

6 On ethics, scientists, and democracy

Writing the history of eugenic sterilization

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In the summer of 1997, a media storm broke out in Sweden. The front-page headline on August 20 of the *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Sweden's most influential newspapers, grabbed the attention of the country: Sweden had sterilized about 60,000 of her citizens—many by force.¹ Even earlier, however, researchers had made the history of compulsory sterilization a topic of considerable interest. As the interest of the international media demonstrated, the practice of eugenics in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries has a history that casts long and compelling shadows.²

The use of compulsory sterilization, by contemporary Western standards, is usually considered appalling and revolting: a violation of basic human rights. Consequently it is often considered an anomaly that state-sponsored eugenics programs took place not only in Nazi Germany and the United States, but also in democratic welfare states such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Compulsory sterilization seems incompatible with the ideals of democracy, and stamps its perpetrators as evil and criminal. It is a fact however, that eugenically motivated compulsory sterilization was generally encouraged by politicians, scientists, and the general public in Scandinavia, and eugenic legislation warranting compulsory sterilization was considered an important element in the welfare reform that was introduced in the 1930s (Figure 6.1).³

The contrast between past and present norms makes eugenic sterilization in Scandinavia a controversial topic in contemporary historiography. For several reasons, the issue is politically sensitive: in the Nordic countries, it links the leading Social Democratic parties with eugenics. It also associates eugenics with many well-known and respected scientists and physicians. Some of them are still alive, as are many of the people who were sterilized. The fact that democratic countries in Scandinavia supported eugenics is also a challenge to the generally accepted interpretation of the established political and ethical order, and blurs the clear demarcation line between fascism and democracy, between good and bad science, between good and evil.⁴ Furthermore, the current governments of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have all considered compensating the sterilized, which I will discuss below. All these circumstances make a study of the history of eugenics a difficult matter politically, scientifically and ethically—and as a consequence of this a theme within the recent history of medicine that deserves specific historiographical consideration.

How can historians write about one of the most wrenching issues of the present day? The following reflections originate from my work on the practice of