Gerald O’Brien

*Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble‐Mindedness in*

*the American Eugenic Era*, Manchester: Manchester University Press,

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Framing the Moron is a detailed book about the use and deployment of meta-

phors 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 devel-

opment 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 comportment.

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 work-

ing 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 eugen-

ics, 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 consoli-

dating 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 formu-

lated 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-

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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 dys-

genic 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, out-

line how religious rhetoric was used in eugenic literature and how groups

were objectified. In these later chapters the idea of metaphors is still pres-

ent 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 popu-

larize and educate the wider population about the need for exclusionary prac-

tices and policies, in this case eugenics. In focusing merely on how groups are

marginalized by metaphors, the book neglects, however, to consider how oth-

ers 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.