What does it mean to bring human life under scientific control? In the first half of the twentieth century, the rationale for the scientific control of human life was grounded in evolutionary theory, racial science, and eugenic policy-making. After the Second World War, this framework came increasingly to seem like a moral disaster of unprecedented proportions. At the same time, advances in the life sciences were delivering our species into a brave new world of manipulative possibilities that the eugenicists could only dream about. Over the past few decades, scientists have wrested control of fertility, learned to surgically and chemically modify mood and behavior, and begun to intervene in heredity. This class will explore these recent developments against the background of the American eugenics movement, asking what kind of society we are hoping to build with these technologies, what opportunities they might open up, and what dangers they might pose.

Course requirements

Lectures are three times a week, MWF, 11-11.50 am in Center 101. You are also required to attend two discussion sections a week. There will be three papers, each worth 25% of your grade, and a final group project, worth 15%. The remaining 10% will be awarded by your TA for the quality of your participation in the discussion sections.

Outline and readings

PART I. American Eugenics, old and new.

Week 1. Getting voted off the island: Darwinism, eugenics and the survival of the fittest

Monday: intro, no reading

Wednesday: Marks for family merit

Francis Galton Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development London: Macmillan and Co 323-337

Friday: Negative eugenics in America


Monday: *Fitter families for future firesides*


[paper 1 assigned]

Wednesday: *Germinal Choice*


Friday: *The New Genetics*


**PART II. Brain control**

Week 3. Psychosurgery and electrical control of the brain

Monday: *The lobotomy operation*


[paper 1 first draft due in section]

Wednesday: *Electrical Stimulation of the Brain*


Friday: *Mental fitness and psychocivilization*

Discussion, no reading

[paper 2 assigned]
Week 4. The death and resurrection of Electrical Stimulation of the Brain

Monday: Brain control in the dock

Hearings before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, Ninety Third Congress, First Session, pp. 337-381.

[paper 1 final draft due in section]

Wednesday: The anti-psychiatry movement

Film: One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest

Friday: Electrical stimulation of the brain revisited


Week 5. The neurochemical self

Monday: SSRIs and cognitive enhancement


Wednesday: The new anti-psychiatry movement


[paper 2 first draft due in section]

Friday: The neurochemical self


PART III. Engineering life

Week 6. Birth control

Monday: the history of hormones

Wednesday: IVF, consumer choice and the ‘right to have children’

Scott La Fee (2009) ‘Octuplets Case Sparks Calls for more fertility-industry curbs’ San Diego Union Tribune

Friday: the little blue pill that changed America

Discussion: no reading

Week 7. Better than well

Monday: HGH and the story of genetic engineering


[paper 2 final draft due in section; paper 3 assigned]

Wednesday: Designer Babies


Friday: our posthuman future?

Week 8. GMOs and the global economy

Monday: Frankenstein foods and the Pusztai controversy

Arpad Pusztai, “Genetic engineering – genetechnology, is it salvation or curse for the 21st century?”

Wednesday: GMOs and globalization


[paper 3 first draft due in section]

Friday: the anti-capitalist movement and genetic engineering

Film: Battle in Seattle
PART IV. The survival of the fittest revisited

Week 9. Selling sickness

Monday: DTC advertising


Wednesday: drugs looking for diseases


[paper 3 final draft due in section, final project assigned.]

Friday: selling sickness

Film Selling Sickness

Week 10. A new ethics for the new eugenics?

Monday: moral panic, 1966


Wednesday: the failure of American eugenics, and the end of sexual morality


Friday: moral panic, 2009


[Final project screening Friday June 12th]