

Book Reviews

PAUL WEINDLING, *Health, race and German politics between national unification and Nazism 1870–1945*. Cambridge History of Medicine, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. xi, 641, illus., £55.00, \$69.50.

This splendid book is a comprehensive but consistently analytical history of German eugenics based on pioneering research in public and private collections. At the same time, it is a major contribution to modern German historiography for a variety of reasons. The most immediate of these is that the subject has assumed increasing significance in recent years as the close connection between the medical killing in the infamous T4 euthanasia programme and the gassing of Jews in the Nazi death camps has been established and as the prominent role played by medical professionals in these activities and in the Nazi movement more generally has received attention. More broadly, however, Weindling's book can and should be read in the context of some of the major debates that have been engaging historians of Germany in recent years. This is not because he takes an overt stand on these debates or even mentions them. He does neither. It is rather because his evidence and analysis suggest fruitful ways of transcending increasingly deadlocked discussions, such as the debate as to whether there was a German *Sonderweg*, a "special path" that led to Nazism, or whether Germany was just another European bourgeois society facing the problems of capitalist industrialization.

Weindling convincingly argues that German eugenics neither had its roots in German nationalist racial movements nor its natural consequence in an alliance with Nazism. Rather, its history is "better understood from the perspectives of public health, social policy, and of the bio-medical sciences" (p. 10). The fact that the Grand Old Man of German eugenics, Alfred Ploetz, could have "metamorphosed from being an admirer of Kautsky to a supporter of Hitler" (p. 579) illustrates the complexity of the problem. There was, to be sure, something intrinsic to eugenics which made such transformations possible, namely, the vision of technocratic social engineering with the object of creating a healthy social organism, of "biologically based collectivism" (p. 578). Nevertheless, Germany did not have a monopoly on eugenics, and the question remains why Germany proved so much less resistant to the dangers of eugenics than Britain and the United States. The answers, for Weindling, lie both in the general political and social circumstances of Germany during the formative period of its eugenics in the Second Empire and in the very special conditions created by the First World War and its aftermath. In contrast to their Anglo-American counterparts, German scientists were members of a *Bildungsbürgertum* that found its chief employment in the service of the state and its institutions, the most relevant of which was the German university. Their response to the crisis of industrialism and the intensification of social and political division in Germany that took hold in the early 1870s was to seek apolitical panaceas. Eugenics, "a form of 'technocratic anti-politics'" (p. 20) was particularly attractive from this perspective. An environment favourable to professional interventionism was strongly reinforced by the progress of medical science and Germany's health and social insurance system, and was further promoted by the social imperialism, racialism, and anxiety over the declining birthrate before World War I. As Weindling shows in rich and sometimes slightly confusing detail, however, eugenicists and their supporters covered a broad political spectrum, and both liberal and socialist influences as well as bureaucratic conservatism checked the influence of racists and the inclination to interfere in personal and family affairs in the name of racial purity and population policy.

War, defeat, and persistent socioeconomic and political instability decisively shifted the balance, first, in favour of "welfare oriented eugenics" that was often allied with the Weimar social welfare system despite its support of authoritarian professional interventionism, and then, especially once the depression hit, in favour of even more authoritarian forms of welfare eugenics and racial hygiene that sought to cut costs through selective benefits and compulsory sterilization. While some of the progressive eugenicists retreated into negative eugenics in the face of economic crisis, the more consciously anti-Weimar racist scientists and doctors gained ground. Both doctors and scientists were hard hit by the inflation and depression, and they found it advantageous to at once attack the social insurance system and try to bolster their status by asserting professional and technocratic values. Thus, as Weindling argues, eugenics could thrive "in this crisis atmosphere as a medically regulated solution to problems of personal and mass poverty" (p. 462).

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The Nazis were able to capitalize on this authoritarian conception, just as they were able to play on the differences between the more conventionally authoritarian and scientific supporters of racial hygiene and the radical anti-Semites and racists. Just as Weindling provides a more complex understanding of the German *Sonderweg*, so he demonstrates that the most extreme Nazi measures of forced sterilization, euthanasia, and mass murder cannot be comprehended from simple “intentionalist” or “functionalist” perspectives, but rather in terms of the interaction between the actions taken by doctors, scientists and lower-level Nazis, on the one hand, and the will and decisions of Hitler and his top leaders, on the other. Thus, while there were severe tensions between many doctors and scientists and the regime, medicine was nevertheless “integral to the final solution”, (p. 552) and the traditions of German genetics, scientific professionalism as it had developed in that country, and a goodly amount of personal ambition and opportunism had promoted this involvement. Real science could go on, as the genetic studies of Otmar von Verschuer and even his infamous student, Josef Mengele, demonstrate. Verschuer, who was rehabilitated after the war, joined other colleagues in arguing that they were true scientists victimized by radical Nazis. Weindling demonstrates in this fine book that this was not only a specious argument in terms of their personal histories, but even more importantly that it was precisely the authoritarian professionalism and pretentious claims of such “true scientists”, as they had developed since the nineteenth century, that were the problem.

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RICHARD A. SOLWAY, *Demography and degeneration: eugenics and the declining birthrate in twentieth-century Britain*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1990, 8vo, pp. xix, 443, \$49.50.

The history of English eugenics has been blessed with a mass of fine scholarship over the last decade, perhaps not surprisingly. Today's developments in genetic engineering keep the subject controversial; moreover, the Eugenics Society's papers form a fascinating collection easily accessible at the Wellcome Institute Contemporary Medical Archives Centre. Earlier work by Lyndsay Farrall, Geoffrey Searle, and Greta Jones was capped in 1985 by Daniel J. Kevles's comprehensive *In the name of eugenics. Genetics and the uses of human heredity*. Was there scope for another general account?

Readers of Richard Soloway's characteristically fluent and subtle survey will probably conclude that there was. There is much in his account that casts doubt on Greta Jones's claim that eugenics became a powerful weapon in ruling-class politics from the Edwardian age onwards. Reaffirming what is generally becoming the authorized version, Soloway demonstrates that eugenics failed to generate a truly wide appeal. The membership of the Eugenics Education Society (later, the Eugenics Society) was barely two thousand. Of these, the active and vocal core included few major public figures, scientists or politicians: the Society's long-serving leader, Leonard Darwin (who thought eugenics good common sense, rather like stock-breeding), always fought a losing battle in trying to convince such front-rank scientists as Karl Pearson and Ronald Fisher, while jousting with unwanted allies like Marie Stopes (target of a notably jaundiced portrait from Soloway), and trying to placate the “better dead” brigade amongst the membership.

Long before the rise of the Nazis, eugenics was too hot a potato to stand much prospect of incorporation into the programme of any political party or church. No less concerned by “national deterioration” than the eugenists, public health spokesmen looked instead to environmental and social improvements as the way forward; and the medical profession chose to keep as quiet about eugenics as about all other aspects of that embarrassing subject, sex. In short, so Soloway convincingly demonstrates, quite apart from its shortcomings as science, eugenics was maladroit as a movement, a pressure group uncertain and divided as to what it was trying to achieve.

Was it worth another book? Does Soloway significantly modify the received view? Yes, because, in great detail and with surer steps than previous scholars, Soloway traces the ripples of