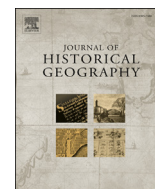




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Situating eugenics: Robert DeCourcy Ward and the Immigration Restriction League of Boston



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ABSTRACT

Recently historians of eugenics have turned their attention toward the locations where eugenics was disseminated and practiced. Continuing in this tradition, this article investigates the role of the Harvard geographer and climatologist Robert DeCourcy Ward as a leading member of the Immigration Restriction League of Boston between 1893 and 1921. I argue that the cultural history of the New England region and the evolving political and social landscape shaped eugenic thinking and thus 'restrictionist' discourse. In that sense, eugenic proclamations can be studied geographically as they often reflect the political and social conventions of their place and time.

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By the end of the nineteenth century the old Yankees and Brahmins – an elite group of New Englanders, most with ancestral ties to the original English colonists – had begun to lose their political and social influence in the cities of the north eastern United States.¹ Indeed the demographics of urban areas had changed so considerably that in 1885 Boston elected Hugh O'Brien, its first Irish-born mayor. There was, as John Higham asserted, a perceived breakdown in the 'homogeneity of American culture'.² As a reaction to these political shifts, as well as to increasing criminality, pauperism and class warfare, nativists argued that immigration restriction was crucial. On 31st May 1894 three young Harvard graduates – geographer and climatologist Robert DeCourcy Ward, and lawyers Charles Warren and Prescott Hall – founded the Immigration Restriction League of Boston (IRL). Hall was secretary of the League until his death in 1921, at which point it was dissolved. Warren actively promoted the League among the political elite, and Ward was chairman of the organization until 1908 and then served as a member of its executive committee.³ The headquarters were located in downtown Boston, walking distance from the harbour and among the financial and legal sectors of State Street and

Pemberton Square. The League was concerned that the nation, and more importantly 'the American race', could no longer cope with what it saw as the huge influx of unassimilable aliens. Inner city areas were viewed as 'incubators of disease and violence'.⁴ Ward styled the IRL as a 'non-partisan, non-sectarian and non-political organization'.⁵ At its first meeting Ward, Warren and Hall along with two other restrictionists, Samuel Parker and Winthrop Hodges, voted to draft a report that would act as an official constitution.⁶ This document spelled out the objectives of the League:

The objects of this League shall be to advocate and work for the further judicious restriction or stricter regulation of immigration, to issue documents and circulars, solicit facts and information on that subject, hold public meetings, and to arouse public opinion to the necessity of a further exclusion of elements undesirable for citizenship or injurious to our national character. It is not an object of this League to advocate the exclusion of

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¹ See F.C. Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles*, Chicago, 1982, chapter 2.

² J. Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925*, Westport, 1955, xiii.

³ W.A. Koelsch, Robert DeCourcy Ward 1867–1931, in: T.W. Freeman (Ed.), *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 7 (1983) 145–150.

⁴ P. Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society: Immigration and Nativism in America*, Berkeley, 2010, 5.

⁵ R. DeC. Ward, Open letters: an Immigration Restriction League, *The Century: A Popular Quarterly* 49 (1895) 639.

⁶ Immigration Restriction League, Records, Minutes of meetings of the executive committee of the IRL, volume 1, 1894–1902 (May 1894–Dec. 1902). MS Am 2245 (1050), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA [hereafter HLHU].

laborers or other immigrants of such character and standards as fit them to become citizens.⁷

Never numbering more than thirty members, and although designed to be non-political, the IRL was politically influential. As early as 1895 it had urged historian and politician Henry Cabot Lodge to raise in Congress the possibility of a literacy test for foreign immigrants.⁸ Even though the membership of the IRL in the 1890s was politically heterogeneous, the core group were Harvard graduates, and most were descendants of New England Brahmins.⁹ They were, as Higham rightly states, 'steeped in Boston ways and Boston ideas'.¹⁰ Their restrictionist ideology was, as Barbara Miller Solomon has argued, not formed by direct contact with foreigners; rather they held a set of ideological presumptions shaped and facilitated by persistent contact with an upper-class intellectual Harvard clique.¹¹ In 'A Boston toast' the poet John Collins Bossidy captured this essence of Brahmin culture:

And this is good old Boston,
The home of the bean and the cod,
Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots
And the Cabots talk only to God.¹²

These views displayed the particular regional context of restrictionism. The Brahmins of New England – an area proud of its American culture, steeped in history, and with long-standing hierarchies of influential families – thought of themselves as under threat by outsiders, people whose ideas and ways of life cut against the grain. The irony of this is of course that all these individuals were descendants of immigrants. But this did not matter as the statistics from the 1885 Boston census seemed to validate their pessimistic assumptions. In that year sixty-three per cent of Bostonians were either foreign or from foreign parentage.¹³ Throughout the country immigrants were being used as the focal point for nationalistic expression, while race and ethnicity were often excuses for social exclusion.¹⁴

Shaped by what David Livingstone has called the 'particularities of place', the variety of eugenic and racial ideologies which flowered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the range of spaces that produced them.¹⁵ In this article I develop this notion. Using the eugenic activities of Robert DeCourcy Ward as a case study, my principal argument is that the eugenics of the Boston Immigration Restriction League can be read partly as a product of place – mirroring the local and regional cultural and intellectual traditions, as well as political interests, of New England. Indeed, to fully understand its history, eugenics should not be

dissociated from the places where it was read, interpreted and proselytised. Thus, after providing a brief biography of Ward, I trace the development of the IRL and show how Ward's restrictionist objectives and eugenic inspirations were conditioned by the peculiarities of the region.

Methodology and sources

As Stephen Daniels and Catherine Nash have argued, geography and biography are intimately connected.¹⁶ Situating persons and ideas within broader social, political and scientific movements provides a context for further historical enquiry, but 'spatialising' history requires a greater understanding of different local and regional cultural and intellectual traditions. With that being the case, an in-depth analysis of the history of eugenics will show that it has 'borne the stamp of the regional circumstances within which it has been practiced'.¹⁷ Using a combination of the archival material of the IRL and the published articles of Robert DeCourcy Ward, I hope to add to the growing literature on this topic and encourage a greater focus on the historical geographies of localised encounters of scientific discussion and dissemination. To that end, I present a situated account of Ward's connections to the immigration restriction movement in Boston. By extracting biographic information, and shining a light on the machinations of the immigration restriction movement, I make sense of Ward's position among the messy and often inconsistent pursuits of Boston restrictionists.

In 1991 Nancy Leys Stepan complained that many historians of eugenics have neglected to pay attention to how regional and cultural differences have helped construct eugenic traditions.¹⁸ Since this claim there has been a greater attempt by historians to elucidate this connection. Edward Larson's *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* is an attempt at situating eugenics within a particular region. He argues that the political, social and geographical delineations between the 'North' and the 'Deep South' in the US resulted in a difference in how eugenics was read, understood and politicised. Regional pride, racial segregation and the assumption of white superiority created an environment responsive to eugenic concerns in the South.¹⁹ In addition, Nancy Gallagher has taken the eugenics movement in Vermont as a regional study. She shows that many advocates infused eugenic discussion with Vermont's cultural and biological history – in particular citing the 'pioneer stocks' as those 'who were most deserving of the title "Vermonters"'.²⁰ More recently, Marius Turda's edited volume *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900–1945* places eugenic thinking within the changing cultural and political landscape of inter-war eastern and central Europe, laying bare the religious, political, cultural and social contexts within which eugenics was built.²¹ While these investigations provide a refreshing insight into the locations of eugenic practice, it is a situated approach that provides the ammunition not only to contextualise the issues at hand, but to identify the direct impact local traditions had on eugenic discourse. Historians of science are now turning their attention to this aspect of historical writing. They are, as Daniels and

⁷ Immigration Restriction League, *Constitution of the Immigration Restriction League*, Boston, 1895.

⁸ President Grover Cleveland vetoed the resulting bill in 1897, however the League persisted with their efforts in this regard, see E.A. Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, New York, 2001, 357–358.

⁹ B.M. Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition*, Oxford, 1956, 104, and chapter 6.

¹⁰ J. Higham, *Strangers in this Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925*, second edition, Westport, 1963, 102.

¹¹ Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants*, 100.

¹² Quoted in K. Jones, American nativism and exclusion: the rise and fall of the Immigration Restriction League, unpublished PhD thesis, Georgetown University, 2013.

¹³ J.D. Petit, *The Men and Women We Want: Gender, Race, and the Progressive Era Literary Test Debate*, New York, 2010, 18.

¹⁴ J. Sharpe, Is the United States postcolonial? Transnationalism, immigration, and race, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 4 (1995) 181–199.

¹⁵ D.N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago, 2003, 179–182.

¹⁶ S. Daniels and C. Nash, Lifepaths: geography and biography, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004) 449–458.

¹⁷ Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place*, 134.

¹⁸ N.L. Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*, New York, 1991, 3.

¹⁹ E. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South*, Baltimore, 1995.

²⁰ N.L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State*, Hanover, 1999, 115.

²¹ M. Turda (Ed.), *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900–1945: Sources and Commentaries*, London, 2015.

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