

Cultural Hegemony, Meritocracy, and
German Eugenics through 1945

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

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Hearing of German eugenics invariably conjures up imagery of the atrocities of the Third Reich during the Holocaust. That imagery, however, is representative of only one late chapter of German eugenics. The development of eugenics had its roots in science long before the Nazis took power in 1933, and began with worthwhile intentions—to save Germany from degradation by disease and to protect its future from problems encountered after increased urbanization. Besides science, there were economic and social components to the development of eugenics. But it was only when politics became the dominant influential force that eugenics twisted off on a destructive tangent with hegemonic beliefs leading to meritocratic social policies and laws.

There are misconceptions about the presumed connection between German eugenics and the racial policies of the Third Reich. That was partially due to a number of Aryan studies in the 1970s that focused on the concept of white supremacy, often overlooking issues of science (Weindling 321). Weiss agreed, adding that only a small percentage of those involved in eugenics were pro-Aryan (“Race” 194). Issues of science must be considered to understand the development of German eugenics. As Weiss described, it is the *logic* of German eugenics that pushed the movement forward with aims of “saving” Germany (“Wilhelm” 34).

Weiss observed that the majority of educated whites in Europe and North America in the latter part of the 1800s assumed the racial and cultural superiority of Caucasians (“Race” 194). That view is obviously racist by today’s standards. But it is important to note that the term “race” applied not only to skin color, but also to cultural populations. In fact, the terms “‘Nation,’ ‘Race,’ and ‘the State’” were often used interchangeably (Brechin 232).

The theory of history which is most appropriate for discussing the topic of German eugenics is psychohistory because, as Tosh pointed out, “Racism lends itself to this approach,” and it is the

theory most likely to deal with racism when we study the “irrational or pathological” (278). When one group of people holds hegemonic ideas believing themselves to be superior to another racial group or cultural population, then it is testament to their filtered view of the world. That view may be irrational, and at times pathological, and it colors their beliefs in others, affects their interactions with others, and shapes social policies and laws. The psychohistory theory discusses how people think and how the complex and often inconsistent logic they use with that thinking shapes their attitudes and decision-making.

German eugenics has its roots from the early 1870s. Weingart argued that eugenics history has its basis in two scientific theories: evolutionary theory, and human heredity (“German” 260). Weingart also observed that Darwin’s theory of evolution was not a natural law in the purest scientific sense (“Rationalization” 162). But the benefit of the theory of evolution was that it could provide us a chance to see that our own fate could be altered proactively. It seemed clear to eugenicists that we could no longer trust evolution to make the species stronger (“Rationalization” 162). Those of science had to step in and do something proactive. Eugenics¹ began as just such a scientific effort to improve the declining birth rate and reduce disease.

Weiss identified three major influences that shaped German eugenics (“Wilhelm 35). First, increased industrialization created social problems such as the rapid spread of disease, the increase in alcoholism, venereal disease and suicides, along with rampant crime and prostitution. Secondly, the general public held doctors and scientists in high regard, and trusted them to “fix” almost anything. Thirdly, the view of social Darwinism held that some individuals, groups or populations were considered weak, sickly, and minimally productive.

Weiss noted that the sick were living longer due to modern medicine (“Wilhelm” 27). As a result, the fear was that the unfit would prosper and thereby pose a cultural threat to the population

¹ The term eugenics was coined in 1883 by Francis Galton to name the new science.

as a whole. She also pointed out that social Darwinists believed that modern medicine impeded the efficacy of natural selection (“Wilhelm” 39). But increasing numbers of the sick and degenerate meant an increasing burden on the welfare resources of the state. Since science was believed to be a part of the “problem” by improving the health of the weak, it should therefore be a part of the solution. Advocates of eugenics thus saw it as an important tool to reduce the undesirable elements and boost the favorable human elements.

Prior to industrialization, societies across the globe valued large families. More hands in the agrarian era meant more help on the farm. But as industrialization grew, increasing urbanization meant smaller living spaces which meant that smaller families were preferred. The preference for smaller families was one factor influencing the declining birth rate. The onset of World War I (WWI) affected the birth rate even more. The years of the first World War were the only years between 1871 and 1933 in which there were more deaths than births, and approximately 3.5 million fewer births during the war meant fewer future members to productively contribute to Germany’s economic health (Weindling 327, 330). This created added pressure after the war on both politicians and scientists to do something about it.

Weingart noted that eugenics was based on a scientific-technocratic view of the world in which mankind could use science to manipulate the world (“Rationalization” 163). Weindling agreed with this concept when he wrote that eugenics was “a modernizing set of progressive values” (321). These new values were deemed vital for a strong future for Germany.

Weingart wrote that the ultimate rationalization of eugenics was that of human reproduction (“Rationalization” 160). The objective was twofold: that the advantaged should be saved from biological extinction, and the number of unproductive types should be minimized. Weiss concurred and mentioned that both pro-Aryans and those who rejected Aryanism agreed that it was desirable to boost the numbers of the fittest (“Race” 195). It was a unification of bias based on social class. It

was only when those with Aryan sentiments gained dominant political power that they added the component of reducing the numbers of the undesirables.

Brechin wrote that racism ceased to have widespread scientific respectability between the mid 1920s to about 1940 (229). But racist views continued to exist at certain levels. Noticing increasing cultural and racial bias, many ethical scientists began to change the focus of eugenics to curing genetic disease, and they even used “race hygiene” to distinguish their more ethical activities from those that had become increasingly race-oriented. Those scientists who were more racist-oriented formed a coalition with politicians of the conservative right. The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute became the leading institution between 1927 and 1945 for eugenics research, with their objective being to “save” Germany from degradation. These scientists “appointed themselves as interpreters of Divine Plan through natural law” (Brechin 235).

Thus, science and politics are intertwined in the discussion of eugenics in Germany, and that mix was problematic, according to Weingart (“German” 260). There was the general belief that advancements in science were morally “good.” Those in leadership believed that political action could be legitimized by knowledge of science, and by delegation of power to implement policies and laws stemming from that knowledge (Weingart “Rationalization” 164).

Besides the influences of eugenics suggested by Weingart and Weiss, Weindling offered a view that two major factors influencing the development of eugenics were biological organicism and patriotic cultural idealism (324). Biological organicism referred to the ability of scientists to manipulate an organism, a highly valuable ability when attempting to cure disease. Patriotic cultural ideals *made* that biological study highly relevant for the cultural objective of keeping Germany genetically strong.

Being strong equated with power. Germany felt weakened after WWI, and wanted to be strong again by regaining its power. Eugenics was thus a logical mechanism to increase power

through rational population management. In the context of the post WWI era, the nation's health was a top priority. Germany had already seen more sickness and mental illness after industrialization, but they saw even more problems after the war. Some eugenicists argued that one-third of the population was degenerate at this time. Wartime casualties, high death rate from disease, mental illness and mass starvation worried both politicians and scientists (Weindling 325). While eugenics was valued primarily by scientists prior to WWI, Weingart noted that it was met with a more receptive attitude after WWI by those in politics ("German" 262).

It was because Germany remained autocratic after WWI that politics could play such a strong role in influencing the direction of science. Despite some scientists of a more ethical stance focusing on genetic research, still others remained in the main thrust of the movement as it evolved from science-based to politically-motivated. State socialism was considered superior to capitalism in being able to solve Germany's problems (Weiss "Wilhelm" 42). Only a meritocratic political structure could help Germany.

The depression that began in 1929 in Germany led to the unemployment of millions, and it put added pressure on welfare management. Even left-wing welfare-state supporters complained about the increasing strain on the economy, and eugenicists took note of these complaints (Weiss "Race" 222). It was an opportune time for extremists to get into the picture and push their political views.

Prior to 1933, the primary focus on eugenics was by scientists and intellectuals. Once the Nazi party took over in 1933, Adolf Hitler and his maniacal obsession with preserving "Nordic blood" led to massive efforts at government propaganda (Weiss "Race" 226). The radical right wing view that had originally been embraced by only a minority had finally become forced into the political mainstream. Eugenics had become an applied science as they saw fit.

After the Nazis took control in 1933, extreme measures that had been merely suggested in

prior years were finally adopted. For example, sterilization became mandatory for some 355,000 people between 1934 and 1945 (Weingart "Science" 168). The selection process was based on qualities of degenerateness, and included not only racial characteristics, but also individuals with schizophrenia, depression, epilepsy, alcoholism, deformities, and even some criminals.

Additionally, a program of scientific breeding was established for racially clean women and SS men to hasten the pace of reproducing superior humans. The Nazis only believed that they were "helping Nature accomplish what It wanted to do" (Brechin 240). It took the victory by the Allied Forces in 1945 to finally put an end to their nefarious interpretation of eugenics.

The predominant belief in much of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century of Caucasian superiority set the foundation for eugenics to be used politically. It became a Nazi pseudo science at its worst, having been influenced over several decades by bias, and by social and economic problems. Cultural hegemony led to meritocracy. In other words, belief in the inherent superiority of one group led to a system where only the most genetically "strong" should lead the nation. Scientists used eugenics to support their social biases and political convictions. And politicians used eugenics to justify their social policies and laws. Both groups used the logic of eugenics to further their own ends. The mix of science and politics eventually saw politics take the stronghold in directing public policy. It wasn't German eugenics that led to the Holocaust. Rather, it was the radical Nazi element of it. After 1945, eugenicists could re-focus on more ethically-useful research (e.g., the curing of hereditary disease). No longer would eugenics be able to be used nefariously for subjective political ends.

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