“Mentally superior children are born of physically superior people”: Bernarr Macfadden’s *Physical Culture World* and the Influence of Eugenic Thought in American Fitness Culture, 1900s-1930s

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes U.S. fitness culture during the early decades of the twentieth century as a field of knowledge production and corporeal practice that helped to establish and normalize eugenics as part of popular culture within the white urban middle class. Using the widely distributed books and magazines from the publishing empire of Bernarr Macfadden as an exemplary case study, the article argues that fitness culture was effective and productive in transmitting the ‘science of eugenics’ into popular practices of self-management, combining ideas about life-long physical training with questions of marriage counseling, family planning, and health issues related to mothers and children. In relating the appeal of ‘scientific modernity,’ of university-trained experts and their insistence on efficiency as the ultimate ratio of an ordered society, to physical health and training as well as to citizenship discourse, the texts and images of fitness culture constituted a biopolitical ideal that operated against the backdrop of abject bodies that deviated from ‘normalcy’ in racialized, gendered, or sexualized terms or because of their supposed lack of physical capacity.

In August 1928, the readers of *Physical Culture*, the magazine forming the backbone of the publishing enterprise of fitness and health entrepreneur Bernarr Macfadden, were asked to engage in an interesting do-it-yourself home improvement activity. In an article entitled “Rainy Day Occupations for *Physical Culture* Children,” author Ray Wardell described how parents should make use of ordinary household items to build an indoor playground for their toddlers. Its centerpiece was supposed to be an “old chest, painted light green, with one of the splendid new hard surface lacquers, [that] holds toys and is low enough for the child to use with no assistance” (52). Also equipped with a broom handle as a horizontal bar and an old football placed on a rattan pole, the new piece of furniture combined the design of a sandpit with that of a gymnasium. The necessity of the effort seemed self-evident: “[w]e cherish every lingering ray of sunshine for these physical culture children of ours for we know that brings roses to little cheeks, wholesome exercise for small legs...
and happy harmony in young heads. But those rainy mornings will come [and] we round up the whole family for Rainy Day Drill” (52).

This article and the well-meaning advice it included for parents are a strong reminder that the fitness boom in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century was not only about bodybuilding, calisthenics, or character-building team sports, and that it was addressed not only to men and women who aspired to be actual athletes (Green; Grover). Fitness and physical culture advocates such as Macfadden, Eugen Sandow, Annette Kellerman, Dudley Sargent, and many others usually framed their ideas and concepts within a dense reform discourse including aspects of health, hygiene, and nutrition that became increasingly influential within the white American middle class (Black). These experts’ individual programs often differed in significant details and also changed many of their elements over time, but all underscored an understanding of the term ‘fitness’ that went far beyond the realms of sports or physical culture, and included normative assumptions about society and citizenship, about rights and obligations, and about managing oneself and guiding others toward being a ‘well-adjusted’ member of the community. In the sense of Michel Foucault’s term, these notions of ‘fitness’ were biopolitical in character because they framed ‘fitness’ as a meta-effort, the endeavor to stay fit for achievements in all fields of society (Martschukat, “The Pursuit of Fitness”; Scholl). As initiatives operating in forms of state interventions as well as in less officially marked popular culture trends, biopolitics’ “main role was to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (Foucault 138). According to sociologist Nikolas Rose, biopolitics seeks to constitute a “biological citizenship” that binds the recognition of a fully integrated and acknowledged subject to that person’s obligation of taking care of his or her body in order to stay healthy and productive (Rose; Rose and Novas).

One of the most important among these ‘spaces of existence’ was family and reproduction. Physical Culture’s brief piece on how to create a useful indoor playground / gym for active toddlers arrested by bad weather is only one of many examples of how this and other fitness magazines, books, and pamphlets, plus the illustrations they featured, spoke to the family as a basic social unit and cultural norm “that entailed specific race and class hierarchies as well as socioeconomic assumptions” (Heinemann 71). Addressing the American family as an institution, a location, and a close group of persons aspiring to acquire ‘fitness,’ to live and to reproduce ‘fitness,’ the physical culture movement in general emphasized the overall value of ‘strong,’ ‘efficient,’ ‘productive,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘beautiful’ bodies (both individual and collective). Unsurprisingly, its proponents regularly relied upon and promoted the language of eugenics.

Equipping the do-it-yourself indoor sandpit with a horizontal bar and an old football that could be punched and squeezed aimed at raising ‘fitter’ children, kids that at a very early age could “lie down on a rug, shoulders, hips and heels to the floor, raise legs alternately in a
“Mentally superior children are born of physically superior people”

Jack knife motion,” to again quote the author of “Rainy Day Occupations” (Wardell 52). There is obvious proximity of such childhood workout ideas to the ‘fitter babies’—and ‘fitter family’—contests that were an integral and popular part of the American eugenics movement in the first decades of the twentieth century (Crnic; Stern) The whole notion of raising ‘better’ children while living a ‘valuable’ life as member of a ‘better’ family constituted a hinge that ultimately connected the overwhelming majority of physical culture proponents and their followers to at least some branches of the eugenics movement.

In this article, I will analyze U.S. fitness culture during the early decades of the twentieth century as a field of knowledge production and corporeal practice that helped to establish and normalize eugenics as part of popular culture within the white urban middle class. Both perspectives—knowledge production and corporeal practice—were equally important and inextricably linked to each other: while the dense textual discourse produced, transmitted, and constantly updated a rich knowledge about human bodies, about their needs and functions, and about their preservation and improvement, the urgent requirement to put advice into actual physical practice caused a sense of corporeal self-awareness that translated back to ego-documents revealing the degree to which notions of ‘fitness’ structured the minds of white middle-class Americans. Using the widely distributed books and magazines from the publishing empire of Bernarr Macfadden as an exemplary case study, I argue that fitness culture was effective and productive in transmitting the ‘science of eugenics’ into popular practices of self-management, combining ideas about life-long physical training with questions of marriage counseling, family planning, and health issues related to (expectant) mothers and children. In relating the appeal of ‘scientific modernity,’ of university-trained experts and their insistence on efficiency as the ultimate ratio of an ordered society, to physical health and training as well as to citizenship discourse, the texts and images of fitness culture constituted a biopolitical ideal that operated against the backdrop of abject bodies that deviated from ‘normalcy’ in racialized, gendered, or sexualized terms or because of their supposed lack of physical capacity.

I proceed in two separate yet linked arguments. First, I briefly introduce important aspects of the physical culture movement in general and of Macfadden’s role in it in particular. This description is based upon a discussion of surrounding discourses concerning changing ideas about fitness and citizenship also relevant for the physical culture movement and the eugenic movement. In the second part, I probe my argument based on primary sources, emphasizing the important role of Macfadden’s Physical Culture world’ in articulating, familiarizing, popularizing, and normalizing certain elements of eugenic thought for a white urban middle-class clientele primarily interested in shaping their bodies according to the ideals proposed by physical culture advocates.

1 Throughout this article, I use the terms ‘physical culture movement’ and ‘fitness culture’ synonymously.
1 National ‘Fitness’ and the U.S. Physical Culture Movement

Historian Jürgen Martschukat has outlined a genealogy of the term ‘fitness’ (“The Pursuit of Fitness”; “The Age of Fitness”). As he argues convincingly, notions of ‘fitness’ changed significantly over the course of the nineteenth century. Meaning at first a stable, almost essential quality in persons who ‘fit in,’ the term later changed its meaning into a much more active and flexible understanding stressing change based on one’s individual, self-managed effort to increase or optimize health, ability, success, or overall quality of life. This more recent conception became immensely relevant for modern liberal societies such as the United States that revolved around the guiding principle of self-government. In that sense, ‘fitness’ became a “regulatory ideal” (Butler), a significant force in establishing a stable notion of what Disability Studies authors such as Fiona Kumari Campbell and Robert McRuer call “ableism” or “compulsive able-bodiedness” in contemporary Western societies of the twenty-first century (Campbell; McRuer). Thus ‘fitness,’ since the latter half of the nineteenth century, has become a marker for inclusion and exclusion and for inner-societal hierarchies based on how individuals as well as groups performed according to this mindset.

The notion of activity, of striving for achievement, was crucial to this doctrine on two different levels. First, it related to general ideas of progress and civilization. As T.J. Jackson Lears has shown, during the decades around 1900 many Americans turned toward their bodies as resources for orientation and assistance in an ever-accelerating competition on both internal and foreign markets (Lears). While many feared that after the closing of the frontier the rise of urban living could lead to a dangerous lack of physical ruggedness and a rise in what had been diagnosed as neurasthenia, other voices increasingly linked those developments to mass immigration of ‘unfit’ newcomers from regions considered far less civilized than those of the former ‘old immigration’ (Bederman). On a second, more concrete level, the notions of activity and adaption so prevalent in the changed concept of ‘fitness’ translated into a true exercise and sport craze, especially among white urban Americans. ‘Bodily fitness’ was now something that could be achieved by what Theodore Roosevelt so vividly described in his famous 1899 “Strenuous Life” speech: the will and ability to be and become fit members of the Anglo-Saxon race, giving them a crucial advantage in an exclusionary, competitive, and social Darwinist matrix of race and citizenship (Bederman; Kimmel; Putney; Testi).

Offering advice and guidance to form and train a ‘strong,’ ‘healthy,’ ‘capable,’ and also ‘beautiful’ body that was prepared to fulfill the new obligations of ‘fitness,’ a group of experts emerged that, over the course of several years, grew into a visible physical culture movement in the United States. For some of them, it became a very profitable busi-
ness. Among these physical culture experts were university professors like Dudley Sargent, college educators like James Naismith and Senda Berenson, vaudeville performers like Eugen Sandow and Annette Kellermann, and ‘guru’-like promoters and publishers such as Bernarr Macfadden (Catapano; Kasson; Park). Although at times only loosely connected and disagreeing on many aspects crucial to the ‘fitness crusade’ in which they took part, they all shared some core values based in a biological interpretation of social order—they all sympathized more or less explicitly with at least some variants of eugenic thought, as did so many contemporaries who otherwise differed in cultural and political persuasions.2

Strength and ability were crucial terms orchestrating this overlapping of discourses; race and sexuality were others. Their importance can be most obviously demonstrated with the exemplary figure of Bernarr Macfadden. His ‘creed’ remained unchanged over his decades-long engagement in promoting physical culture: only strong and healthy bodies were capable and beautiful bodies, and it was the individual responsibility of every person, man or woman, young or old, to live up to that obligation. “Weakness is a crime—don’t be a criminal!” was Macfadden’s most prominent slogan. Re-printed in almost every one of his publications, it focused specifically on this biopolitical understanding of individual responsibility for gaining and keeping up strength and capability for the larger social purposes of maintaining social order now and in the future. This understanding of avoiding the stigma of ‘crime’ through working on one’s body was strongly linked to surrounding contemporary discourses stressing notions of the perceived decline of white, Anglo-Saxon civilization caused, among other things, by mass ‘new immigration’ and related concerns about sexuality and procreation (Bederman; Jacobson; Lüthi; Putney). The expression also contained a clear accusation regarding the ‘unfit classes’ and their ascribed poverty, criminality, and over-promiscuous sexuality, indicating that the ‘positive’ form of eugenics favored by the physical culturalists always rested upon the dense textual and visual representations of ‘unfit,’ ‘weak,’ or ‘feeble-minded’ foreigners and outsiders. Although rarely explicit about or openly discriminatory against racially or ethnically marked individuals or groups, Macfadden and most other fitness proponents strongly located their representations and marketed their services within the symbolic order of whiteness. Establishing an easily identifiable historical line of argumentation linking Anglo-Saxon settlement to later immigration from western and northern Europe to a shared set of traditions, values, and institutions, and ultimately to similar physical features and potentials, many texts stemming from physical culturalists did speak about race without mentioning it, thus providing ‘clean’ versions of whiteness. Moreover, as Ralph Poole has demonstrated convincingly with regard to Sandow’s performances, corporeal practices and their representations added a powerful visual dimension to this strategy of colorblindness, often actively elim-
2 Bernarr Macfadden: Muscular Prophet and Biopolitical Guru

In many regards, Macfadden was a prototypical self-made man. He and his followers were highly eager to create a dense and always up-to-date narrative of success. Born in 1868 as Bernard Adolphus McFadden in Missouri, in his teenage years he began to work out with dumbbells and changed his eating habits to a (more or less) vegetarian diet to improve what he considered a sick and weak body. After moving to New York City, he started a career as journalist, book author, and publisher, which made him the owner of an expanding media empire and one of the most important protagonists of physical culture during the first decades of the twentieth century.

In 1899, Macfadden founded his first magazine, *Physical Culture*, a monthly publication that over time became the flagship of a media enterprise that, despite many serious crises, primarily in its early years, grew enormously in size and importance until the 1940s—a career that ran in striking parallel to the peak years of the American eugenics movement. A typical illustrated magazine, *Physical Culture* profited from new technologies allowing the integration of photography into its pages and relied heavily on advertising to keep its retail price low. It reached a broad middle-class reading public interested in the variety of topics it addressed, among them sport and physical culture, hygiene and health, nutrition and diet, and marriage and sexuality. As early as 1901, the magazine sold more than 150,000 copies per month, a number rising to more than 500,000 copies in the late 1920s (Adams 46, 182; Pringle 664).

Even more profitable were other publications coordinated by Macfadden, among them magazines like *True Detective* and *True Story* and the tabloid daily *The New York Graphic*, which dealt mostly with sex and crime stories. With the help of the profits earned through these media outlets, Macfadden was able to promote the project that was dearest to him—popularizing his extensive and outspoken opinions on fitness, physical culture, health, and citizenship. In the decades before the 1940s, he published more than 50 books and pamphlets in these fields. Especially popular was his multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Health and Physical Culture*, which saw several editions after its first publication in 1912. Moreover, starting in the 1920s, the physical culturalist pro-

3 Sandow himself could be described as an outspoken advocate of ‘positive’ eugenics, stating his conviction that eugenics ‘will lead us inevitably to healthier, more vigorous and more beautiful humanity’ (84). Sandow nevertheless was more influential in Great Britain than in the United States.

4 Many authors have tried to characterize Macfadden with catchy phrases; Waugh refers to him as a “muscular prophet,” while Currell describes him as a “guru.”
duced regular radio broadcasts explaining calisthenics and health issues, starred in eight short movies with physical culture content, and founded several sanatoriums giving men and women the opportunity to get well with ‘individually shaped’ Macfadden programs.

Since the establishment of a serious social history of sport in the 1970s, scholars have underlined the important role Bernarr Macfadden played in establishing and popularizing a sense of sport and physical culture that promoted an understanding of life-long physical activity aiding individuals, both men and women, in gaining and keeping up fitness to be ‘successful,’ ‘productive,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘valuable’ members of society. This scholarly literature differs significantly from older texts published while Macfadden was still alive or shortly after his death in 1955. In these older contributions, authors either celebrated Macfadden uncritically or denounced him completely. Among the first group were essays written mostly by family members or close associates (M. Macfadden and Gauvreau; Ousler). They confirmed and stabilized Macfadden’s own autobiographical statements and described the physical culturalist as a far-sighted health reformer who had successfully opposed both traditional folk knowledge and the theses of self-proclaimed ‘modern’ experts. In opposition to these dominant trends of health-related knowledge, his supporters claimed that Macfadden had established an almost holistic and superior program to bolster the physical condition of the American public. Fierce opponents disagreed: they considered him nothing more than a charlatan or quack, the leader of an esoteric sect whose financial success rested first and foremost on printing immoral and often even pornographic texts that contained crude, unscientific information on health, hygiene, and sexuality. Moreover, the illustrations in Physical Culture and other publications aroused a special concern among critics.

Compared to these older texts, the newer social and cultural sport history literature argues in more complex ways. Authors like James Whorton, Donald Mrozek, and Harvey Green discuss the ambivalent roles Macfadden played as a member of the reform-spirited generation around and after 1900 that tried to entrench the idea of a kind of health-oriented sport or physical culture among members of the white urban U.S. middle class (Green; Mrozek, Sport and American Mentality; Whorton). Already at the beginning of this newer engagement with Macfadden’s influence, some authors hinted at the obvious implications of the material included in Physical Culture and other associated publications for histories of gender and sexuality (Endres; Griffith; Stanley; Todd). They emphasized the fact that many of the texts he published—either written by himself or by others—were strongly related to surrounding issues including women’s rights, birth control, or marriage.
counseling. Furthermore, some biographies written since the 1980s aim at integrating Macfadden and his media empire into social and cultural trends, stressing his influence on the many reform issues of the Progressive Era and his attempts to keep them in the focus of public debates during the 1920s and 1930s. Scholars now offer an overall assessment of Macfadden that avoids both glorification and condemnation. The most recent biography, by Mark Adams, is a good example of this nuanced assessment: it underscores the ambiguities of an energetic character who was rarely aware of the consequences that many of his ideas and deeds had for his readers or his family (Adams; Ernst; Hunt).

*Physical Culture* started publication in 1899 and over the course of several years became the largest and most opinion-driven American sport and fitness magazine of the first half of the twentieth century. The paper was particularly important in establishing a broad understanding of what sports and fitness should mean to a general public. It argued that fitness should be considered part of a larger, all-encompassing physical culture commitment that could not and should not be restricted to the pure results of well-known athletes competing in leagues or championships. Contrary to its image as being solely a bodybuilding magazine that rested on mildly pornographic images of semi-nudes, *Physical Culture* was instead a publication dedicating itself, from its earliest days and especially after the Great War, to a broad variety of topics relevant to the booming sport and physical culture movement in the United States and beyond: from the relevance of physical training for the military and for public education, to issues of hygiene, health, sexuality and diet, and even to feminist concerns about dress reform and voting rights. Combined with other outlets of his publishing empire, Macfadden’s magazine aimed at popularizing the idea that sport and popular culture could ultimately better U.S. society. Over time, notions of eugenic thinking became ever more important for that objective.

Access to the primary sources of the *Physical Culture* world is easy, as the material can be accessed in many scholarly libraries and online. To demonstrate eugenics’ influence within the *Physical Culture* world, I rely primarily on the following texts: first, a variety of marriage counseling brochures, such as *What a Young Husband Ought to Know*, *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (both 1902), and *Manhood and Marriage* (1916) and *Womanhood and Marriage* (1918); second, texts dealing explicitly with sex and birth control advice, such as *Talks to a Young Man about Sex* (1928) and *Woman’s Sex Life* (1934); and, third, books about the issue of raising young children, such as *Physical Culture for Babies* (1904) and *How to Raise the Baby* (1926). Spanning three decades of advice writing within Macfadden’s *Physical Culture* world, these texts reflect change as well as continuity in attitudes and opinions. Their impact on readers is at times difficult to estimate, especially that of the pre-World War I publications which were banned in parts of the country. Considering their low price, their regular advertising, and their broad availability in public libraries,
a significant number of readers can be assumed. With the same interest in mind, I use articles from Physical Culture magazine. Collections of that magazine in libraries are usually incomplete, especially for issues from before World War I, when many libraries considered Macfadden’s main magazine as unsuitable for collection.

3 “Choose Your Mate with Your Children in Mind”: Addressing Eugenics in Macfadden’s Physical Culture World before World War I

Just four years after its first publication, Bernarr Macfadden used the pages of his Physical Culture magazine to launch an especially characteristic element of his ‘fitness crusade’ that would remain one of its most prominent cornerstones. In the spring of 1903, Macfadden announced a competition, awarding $1,000 in prize money to the “most perfect specimen of physical manhood” (‘The Thousand-Dollar Prize Announcement’ 12). In explaining the reasons for his decision, he offered an understanding that related his suggested Physical Culture Meeting to U.S. cultural traditions and a progressive notion of competition: “[i]n nearly every county in these great United States there is held an annual fair in which prizes are offered for the best specimen of the various domestic animals—horses, cows, and pigs. But never on a single occasion has a prize been offered for the best specimen of man or woman” (12; see also Adams 50-55).

Clearly, Macfadden had been inspired by popular bodybuilding contests and shows, organized by, among others, Eugen Sandow in Britain, but he embedded these ideas into surrounding discourses dealing with the general role of physical culture in U.S. society (Chaline 109-35; Chapman). On earlier occasions, he had already proposed fitness contests in schools and underscored his opinion that the Army should be a school in physical education (Ernst 34-36). Much of this broad, patriotic rhetoric can be understood as a helpful strategy in countering contemporaries who condemned Macfadden’s publications and shows as obscene and at times successfully tried to ban them from the public. Nevertheless, the popularity and longevity of these contests might serve as a starting point for a discussion of how influential eugenic thought was for the Physical Culture world and how this influence changed over time.

“Life is one long continuous athletic contest”—another of Macfadden’s recurring pronouncements demonstrates the centrality of competition as a guiding principle in his worldview (Ernst 34). After inaugurating the Physical Culture Meeting in 1903—the show took place in December in New York and included, despite the original announcement’s emphasis on ‘manhood,’ a separate prize for the ‘best woman’—similar fitness contests that judged well-built muscles and proportions based on how men and women looked posing in swim trunks and bathing suits became a regular feature of the Physical Culture world. They
served several important objectives beyond selling the magazine. First, they linked the idea of a broader physical culture to the expanding world of sports. The relationship between these two sectors of bodily practice was more complicated than might be expected because of issues revolving around amateurism versus professionalism / commercialism, strict organizational structures versus more individually organized ways of being active, and differences in opinion about who could actually be called an athlete. When Harvard professor Dudley Sargent started his quest for the ‘Perfect Woman’ in 1909 and finally assigned that award to the swimming and diving performer Annette Kellerman, he did so to explicitly challenge prevailing medical assumptions about women’s physical capabilities and promote athleticism in women (Sargent; Vertinsky). Overall, the idea of competition served as an important hinge that allowed for a similar frame of reference and overlap of clientele between physical culture, on the one hand, and sports, on the other.

Second, contests emphasized the relevance of visibility, display, and performance as fundamental elements of the Physical Culture world. On-stage presentations of ‘fit,’ ‘capable,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘beautiful’ bodies were just a final step within a representational logic that stressed display, comparison, and public (self-)evaluation. Both the Physical Culture magazine and most of the other publications of Macfadden’s publishing empire depended heavily on illustrations, as did an increasing number of books and articles authored by other members of the U.S. physical culture and sports movements. The new opportunities for printing photography easily and inexpensively accelerated this trend, and Physical Culture in particular relied for its entire existence on images that not only sought to educate readers in how to perform correctly and successfully but also served themselves as models of ‘ideal bodies.’ Macfadden’s was the trained body most regularly featured as a male model in the magazine. Over more than three decades, one can detect how both the person and the whole movement struggled with troublesome notions of aging (Stieglitz, “A man of your years”). Readers themselves also became active participants in that process of construing visibility as most influential. In addition to professional photography, Physical Culture consistently offered readers the opportunity to send in pictures of homegrown, ‘fit’ bodies, revealing not only how ‘ordinary’ American men and women interacted with the normative models provided by Macfadden and others, but also how readers used their styled bodies as sexual markers and commodities (Stieglitz, “A particularly desirable exercise”). The purpose of training one’s body, many of these photos reveal, was to place oneself on a market ruled by a linear physical logic of ‘fitter’ as ‘better’ and ‘more valuable as a partner.’ If ‘fitness’ was about self-management, these pictures made the necessary efforts and their ‘success’ publicly visible.

This marks a third reason why the idea of competition was so crucial for members of the Physical Culture world. In a broader understanding,
this contest orientation (or fixation) helped anchor the whole worldview of the fitness culture within a liberal, progressive, ‘American’ mindset that linked bodily practices to larger issues of the nation and citizenship (Mrozek, “Sport in American Life”). Conceiving the United States as part of a world-wide struggle over dominance and Anglo-Saxon whiteness as under increasing pressure—as for instance articulated in widely-read contemporary books such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) or Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920)—translated into a specific understanding of citizenship as an active obligation that related individual ‘betterment’ and ‘health’ to that of the racial nation in general. Taken together, these three crucial roles associated with the central idea of competition within the physical culture movement—securing popularity by stressing the proximity to sports, emphasizing the necessity of comparison through visibility, and marking competition as a truly national obligation—opened up the space in which eugenic thinking found its entry into physical culture.

Against the backdrop of the eugenic movement’s development in the United States, it is unsurprising that its influence on physical culturalists differed over time. Eugenics, as a term, a defined concept, or a school of thought, was rarely discussed in most physical culture publications before World War I. Nevertheless, many prominent issues that would structure the eugenics debate in future years were already present in these publications: ideas of guided selection when seeking marriage partners, the need to battle a possible ‘suicide’ of the white race, and the strong appeal to (expectant) mothers to be aware of the responsibilities involved in giving birth and raising a ‘fit’ baby. Moreover, this strong argument for (self-)improvement certainly operated within a competitive ‘survival of the fittest’ logic which at least implicitly always reminded readers about ‘unfit,’ ‘weak,’ and deviant others.

In early marriage counseling brochures like *What a Young Husband Ought to Know* and *What a Young Woman Ought to Know*, Macfadden’s language was very cautious, as the author was aware that both texts were subject to moral guardians’ surveillance. The purpose of such publications was to find strategic ways to discuss sensitive topics as frankly and comprehensively as possible, while also keeping the language non-controversial in a public market. Scientific language was a strategy of choice, but it had limits: in Macfadden’s worldview, science and science-based medicine were considered more part of the problem than part of the solution (Adams 52, 78). Often openly critical towards formal medicine and overly theoretical, scientific language and its increasing explanatory influence in the fields of health, hygiene, and nutrition, Macfadden instead advocated an understanding of physical development and capability based on common sense, on ‘naturalness,’ and practical physical culture experience. Nonetheless, the constant threat of censorship of his outreach in matters of sexuality, hygiene, and marriage caused Macfadden

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6 For an important perspective on common sense, see Reyes in this special issue.
to integrate scientific and medical vocabulary into his dictionary. In the long run, eugenic discourse provided the ‘scientific air’ that Macfadden’s ‘fitness’ doctrine needed. Much the same occurred in publications not originating in Macfadden’s publishing empire, as for example in the case of physician William Walling’s 1902 advice book *Sexology*.

Readers were also important agents in bringing eugenics into Macfadden’s early publications. *Physical Culture* regularly contained a section with letters to the editors, and comments that related the recurring topics of the magazine to larger social concerns were frequent. In February 1910, for example, one reader offered a long opinion about how physical culture might aid in the struggle against “America’s decreasing birthrate” (Burwell 203). After stating how serious he or she considers the problem to be, the author—J. M. Burwell from Pittsburg, Kansas—blames this decline on rising divorce rates, the selfishness of ‘modern’ women, and the willingness of doctors to assist in birth control and abortions. And while the solutions offered in the letter rest primarily on fundamentalist Christianity, the argument resembles the ambiguities characteristic of how the *Physical Culture* world dealt with eugenics in these early years: Macfadden and many of his collaborators shared the diagnosis of a society under pressure and in increasing danger of degeneracy, but they remained reluctant to embrace the solutions suggested by eugenicists for fear of losing too much explanatory authority with their readers.7

This is further evident when looking at the very few exceptional texts from the pre-World War I years that actually addressed eugenics directly. The author of one article that criticized mothers for not breastfeeding their babies used the opportunity to both introduce eugenic principles to readers as well as to criticize problems (Knarf). “Eugenics,” he explained, “includes the raising of children as well as their bearing,” and by insisting that the “birth rights of the child inevitably imply birth responsibilities of the mother” (423), the author sets the tone for how the *Physical Culture* world would engage with eugenics in the following years: conceptualizing it as a pool of valuable information offering additional resources and advice to ‘better’ and increase the ‘fitness’ of the white urban American middle class, without subscribing to those features of eugenic thinking that contradicted long-standing anti-science resentments. If getting ‘fit’ was considered an individual obligation, a citizen’s responsibility, then eugenics offered a language of national urgency and racial activism very appropriate for that understanding. Milo Hastings, a member of *Physical Culture*’s editorial staff, underlined this conviction in an article titled “Can We Breed Better Men?” that indicated physical culturalists recognized eugenics as something they had to confront more thoroughly in the future (Hastings; see also Gillette 73–74). In the longer run, this initially reluctant embrace of eugenic thinking within the fitness movement developed into a partnership that turned out to be beneficial to both advocates of eugenics and physical culturalists. At the same time underscoring a skeptical view on science and showing a

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7 In this regard, calling the *Physical Culture* world a sect does in fact make sense: in these early years, Macfadden and many of his partners showed signs of paranoia and were reluctant to reach out to ‘outsiders,’ especially medical experts (see Ernst 203).
somewhat folksy understanding of nature, but nevertheless slowly opening up to the concepts and the language of eugenics, Macfadden and his collaborators significantly aided in establishing eugenics as a popular science, a science that seemed to bring nature’s true laws back into society’s common sense. In that perspective, science and ‘authentic’ somatic experience ceased to be opposites and became mutually inclusive and supportive. Seen from the point of view of eugenics, the publications of the Physical Culture world increasingly became another outlet for the movement’s strategy of popularizing and normalizing their ideas and of integrating eugenics into vernacular discourses and genres as a lasting element.

The eighteen months of the United States’ involvement in the Great War were especially important in that process because they brought significant change to the physical culture movement in general and to Macfadden’s enterprise in particular. First, hyper-patriotism and the focus on the military offered an opportunity to stress the importance of athleticism to the war effort; debates about the poor physical preparedness of American draftees were widely discussed in fitness circles (Linker; Pope). Moreover, the ‘modernizing’ effects of the war and its aftermath helped to overcome still-prevalent Victorian standards of decency and morality, and, as a consequence, gender interactions—at least in urban areas—became less policed (Fitzpatrick). For Macfadden, this development meant that most of his immediate censorship threats dissolved and that his long-time efforts to celebrate bodies for their capability and beauty moved into the mainstream of popular culture. At the same time, the influence of eugenics peaked as well. As Philippa Levine has recently underscored, the war seemed to reveal the urgency of many of the social problems the eugenicists hinted at: “[m]any saw […] this devastating conflict as a eugenic disaster, killing off or crippling vast numbers of young men, raising sexually transmissible disease rates, promoting the use of alcohol, and removing women from the domestic sphere” (Levine 5). Against this backdrop, eugenics’ role in U.S. popular culture of the interwar period cannot be overestimated, and physical culturalists such as Bernarr Macfadden enabled this hegemony (Currell and Cogdell; Nies).

4 Defining Eugenics for Marriage Counseling after World War I

The Physical Culture world clearly addressed eugenics after World War I much more often and more sympathetically than it had done before. Integrating the findings of scientific studies into the advice proposed by magazine articles and books gained wider acceptance, making it easier to relate to topics discussed among eugenicists and experts associated with the movement. Macfadden started to co-write widely distributed books with authors from the scientific and medical com-
munity, a practice previously unheard of (e.g., Macfadden and Clinton). Moreover, the popularity of eugenic thinking, especially in the field of reproduction politics (Heinemann), made the physical culturalists reach out to eugenic experts and invite them to contribute their opinions on issues like birth control, abortion, marriage counseling, sex hygiene, and heredity. Altogether, four main fields of interest evolved that characterized how the fitness movement talked about the obvious fascination radiating from eugenics.

First, there was an enormous demand for definition and explanation: articles and book chapters outlining what eugenics was all about and what solutions it suggested multiplied over the course of the interwar years. To satisfy this demand, Macfadden’s publications now invited outside authors affiliated in one way or another with the eugenic movement to enlighten readers about core elements and approaches of the ‘new, truly natural science.’ Many of them were prominent within the ranks of the eugenic movement: Margaret Sanger, who Macfadden had supported financially for some time, first published in Physical Culture in 1916 and did so again in the 1920s. Biologist Albert Edward Wiggam, who taught at the University of Wisconsin and was very persuasive in “describing eugenics as God’s plan” (Rosen 128), authored several articles in Physical Culture during the early 1920s (e.g., Wiggam, “What Temperament”; “Proving and Measuring”), and used that opportunity primarily to paraphrase texts and lectures by Charles Davenport, a towering figure of the eugenic movement.

But most significantly, it was Bernarr Macfadden himself who started a continuous effort to outline the teachings of eugenic science and relate them to his own physical culture program. From the late 1910s onward, he regularly picked up eugenic issues in his recurring editorial column in Physical Culture. “Is It National Suicide?” he asked in 1922, and—in what can be described as a typical Macfadden twist of argumentation—he depicted his ideas as truly scientific in spirit while blaming his prewar moral critics as stubbornly resistant to the insights of eugenics: “[w]hy should we be surprised at our inability to reproduce ourselves when such an appalling influence is sapping the very life out of the Nation? Prudery has made the body, the source of all life and health for the individual and the Nation, a thing obscene” (“Bernarr Macfadden’s Viewpoint” 17). The quote nicely indicates how Macfadden had by this point actively integrated eugenics into his thinking: describing “prudery as national suicide,” he made an accusation against his critics that made perfect sense at a time when an ‘enlightened’ attitude toward sexuality had the blessings of an accepted and widely popular science. At other times, the editorial column allowed Macfadden to address topics such as the nexus between eugenics and parental responsibility, or how the science of eugenics allows for pre-natal sex determination. In the 1933 edition of his Encyclopedia of Health and Physical Culture, he included a chapter outlining the history of eugenics and its main issues (4:
This is particularly remarkable because it is one of Macfadden's rare statements on the topic where he unequivocally spoke about the 'unfit' others as objects of necessary intervention. Most other texts relied primarily on the assumption that the surrounding discourses of immigration, crime, and sexuality were dense and well enough known to serve as a tacit backdrop. The conventions of an encyclopedia, however, asked for a richer description of the "large number of feeble-minded, insane, blind, deaf and otherwise subnormal children" (4: 1523), the "children of inferior, sickly, frail and stupid parents" (4: 1528), and the "subnormal moral delinquents and the sexually vicious" (4: 1527). Moreover, the text informed its readers about eugenic strategies for selecting, segregating, and eliminating the 'unwanted,' but it also stressed environmental factors—and thus the importance of physical culture—as relevant for any serious discussion about the necessity of efficiently planning society.

Macfadden’s offensive swing towards integrating eugenics into his own texts can be traced back to his marriage counseling books from 1916 and 1918, which contained long paragraphs introducing the major assumptions of eugenics. Addressing a fictional future wife, he stated that the "science of eugenics holds a prominent place in public discussions today, and every young woman should endeavor to learn whether or not there are any constitutionally weak strains in the family which she is thinking of entering" (Womanhood 112). Next to general information on the eugenic worldview and its prominent proponents, this kind of scientifically guided marriage counseling, combined with birth control advice, emerged as the second largest field of interest characteristic of the Physical Culture world’s dealings with the new science. Macfadden and his collaborators realized that the popularity and claim to scientific authority of eugenic thinking offered a welcome opportunity to conceptualize the long-standing convictions of physical culturalists in more up-to-date terms. The overall social climate for such issues was now less restrictive, but quoting eugenic experts when discussing choosing a future partner or the quality of marital sex life was still a way of adding respectability to arguments that would have triggered censorship just a few years earlier.

Interestingly, information on these topics was offered in a wide variety of formats that differed with regard to gender. In matters of marriage, Physical Culture often approached female readers with the help of fictionalized, melodramatic texts. An article from 1936, for instance, narrates the story of one unhappy Marjorie, who found help at a “Eugenics Day” at the local Science Club where a doctor told her what she should know about meeting a future husband (“Marriage!”). Another unsigned piece unveiled the wonders of eugenic mating in a “modern young woman’s” secret confession (“What I Want to Know” 54). This does not mean that women were not supposed to read more ‘objectively’ written advice, as brief examinations of books like Womanhood and Marriage or Woman’s Sex Life reveal. But confronting the sexual and
emotional desires of women with the rationality of eugenics remained a complicated task for physical culturalists. “Do Eugenic Mothers Make Loving Partners?” asked an opinion piece in the late 1920s, wondering how “any woman could want to have a baby in such cold-blooded way[s]” as eugenic science suggested, before finally realizing that she and her husband had already unknowingly fulfilled most of the relevant eugenic standards (Rogers 10). Taken together, these texts reveal an interesting rhetoric: ‘selling’ eugenics in what were considered ‘soft’ and ‘female’ genres increased acceptance and popularity through reconciling a cherished ‘warm and natural’ emotion such as love with the analytic reason of science—a successful and influential strategy basic for eugenics’ overall popularity.

When explicitly addressing men, Physical Culture world texts tended to deploy a more ‘scientific’ reasoning. When Ernest R. Groves, Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, elaborated upon what “A Man Thinks about Modern Marriage,” he not only offered marriage counseling in a narrow sense but also included extensive observations about modernity, Great Depression economics, changing gender relations in U.S. society, and what all this new complexity meant for American men and their former roles as breadwinners. “The general trend today is toward a recognition of the need of turning matrimonial counsel over to a specialist,” he explained, before suggesting the marriage institute recently established by Paul Popenoe, the co-author of one of the leading college textbooks on eugenics (Groves 106; Popenoe and Johnson). In a similar fashion, Macfadden’s Talks to a Young Man about Sex (1928) combined traditional physical culture knowledge with up-to-date eugenic vocabulary and an overall interpretation of the accelerated pace of modern life. Texts explicitly addressed to men confronted ‘modern, scientific’ marriage not so much as a dilemma between reason and emotion, but primarily deployed analogies from economics—plan ahead, seek advice, make a rational decision based on researched and reliable data, let love be the result of two partners mating after a sound ‘investment’ consideration. Not even the Wall Street crash in late 1929 altered this overall ideal.

5 Reproductive Athletics

As a majority of marriage counseling texts originating from the Physical Culture world after World War I addressed future husbands and wives as modern, eugenic subjects, young (expectant) mothers also moved into the focus. A significant number of texts began to feature longer pieces on motherhood or were focused exclusively on the topic, establishing the third major field of eugenic influence in the fitness movement. These texts were rarely aimed at parenting couples, but they charged motherhood in particular with strong responsibilities and commitments. This messaging was consistent with the cultural conserva-
tism of many physical culturalists and Bernarr Macfadden in particular: though a strong supporter of women’s rights and the active integration of women into the world of athleticism, Macfadden understood femininity as primarily destined for marriage, motherhood, and ‘national reproductive duty.’ His concept of physical culture functioned as a eugenic tool preparing ‘stronger’ women for precisely these roles. Combining his established knowledge in how to shape ‘useful’ bodies and his emphasis on visual culture, the Physical Culture world developed elaborate training programs for young and expectant mothers and advertised them in books and magazines. In often richly illustrated texts, one finds pregnant women or those who just gave birth doing a wide variety of “healthy,” “relaxing,” or “pain-reducing” exercises. Dorothy Pearl Buchanan, for example, elaborated at length on traditional notions of female weakness before stating that “one must recognize the advantage of a sound, strong body in that supreme crisis of a woman’s life—maternity” (63). After explaining that a sportive lifestyle at a younger age prepared the body for birth, she suggested a detailed program in calisthenics for those pregnant wives who had not been responsible enough to plan ahead. Swimming figured prominently in that debate as a sport that by that time had successfully labeled as appropriate for women (Stieglitz, “A particularly desirable exercise”). A Mrs. Jennie L. Reed from Tulsa, Oklahoma, emphatically told readers that “I swam until a month before Baby came—and she is a perfect child!” (65). To stress the beneficial results of such physical activity and their eugenic value, the editors of Physical Culture placed two photographs at the center of her article’s first page. One of them was a studio portrait of the young mother in a fashionable swimming suit and, next to it, the second image showed a smiling young girl, Jennie Reed’s ‘sunny little ‘water baby,’ who is surely destined to carry on the traditions of our aquatic girl marvels when she grows up’ (65).

The photo of the ‘water baby’ introduces the fourth and final central field that demonstrates the influence of eugenic thinking on physical culturalists. Starting in the early 1920s and continuing into the 1930s, almost every issue of Physical Culture contained one or more pages of photos depicting babies or toddlers, most of them undressed and shown in more or less professional studio arrangements. Usually mailed to the editors by parents and often arranged under headlines featuring keywords such as happiness, health, or vitality, these image galleries were the print media extensions of the popular ‘better babies’ contests.

Showing off well-developed infants, fitness culture embraced these ‘ideal’ children as both the results of their parents’ responsible lifestyle, proposed by physical culturalists, and as the promise the movement presented to America’s future. Macfadden and his collaborators insisted that readers understand that these ‘healthy,’ ‘beautiful’ children were at the same time the results of pre-natal hereditary guidance and of a post-natal commitment. “Mentally superior children are born of
physically superior people,” explained Macfadden in his *Encyclopedia of Health and Physical Culture* (1: 133), underlining his strong conviction about the two indivisible relationships between mind and body and between heredity and environment. Parental, meaning foremost maternal, responsibility was of utmost importance when talking about ‘Physical Culture Babies’: “Make Your Baby Strong, Beautiful” the fitness ‘guru’ urged his readers, and the editorial staff of the magazine illustrated the article that appeared under this headline with not only an image of Macfadden’s wife holding his son Byron in Madonna-like fashion but also with photos that demonstrated a variety of exercises parents could use to start even newborns on the path of physical culture (32).9 Various experts in *Physical Culture* posed pressing questions such as “What Is Your Child’s Weak Point?” (Stoehr) or “How Much Exercise for Baby?” (Miller). If women were asked to prepare for motherhood through a physical culture lifestyle, parents (and especially wives) were also held responsible for the eugenically sound development of their children—even when unstable living arrangements and stressful jobs complicated the task. A longer contribution by a mother from Davenport, Iowa, illustrated such problems nicely (Wittry). When her husband had been forced by the Great Depression to take up a position as a traveling business consultant and to move constantly throughout the year, Mrs. Witty decided to stay close to him and live in different motels with her three young children. In vivid detail, she described how she still managed to arrange a suitable physical culture setting for her family: “I carried bath paraphernalia with us and […] baby’s body, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth had their daily overhauling […]. We purchased a small crib, easy to take apart and put together, to solve the question of home sleep [and] exercise was gained in air and sun-baths, and a set of infant physical culture movements” (12, 15).

6 Conclusion

In the spring of 1924, Bernarr Macfadden took his entire family to Washington, D.C. Invited by members of Congress, he gave a lecture in the Caucus Room of the Senate, declaring: “[y]ou are not what you can be until you have thoroughly developed that body of yours” (“Converting Congress” 31). Naturally, his magazine dedicated a richly illustrated article to this occasion, stressing how welcome the publisher’s message was to the leaders of the nation. Even President Calvin Coolidge made a brief visit, and the meeting affirmed Macfadden in his central belief: “[h]e is bronzed and athletic in appearance, and his vital vigor is undoubtedly due to the attention he has given to walking and other exercises” (32), as Macfadden described the foremost ‘national body.’ But it was the fitness of his own family that took center stage in the article. Three photographs grace the two-page essay, all showing the entire Macfadden family in front of the Capitol: Bernarr, his third wife Mary, and

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9 Byron Macfadden died shortly afterwards from a severe illness during which his father declined to call a doctor (Adams 118; Ernst 67).
seven children. America’s most influential physical culturalist had always been proud of his family. As his biographers describe it, he planned this particular family unit with eugenics in mind (see esp. Adams 84-92). After two brief previous marriages, he met Mary Williamson in 1912, when she won a physical culture contest in England. He fathered eight children with her, who were often referred to or depicted in the texts of the Physical Culture world. Helen, their eldest daughter, would become a prominent fitness advocate herself. When Physical Culture so explicitly framed Bernarr Macfadden’s lecturing tour to the national capital with a family reference, then, the magazine underscored the indivisible link between political and private responsibilities, between a sound family and a strong nation.

For the U.S. fitness movement and especially for the ambitions of Bernarr Macfadden, eugenics presented a welcome discourse that rose to prominence at the right time. Both movements shared the diagnosis of white American civilization in crisis, both focused in their suggested solutions on the human body either as object of control, regulation, and aggressive intervention or as a resource for guidance and betterment, both insisted that improvement was possible with action taken, and both had a vital interest in making reproductive politics the center of attention. After World War I, both movements were increasingly part of one overall discourse of ‘envigored nationalism’ (see “Introduction” to this special issue), and each benefited from the other’s popularity.

Nonetheless, one important difference remained, and it revolved around conceptualizing eugenics as a science. Whereas many eugenists successfully tried to establish, popularize, and normalize their thoughts in decidedly ‘softened,’ populist forms, genres, and techniques (and closing ranks with the physical culturalists certainly was one element in that strategy), Macfadden and many of his partners continued to insist on the scientific character of eugenics. From their perspective, construing eugenics as a science had strong advantages: at first, it offered welcome aid in giving the still sometimes provocative practice of shaping and displaying trained bodies a touch of legitimacy and in representing it in less controversial language. Later, during the interwar years, the Physical Culture world struggled to remain associated with positive, community-oriented notions of modern efficiency. While he himself was increasingly associated with commercialized big business and its anti-social consequences, Macfadden and others now emphasized their alliance with university-educated experts and their elaborate studies as evidence of their own rational, patriotic, and responsible relationship with matters of civilization, nation, and community.

Many features of the relationship between the American eugenic movement and fitness culture in the decades after 1900 look familiar to twenty-first century observers. As art historian and bodybuilding scholar Jörg Scheller has argued, Bernarr Macfadden and the physical culture movement constitute an important part of the genealogy of today’s
postmodern, neoliberal societies of the global North with their multiple lifestyle options and promises of technically or surgically enhanced, optimized bodies for those who can afford them (261). When today’s global corporations constantly call upon us to “Just Do It” (Nike), remind us that “Nothing Is Impossible” (Toyota), encourage us to become “A Better Human” (Microsoft), and when forms of ‘liberal eugenics’ are ever more present in today’s discourses of genetics and in the possibilities of pre-natal diagnosis, then ‘ableism’ in the sense given to the term by Fiona Kumari Campbell evolves as the postulated ideal of the human condition: ableism is “a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (5).

In many regards, the American fitness movement after 1900 paved the road for today’s ‘ableism,’ and the Physical Culture world’s embrace of eugenic thought and language was crucial in that process. Its conflations of nature and environment, science and populism, order and change, individual and family, citizen, nation, and civilization created a powerful realm of meaning that strongly appealed to large segments of the white U.S. middle class, especially after World War I. Rooted in long-standing ideals of individual social uplift and self-government, it offered the promise of inclusion to those who were willing to labor for ‘fitness,’ who answered the call for an active self-management of their bodies. This appeal of physical culture nevertheless rested on its limitations as well. Although it strongly encouraged women to participate, marriage and motherhood remained in the center of its understanding of femininity—care for their own bodies always translated into responsibilities for family and nation. Moreover, strong though mostly indirect references to discourses of immigration and crime resulted in the ultimate whiteness of the movement that framed the necessity of their efforts within a racialized concept of nation and civilization. In addition, by insisting on a naturalized relationship between strength and beauty, capability and physical build, Macfadden and his partners also excluded anyone who, for whatever reason, could not meet these requirements. Next to the gym, the family home became the most important space in which to live up to these expectations, not only regarding oneself and one’s partner but primarily with the children in mind. As a final consequence, the amalgamated discourses of fitness and eugenics made children a high-profile object of interest. Thus, by strongly invoking parents and especially mothers, the physical culturalists enlarged every citizen’s obligation to self-management into an uncompromising commitment to the nation’s future. Against that backdrop, not only was weakness an individual crime, but denying the combined promises of physical culture and eugenics to one’s offspring was the irrefutable proof of a person’s ‘unfitness.’
“Mentally superior children are born of physically superior people.”

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