hygiene" in anticipation of his lecture on April 23 (*Københavns Husmoderforenings Blad* 1934, 8). Most striking is the section where Wimmer presents pregnancy, not as life-giving, but as death-bringing, specifically "assassination ... by degeneration":

*The thought behind race-improving endeavors is clear and must be applauded by anyone with a humane mindset: To prohibit the birth of individuals, who because of such an inherited encumbrance are liable to become ill in their souls or to become abnormal etc., and to live a more or less pathetic or unhappy life, to little joy and gain for themselves, to the unrest and disruption of society. We all must lament this 'assassination of the child by degeneration in the mother's womb'. (Ibid., 8)*

Wimmer, and by extension the Listener Group, saw eugenic abortion as the compassionate solution to the problems of society. Through their sustained engagement with eugenic educational material, the Copenhagen Housewife Association make up one important branch of the propagandizing apparatus of racial hygiene in early 20th-century Denmark. They were not mass-disseminating eugenics from a stage or over the airwaves, nor were they simply consuming eugenic media. Rather, they reproduced it through their own educational multimedia format in a way that they viewed as attractive to bourgeois women. Eugenic science reached Danish homes through the airwaves. It was amplified through a loudspeaker, through articles placed alongside advertisements for dry cleaning services and advice on how to set a festive dinner table, and through committed and rigorous study conducted by and for bourgeois women. The Listener Group serves as a prime example of how bourgeois white women embraced the task put upon them by eugenicist scientists to further the advancement of 'white civilization' and

of the intimate multimedia work they took on in doing so.

## Conclusion

*The Stork* (1929) and the Copenhagen Housewife Association's Listener Group (1934) demonstrate the significant cultural work that white bourgeois women took on in order to do what they understood as their part in ensuring the reproduction of the Danish nation in the interwar period. Thit Jensen and the Housewife Association promoted the necessity of 'racial hygiene' as Denmark's foundational welfare reforms were developed and implemented in the 1920s and 1930s. They represent two different modes of early feminist engagement with eugenics in Danish popular culture: a sensational popular performance and an intimate radio study group. Together, they illustrate how the project of expanding Danish women's rights and position in society facilitated an increased interest in, engagement with, and propagandizing for eugenic science via modern communications technology, cultural production, and education among the bourgeoisie.

*The Stork* is one of the more egregious expressions of "popular eugenics" in Denmark (Currell and Cogdell 2006). It is blatantly ableist, classist, and racist. It represents a loud eugenics that did not profess loyalty to the eugenic "establishment" and the actual scientific technicalities of inheritance (Koch 1996, 115). In contrast, the Housewife Association's engagement with eugenics on the radio and in their magazine appears rigorously in line with the eugenic experts. Studiousness abounds, including in the noted '(non) neutrality' on Nazi anti-Semitism. Both instances of eugenic feminist cultural production accept the premise of national and 'civilizational' decline as the rationalization for implementing 'racial hygiene'. I have argued that within this discourse, 'civilization' should always be understood as white. *The Stork* and the Listener Group represent two "rearticulations" that served to uphold 'white civilization'.

*The Stork* and the Listener Group are exemplary of the slippery relations between apparently contradictory political projects – feminism, progress, and welfare contra eugenics, racism, ableism, and classism – in the development of what is often called one of the most progressive and democratic structures in the world, the Danish welfare state. Eugenics was engaged by ‘progressives’ internationally. Yet this analysis is not a sweeping indictment of the women’s movement as evenly eugenicist, racist, and classist. These two cases display *specifically* white bourgeois women’s allegiance to racial hierarchy and class society as they promoted so-called progressive and compassionate reforms. In this way, they parallel the intermingling of feminism and eugenic ideology as seen, for example, in the contemporaneous United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> An undeniable image of what eugenics looked like

“in women’s hands” in early 20th-century Denmark emerges: bourgeois white feminists grasped onto eugenics, shaped it, and disseminated it popularly to the detriment of those who were deemed unworthy of humanity along the lines of sexuality, class, disability, and race.

As the two stories tell of the popular spread of eugenics, they call attention to the dangers of placing the responsibility of an ugly past on a select few. They highlight the presence of white supremacist ideas in the hands of feminists and social democratic progressivists and re-emphasize the importance of popular cultural, critical race, and class analysis for historical research. Finally, they demonstrate the necessity of tracing the strings – humbly and with care – that are intertwined with white supremacist ideology in the history of what has been called welfare in modern Denmark.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All translations from Danish to English are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘interwar’ to stress the significance of World War I for the proliferation of eugenic ideology internationally.
- <sup>3</sup> Eugenics and ‘racial hygiene’ are used synonymously.
- <sup>4</sup> The Housewife Association and Jensen were no longer affiliated in 1934.
- <sup>5</sup> Social Democrat Karl Kristian Steincke (and later Minister of Justice and Minister of Social Affairs) proposed a modernization of Danish society in his two-volume book *Social Relief of the Future (1920) (Fremtidens Forsørgelsesvæsen)* wherein he argued for the utility of eugenics. Steincke’s advocacy for eugenics influenced the Danish social reforms greatly.
- <sup>6</sup> In comparison with their German and US counterparts, Danish scientists were less concerned with fostering a superior group of people than with preventing “degeneracy” and disease generally (Proctor 1988; Koch 1996, 134).
- <sup>7</sup> KVINFO, the Danish Center for Research on Women and Gender, hosted the online encyclopedia from 2001 to 2022. The *Biographical Encyclopedia of Danish Women* is now hosted by the Danish National



Encyclopedia on Lex.dk. This narrative of Thit Jensen is thereby further embedded into national memory.

- <sup>8</sup> See Jensen's lectures, "Humanity and Laziness" [Humanitet og Dovenskab] (1912), "Feminist Program" [Feminismens Program] (1924a), "Voluntary Motherhood" [Frivilligt Moderskab] (1924b) and "Morality" [Moral] (1909).
- <sup>9</sup> For analyses of Sanger's eugenic and white supremacist ideology, see, for example, Davis (1983) and Roberts (1998).
- <sup>10</sup> Observations from the author's visit to the Jensen museum in Farsø in summer 2022. More examples of popular representations of Jensen (accessed October 10, 2022) are available from: <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/writers/jensen-maria-kirstine-dorothea-thit/>; <https://forfatterweb.dk/oversigt/jensen-thit>; and <https://www.dr.dk/skole/dansk/mellemtrin/thit-jensen-1876-1957>.
- <sup>11</sup> See: "Fru Thit Jensens Skuespil 'Storken,' der fik stormende success," *Demokraten (Aarhus 1884-1975)*, January 7, 1929, p. 3. "'Storken' par Folketeateret," *Vestsjællands Social-Demokrat*, January 5, 1929, p. 3. A Sunday performance was added to accommodate the many requests from people who would have to travel to see the play. "Folketeatret," *Frederiksborg Amts Avis*, January 25, 1929, p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> See: "Storken's Premiere," *Vejle Amts Folkeblad*, January 5, 1929, p. 8, in which a writer from Vejle suggests that the opinions of the play are particular to people in the Danish capital. See also Wieth-Knudsen's review: "Stork eller Slange?" in *Nationaltidende*, reprinted in *Aalborg Amtstidende*, January 30, 1929, pp. 1 and 3.
- <sup>13</sup> This parallels the work of US eugenicists Henry H. Goddard, Arthur Estabrook and Charles Davenport who constructed the genealogies of the Kallikak family and the Nam family respectively (pseudonyms). They argued that poor intelligence, criminality, and "non-social traits" were passed down through generations (Estabrook and Davenport 1912; Goddard 1912).
- <sup>14</sup> The 'yellow peril' was a scaremongering narrative that identified people from East Asia as a threat to European civilization. It was believed that they would supplant white Europeans at the top of the racial hierarchy through their technological and cultural development (Andreassen 2015, 64).
- <sup>15</sup> On the USA, see Davis (1983) and Roberts (1998). On the UK, see Allen (2000).