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The Rhetorical Biopower of Eugenics: Understanding the Influence of British Eugenics on the Nazi Program

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Abstract

The relationship between the British and Nazi eugenics movements has been underexamined, largely because of the more obvious ties between the American and Nazi programs and the lack of a state-sponsored program in Britain. This article revisits this gap to reinsert the British eugenics movement into the historiography of the Nazi program by way of their shared rhetoric. To do this, I employ Foucault's concepts of biopower and power/knowledge, arguing that biopower exists in rhetorical constructions of power and identity, which the eugenics movements employed at national and individual levels to garner support and participation, particularly from women. The article is not an exhaustive account of the rhetorical overlaps between the two movements, but rather serves as a model of how one might understand eugenics as a rhetoric of biopower.

Key-words: eugenics; Nazis; British; biopower; power/knowledge; class; feeble-mindedness; race

The foundations of the Nazi eugenics program are largely attributed to two sources: Francis Galton's writings on eugenics and the American eugenics movement, which established the world's first eugenics sterilization law in Indiana in 1907. The American influence on the Nazi program is well-documented in works like James Q. Whitman's *Hitler's American Model* (2017) and Edwin Black's *War Against the Weak* (2012). However, there has been considerably less work on the British influence on the Nazi program, beyond the influence of Charles Darwin and Francis Galton.¹ This oversight is a product of neglecting the field of German eugenics prior to the rise of the Third Reich; focusing on Nazi doctors who referenced the American program on numerous occasions; and discounting the British movement because

¹ See Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

it never resulted in legislation mandating forcible sterilization, despite political campaigns and related legislation that were considered foundational for a nationalized program. In other words, the British eugenics movement was a program that nearly was, and for that reason, it should be examined as an influence on the Nazi program, despite having been previously downplayed or overlooked.

The British eugenics movement's efforts were considerable, mobilizing the intelligentsia and politicians alike to actively campaign against the continuation of a so-called undesirable class of society. Their focus on class does not negate any racialized biological view – such is apparent in nineteenth-century descriptions and marginalization of the Irish, Africans, and Indians, among others. Rather, their concentration on class, imagined in racialized terms and therefore blurred with race, is part of a larger rhetorical strategy to gain support for the eugenics movement that ultimately classified non-Aryan, working-class, and “feebleminded” as unfit and part of a very broadly constructed underclass. In her study of Victorian eugenics, Angelique Richardson rightly notes that “early British eugenics was primarily a matter of rhetoric and representation;” this rhetorical approach, one that combined scientification with nationalism, was used in the first decades of the twentieth century as well.² Comparing the rhetoric used by British and Nazi eugenics offers an insight into the British influence on the Nazi program; more than that, it offers a broader understanding of the political and social power of language.

As noted by Daniel J. Kevles, the success of eugenics “depended on the authority of science,”³ authority best understood through Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and power/knowledge, which allow for a clear understanding of eugenics as power and offers insight into the transference of eugenics thinking between countries. Biopower, as described in *The Will to Knowledge*, is the “power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death [...] Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize.”⁴ Biopower, then, scientifically classifies and regulates the individual body to strengthen the national body: it includes a range of measures such as public hygiene and fertility campaigns, which lay the foundations for eugenics, an example of biopower that Foucault discusses.⁵ Functioning within biopower is power/

² Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xvii.

³ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 101.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 138, 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

knowledge, which is simultaneously national and individual. At the national level (and using the common translation of the term), Foucault theorizes that power exists because of the knowledge that supports it, and knowledge exists because of the power that (re)produces it.⁶ However, when considered in its original French, *pouvoir/savoir*, the meaning is complicated and is seen as more localized: as Gayatri Spivak notes, *pouvoir* has an element of “‘can-do’-ness,” which requires a more nuanced translation of the concept: “if the lines of making sense of something are laid down in a certain way, then you are able to do only those things with that something that are possible within and by the arrangement of those lines. *Pouvoir/savoir*, being able to do something, only as you are able to make sense of it.”⁷ The ordinariness of this relationship allows the power/knowledge relationship to exist on multiple levels: as produced and reproduced by official entities (government, science, etc.) and as practiced by ordinary people within the framework of their understandings of their positions and themselves – which allows for production and repression as products of power/knowledge.⁸

Using Foucault’s conceptualization of biopower and power/knowledge, this article analyzes eugenics rhetoric, meaning the language used to propose and implement policies, as demonstrating how biopower and power both have a direct and reciprocal relationship with the (re)production of knowledge and that knowledge has a relationship to a biological “can-do-ness” that is an internalized understanding of produced knowledge and which regulates the body itself. In other words, the language used to advocate for and implement eugenics functions at the state level of biopower through rhetorical mechanisms understood as power/knowledge, and at the individual level through the internalization of such nationalism that dictates how one uses one’s body.

I. The power/knowledge of classification

Scientific classification functions as a state-level power/knowledge: the status given to scientific authority allows for the creation of knowledge (i.e. classification of types, species, etc.), which then perpetuates its authority. Within the framework of biopower through power/knowledge, scientific classification must take on a managing of bodies as a population-level interest: this comes through the public health measures that use the act of classifying

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 27-28.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “More on Power/Knowledge,” in *Rethinking Power*, ed. T. E. Wartenberg, 149-173 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 158.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

in order to justify managing bodies – which is seen throughout the eugenics movements in Britain and Nazi Germany. The rhetoric itself is based on categorization of difference that creates a knowledge about bodies that reinforces this difference: thus created, this knowledge then produces the biopower of managing bodies that further creates knowledge about managing bodies. Rhetorically, this is achieved through language that embodies difference, authority, and national interests.

For British eugenics, such rhetoric exists in the scientification of class, which derives its power/knowledge from philosophical and policy-based discussions of class and welfare that are appropriated by the scientific community to create an authoritative and biological classification of difference, which then allows for the further justification of proposed interventions from the scientific community. This rhetoric has roots in Thomas Malthus's claims that society need not consider all men equal but rather weigh their value to society: "a man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society does not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him."⁹ Malthus's rhetoric taps into earlier theories of inheritance and contemporary theories of biological determinism, appealing to the rising authority of scientific claims that sought a place in Britain's political and social arenas. His concept of usefulness is tied to class: although he notes the need for upper and lower classes as motivating factors so "man could hope to rise, or fear to fall in society," he argues that "the middle parts of society are most favourable to virtuous and industrious habits, and to the growth of all kinds of talent;" thus, "our best grounded expectations of an increase in the happiness of the mass of human society, are founded in the prospect of an increase in the relative proportions of the middle parts."¹⁰ His disregard for unproductive or unwanted members of society indicates a clear eugenics argument even before the theory was formalized by Galton and introduces a class-based argument regarding such productivity.

Behind all these ways of describing the poor was Malthus's rhetoric of utility, which laid much of the groundwork for thinking about eugenics in terms of usefulness and fitness. Not surprisingly, Malthus's work influenced both Darwin and Galton's thinking about the social impact of a population unchecked, particularly in light of changing welfare policies.¹¹ Galton, how-

⁹ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, or a View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness* (London: T. Bensley, 1803²), 531.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹¹ Marouf A. Hasian, Jr., *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996; 2017), 16-20.

ever, went much further than Malthus: not satisfied with a natural process to control the population, he proposed that “the aim of eugenics is to bring as many influences as can be reasonably employed, to cause the useful classes in the community to contribute *more* than their proportion to the next generation.”¹² As in Malthus’s treatise, the pivotal concept is usefulness to community, but examined through a scientific lens that likens human reproduction to animal breeding. He describes favoring “superior breeds” which “are partly personal, partly ancestral” and looking for “energy, brain, morale, and health” and a “thriving family [...] defined or inferred by the successive occupations of its several male members in the previous generation, and of the two grandfathers.”¹³ Galton affirmed the contemporary belief that class was hereditary, which was perpetuated by others who also connected poverty to moral and physical degeneracy, thus justifying eugenic claims.

Galton’s coining of the term eugenics, meaning “well born,” aligns health, adaptability, and class as synonymous and as hereditary, thereby encouraging a medicalized and biologically-determined view of class, which, for Galton, could only be altered via processes implemented before birth (i.e. positive eugenics). Using evidence that favored a middle-class society, Galton was able to perpetuate his scientific authority through research that was dictated by his own class authority and merely reinforced the existing prejudice against the lower classes. Referring to the lower classes as the “residuum” of natural processes (and therefore less human than the middle classes), Galton introduced a stratification that perpetuated the legitimacy of the middle class and biologically segregated the lower classes.¹⁴ Such rhetoric provided a foundation for the Eugenics Education Society (EES), established in 1907, which sought to address the spread of the residuum that represented the most degenerate of the working class, through “the control of their excessive fertility, which it held that they were insufficiently responsible to manage themselves.”¹⁵ Thus, the EES was able to legitimize its existence and recommendations through claims of scientific knowledge regarding reproduction, thereby arguing for control of fertility.

Using the same power/knowledge of class, eugenicists extended rhetorical biopower to race, relying on a blurring of concepts that perpetuated so-called biological differences. As perpetuated by the white, middle-class

¹² Francis Galton, “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1904): 3.

¹³ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 324, 326.

¹⁴ Francis Galton, *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (London: Macmillan, 1874), 23.

¹⁵ Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century*, 29.

intelligentsia, eugenics reinforced its position of power through a knowledge generated by and about the very groups that were advocating for it. Thus, issues of race and “feeble-mindedness” could be exploited using the same rhetoric seen in discussions of class, and the conflation of class and race became a deliberate technique to make such connections, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century. Eugenicists argued that British losses during the Boer Wars were evidence of its degeneracy that they attributed to the proliferation of the poor, the influx of foreigners to British soil, and the moral and physical degeneracy of both, which impacted British purity either through physical proximity to the preferred white middle class or through inter-marriage.¹⁶ Such arguments about degeneracy were coupled with views of the poor as racially different to that of the middle class.¹⁷ This racialization of class was repeatedly couched in scientific rhetoric as a means of promoting nationalism and arguing against social welfare policies, despite Darwin’s attempts to distinguish race as biologically determined and class as socially and culturally determined.¹⁸ As noted by Angelique Richardson, “The fluidity of the concept of race” meant “racial language was readily used to distinguish groups of varying social as well as ethnic backgrounds.”¹⁹ This blurring, however, was not accidental, nor simply a product of shifting meaning; rather, it signaled an othering that extends to all those deemed inferior to a white, middle-class English society, or, as Galton phrased it, the contrast between “high races” and “persons of lower natural stamp.”²⁰ The national imperative, as articulated by Galton and others, was a concern for the development of the genetically superior for the greater good, at the cost of individual liberties and through biopower.

This nationalist rhetoric was framed within scientific concepts of species survival. In discussing the British losses during the Second Boer War, eugenicist Karl Pearson claimed the British were defeated “by a social organism far less highly developed and infinitely smaller than our own [... and] our soldiers [lost] the power of adapting themselves to change of environment.”²¹ Pearson’s evolutionary language maintains British superiority but acknowledges the evolutionary failings of its soldiers, introducing the possibility of improving this military stock. Through this distinction, he argues that “the struggle

¹⁶ See Karl Pearson, *National Life: From the Standpoint of Science* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁸ Deborah A. Logan, *Harriet Martineau, Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 244 n. 4.

¹⁹ Richardson, 24-25.

²⁰ Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, 330.

²¹ Pearson, 9-10.

of existence among nations will not necessarily be settled in favour of the biggest nation, nor in favour of the best-armed nation, nor in favour of the nation with the greatest material resources.”²² Britain, then, cannot rely on these strengths alone, what he terms “the flesh, blood, and sinews of a nation” that need to be brought under a “complex nervous system [...] to make it a homogeneous, highly-organized whole.”²³ This corporeal language of uniformity and adherence to a common goal, led by the thinking scientific community, speaks clearly to British nationalism.

Science, argues Pearson, is what will preserve the nation. Science functions “to show us what national life means, and how the nation is a vast organism subject as much to the great forces of evolution as any other gregarious type of life” and “to develop our brain-power by providing a training in method and by exercising our powers of cautious observation [...] to prepare for and meet the difficulties of new environments.”²⁴ Such claims to scientific authority are couched in languages of inclusion but are actually a thinly disguised rhetoric of exclusion, whereby the fitness of the British nature will come at the cost of individual liberties and diversity. This distinction is perhaps clearest in Pearson’s proposal to train scientific scouts to become observers of society’s adaptations and to identify the weaknesses – presumably a system of spies to report inferiority. Thus, Pearson, using imperialism framed by scientific justification, argues both for the spread of white males to colonized countries and for politicians to “insure [*sic*] that the fertility of the inferior stocks is checked, and that of the superior stocks encouraged [...] the statesman has to hold the balance between the strong social feelings upon which are based the external success of the nation and the crude natural check to the unlimited multiplication of the unfit upon which the internal soundness of the nation depends.”²⁵ For Pearson, the threat to the British nation is external and internal, requiring an act of promoting white superiority and middle-class superiority that ultimately aligns the lower classes with non-Aryan races.

Pearson uses science to both advocate for national eugenics policies and to instill a nationalistic pride that encourages a betrayal of individuals in favor of a national good. Such rhetoric is evident in essentially all eugenic writings, but perhaps no more so than in Robert Reid Rentoul’s well-known (though controversial) *Race Culture; Or, Race Suicide?* (1906). Rentoul’s use of “race suicide,” the fear that unchecked reproduction would

²² Ibid., 11.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 34, 35.

²⁵ Ibid., 48, 59-60.

lead to the end of a race or nation, focuses on a power/knowledge that advocates for reproductive control by the medical community based on medico-scientific claims of inherited mental deficiencies defined by these same medical professionals – in essence, affirming their authority through self-generated knowledge. Thus, Rentoul touts medical authority over individual identities that groups them into categories of degeneracy simply because of this very authority, justified by the medicalization of social behaviors that are aligned with mental inferiority. He claims that “there are many thousands of mentally unsound persons in this country who would not be classed by lawyers as insane, and who therefore could not be legally certified by physicians.”²⁶ As such, the medical profession must establish a classification of degeneracy that includes “criminals, neurotics, erotics, inebriates, drug *habitués*, kleptomaniacs, drunkards, borderland cases, ‘failures in life,’ and children who are mentally backward, mild epileptics, those suffering from severe chorea or migraine,” a group which Rentoul contends will “propagate a degenerate stock.”²⁷ This grouping of mental and physical ill health with social deviance offers insight into how eugenicists blurred scientific and medical lines to create a class of difference that could ultimately include any individuals that were deemed unfit to become part of this underclass that required regulation.

Rentoul’s rhetoric of difference relied on a fear of these very boundaries contaminating those deemed fit, thereby further blurring distinctions and reinforcing the need for authoritative measures to ensure the health of the nation. In his metaphorical description of race suicide, he relies on medical language to further his claim for intervention. He writes:

We may compare race culture and race suicide to a river, at first pure, clear, and health-giving. We begin to foul the pure condition by adding gross impurities to it. Day by day, hour by hour, and year after year we add diseased humanity – the children begotten by the diseased, idiots, imbeciles, epileptics, the insane, deformed, and those contaminated by venereal and other diseases. All these contaminating influences go on permeating, causing more disease, so converting the river into a cesspool, until it, ever widening and deepening, overflows, saturates and inoculates everything within its reach.²⁸

²⁶ Robert Reid Rentoul, *Race Culture; Or, Race Suicide? (A Plea for the Unborn)* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1906), ix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

This catch-all medicalization of difference allowed for British eugenicists to merge class, race, and mental health as threats to the national species. As noted by Mark Jackson, how Rentoul and other eugenicists “mobilized support for their policies rested heavily both on their identification of the feeble-minded as a class and race apart and on their ability to exploit middle-class anxieties about the multiple social, political, and moral threats posed by the lower classes.”²⁹ Feeble-minded, though a class unto itself, was conflated “with the supposedly promiscuous, parasitic, and impoverished criminal classes [which] guaranteed that both state and charitable interventions were almost exclusively directed at feeble-minded children and adults from the working classes.”³⁰ Seen as neither productive nor physically fit, those deemed feeble-minded were classified as the underclass of British eugenics and as dangerous to British fitness as the lower classes and other races. Defined as being “on the borderland of imbecility,” they were pitied and condemned as “a greater danger to the State, than the absolutely idiotic: these at least have the care and comfort of the asylum.”³¹ This statement reveals the real danger of the feeble-minded: they were not isolated from society and therefore could contaminate the waters described by Rentoul.

Feeble-mindedness was imagined in the same Darwinian terms as the lower classes and so-called inferior races. Mary Dendy, an educator and fierce proponent of eugenics and segregation of those deemed intellectually deficient, claimed feeble-mindedness demonstrated “instances of reversion to an earlier and less developed type of humanity [...] It is as though, when the higher faculties have dwindled, the lower, or merely animal, predominate in an unusual degree.”³² Adapting the authority of scientific theories, Dendy was able to stoke fears of national degeneration through the strong tendencies of the feeble-minded to procreate and pass on their genetic inferiority. Dendy’s rhetoric was so powerful that it was integrated into a 1912 Private Members’ Bill, the “Feeble-Minded Control Bill,” and was repeatedly evoked in Parliamentary discussions on the 1912 Mental Deficiency Bill, which would later become the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.³³ These Bills (and the eventual Act) sought to segregate those deemed to have mental or moral deficiencies

²⁹ Mark Jackson, *The Borderland of Imbecility: Medicine, Society, and the Fabrication of the Feeble Mind in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 131.

³⁰ Mark Jackson, “‘Grown-up Children’: Understandings of Health and Mental Deficiency in Edwardian England,” in *Culture of Child Health in Britain and the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, and Hilary Marland, 149-168 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 154.

³¹ “The Borderland of Imbecility,” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1770 (1894): 1264.

³² Mary Dendy, *The Problem of the Feeble-Minded* (London: John Heywood, 1908), 4, 7.

³³ Jackson, *The Borderland of Imbecility*, 212, 217.

and were supported by the EES and members of the medical community.³⁴ The final version of the act created medico-scientific categories of mental deficiencies (idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, and moral imbeciles) and allowed for state intervention by way of institutionalization.

Although proponents of the bill made efforts to distance themselves from the EES in this final version, claiming that the bill “does not represent any experiment in eugenics [...] It is a bill based on practical experience,” opponents challenged this view.³⁵ Josiah Wedgewood, one of three MPs to vote against the legislation, claimed, “It is a spirit of the Horrible Eugenic Society which is setting out to breed up the working class as though they were cattle.”³⁶ Joining Wedgewood in his opposition, MP Hugh Cecil warned that scientists “are apt to get fancies – you really can hardly call them by a more respectable name – and to press those fancies with a total disregard to the feelings of individuals and with the most ruthless indifference to the sufferings they cause.”³⁷ Whether Cecil was referencing the existing eugenics programs in the United States or a general fear of what science could do is unclear; however, his rhetoric addresses a major concern regarding eugenics and its discourse: the establishment of authority based on knowledge produced by that very authority – power/knowledge in its most explicit form in the history of British eugenics.

The passing of the Mental Deficiency Act serves as a direct connection between British eugenics biopower and that of the Nazi eugenics program. Whereas British eugenics shifted from class and race to feeble-mindedness, the Nazi eugenics program, aimed at *Lebensunwertes Leben* (“life unworthy of life”), focused first on those with physical or mental disabilities and then extended to a racialized eugenics that targeted non-Aryans. While Nazi sterilization laws were modeled after the American eugenics program, the language to describe the need for such laws has roots in the British eugenics rhetoric of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.³⁸ Much like British eugenics, such rhetoric predates the formal proposal, or, in the case of the Nazis, implementation, of a eugenics program, but nevertheless creates the culture for such a proposal to be made. The defining factors of these groups

³⁴ Edward J. Larson, “The Rhetoric of Eugenics: Expert Authority and the Mental Deficiency Bill,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 24, no. 1 (1991): 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁶ Quoted in Jayne Woodhouse, “Eugenics and the Feeble-Minded: The Parliamentary Debates of 1912-14,” *History of Education* 11, no. 2 (1982): 133.

³⁷ Quoted in Larson, 58.

³⁸ For more on the American influence on the Nazi sterilization program, see (for instance) Egbert Klautke, “‘The Germans Are Beating Us at Our Own Game’: American Eugenics and the German Sterilization,” *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 3 (2016): 25-43.

were couched in a scientific rhetoric that both emulated British eugenics and embodies power/knowledge as biopower. In the 1920 book that coined the term “life unworthy of living,” *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens* (*The Permission to Destroy life Unworthy of Life*), the authors, lawyer Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche, made claims to scientific authority in their justification of killing those deemed “incurable idiots.” Hoche argues, “the physician has no doubt about the hundred-percent certainty of correct selection [and] proven scientific criteria” of his actions regarding the killing of “a mentally dead person.”³⁹ The claim to authority is defined by criteria that are created by the very people using this authority, thus perpetuating that authority: couched in claims of certainty, questioning the doctor’s authority on this account would be to question a doctor’s authority as a doctor.

Binding and Hoche’s argument for such killing is framed by victim-blaming the individuals they seek to eliminate. They ask rhetorically, “Is there human life which has so far forfeited the character of something entitled to enjoy the protection of the law, that its prolongation represents a perpetual loss of value, both for its bearer and for society as a whole?”⁴⁰ This introduction of value as a criteria for determining life echoes the language of “life unworthy of life,” which situates people as having or not having worth, and positions the discussion of life as one of value both to itself and to another life – that of the national body or *Volkskörper*. Such phrasing returns us to a Malthusian rhetoric of utility, which had a “hold on the popular imagination” of Germany throughout the nineteenth century and certainly influenced the Nazis’ utilitarian view of life.⁴¹ Moreover, the implementation of a sterilization and eventual euthanasia policy of those with mental disabilities, signed into law six months into Hitler’s Chancellorship (in July 1933), moves the power/knowledge rhetoric into the action of biopower and the active controlling of bodies in order to maintain political power.

Such policies extend to other uses of scientifically-justified rhetoric, which predates the Nazi policies but justify their creation. The Malthusian-Darwinian-Galtonian theory of social usefulness was adopted in Germany well before the Nazi regime rose to power by zoologist and doctor Robby Kossmann in 1880. Evoking Darwin, Kossmann argues that “the human state [...] must reach an even higher state of perfection, if the possibility exists in it,

³⁹ Quoted in Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986; 2000), 47.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Edwin Fuller Torrey and Robert H. Yolken, “Psychiatric Genocide: Nazi Attempts to Eradicate Schizophrenia,” *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 36, no. 1 (2010): 27.

⁴¹ Ernest Benz, “Escaping Malthus: Population Explosion and Human Movement, 1760-1884,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, ed. Helmut Walser Smith, 195 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

through the destruction of the less well-endowed individual, for the more excellently endowed to win space for the expansion of its progeny [...] The state only has an interest in preserving the more excellent life *at the expense of the less excellent*.”⁴² Here Kossmann imagines species survival as related to the need for space, or what will be called *Lebensraum*, a term that first emerged in Oscar Peschel’s 1860 review of *On the Origin of Species* and that became political policy in Weimar and Nazi Germany.⁴³ Living space, framed by a rhetoric of science and politics, allowed for policies that support expansion at the cost of individuals outside (and also inside) the national body. In other words, the claim to space regarding German racial survival justified policies that restricted the individual lives of others. Such rhetoric included the expansion of German land beyond its defined boundary, as introduced by Friedrich Ratzel in 1897, and the need for “the nation and people [to] be pure and racially strong,” a call back to Pearson’s response to Britain’s defeat in the Boer Wars.⁴⁴ Hitler’s adaptation of *Lebensraum* included concerns with space within the Germany borders, a fear that an unchecked population would lead to a “crowding of too many people into an inadequate *Lebensraum* [which] leads to difficult social problems. People are now gathered into work centers that do not resemble cultural sites so much as abscesses on the body of the people – [a] place where all evils, vices, and sicknesses appear to unite. They are above all hotbeds of blood-mixing and bastardization, using ensuring the degeneration of the race.”⁴⁵ Again, the rhetoric echoes Pearson’s situating of individual life as part of and influencing the nation and Rentoul’s image of the muddled waters of society, drawing on fears of contamination that would undermine the health of the national body.

Claims for national health justified the power of scientific and medical discourse to ensure this health, which allowed for the creation of further knowledge to expand the powers of this very discourse. Thus, classificatory systems derived from biological claims of authority, based largely on what was seen in Britain, became central to the Nazi eugenics rhetoric. The creation of the Nuremberg Laws, for instance, has roots in the same biological classification seen in early British eugenics regarding class distinctions; when situated historically as a response to the economic crisis of the 1930s, these

⁴² Robby Kossmann, “Die Bedeutung des Einzellebens in der Darwinistischen Weltanschauung,” quoted in Weikart, 78.

⁴³ Michael Heffernan, “Fin de Siècle, Fin du Monde?: On the Origins of European Geopolitics; 1890–1920,” in *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought*, eds. Klaus Dodds, and David A. Atkinson, 26–51 (London: Routledge, 2000), 45.

⁴⁴ David M. Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 99.

⁴⁵ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler’s Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf*, ed. G. L. Weinberg; trans. Krista Smith (New York: Enigma Books, 2006), 26.

roots are even more pronounced. Moreover, the shift to expand eugenics from those deemed mentally deficient to include Jews (and eventually others) demonstrates the deliberate blurring of biological difference to justify the segregation and extermination of any group deemed unfit by the dominating party. Again, power (eugenics as policy) is determined by the very knowledge (eugenic claims to a science of difference) that justifies its existence and recreates this knowledge (the expansion of such claims of difference). The Nuremberg Laws, then, continued and expanded the eugenics rhetoric that empowered the medical and legal communities. The Laws, which controlled the sexual and marital activity of Jews and Germans, prohibiting the mixing of “races,” categorized Jewishness as strictly biological (dismissing conversion or religious activity) and traced back Jewish blood through heritage lines, modeled after Galton’s own work. Creating such hereditary hierarchies and divisions justified policies and the power to regulate them, which allowed for the creation of further hierarchies – such as the *Untermensch*, with connections to Galton’s “residuum” – and the perpetuation of this power that continues to create knowledge to justify itself.

II. The “Can-do-ness” of Mothers

The perpetuation of such power comes from authority creating its own knowledge and individuals internalizing their own abilities or “can-do-ness” within this knowledge. Thus, the success of eugenics propaganda relied on individual buy-in to perpetuate the hegemony it created. As a regulatory operation carried out on bodies, eugenics biopower was best situated at the individual level in its appeal to women and their “privileged relation to biopower due to their procreative roles as mothers.”⁴⁶ Thus, many eugenics measures brought the nationalistic rhetoric to the individual by way of the reproductive body, appealing to both the individual (female) body’s obligation to the national body and to the desire of many women, particularly in Britain, to be more involved in the politics of the nation. Biopower embodied through this “can-do-ness” creates a type of testifying knowledge from individuals tasked to participate in the national eugenics agenda; this knowledge, of course, is simply reframed from the power/knowledge of the eugenics movement and thereby only reinforces existing knowledge and power. In other words, as much as women believed they were contributing to the national good, they were simply adhering to the existing power/knowledge that was already dictating their actions and beliefs. Rhetorically, then, the appeal to women as mothers needed to persuade people to take individual responsibility while

⁴⁶ Chloë Taylor, “Foucault and Familial Power,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 1 (2012): 213.

still adhering to a rhetoric of collectivity and national good for the fit of the nation.

To do this, the British eugenics movement adopted the term “racial instinct,” understood to mean the sexual drive *and* imperative to procreate with a member of one’s own race, which included national, ethnic, class, and mental health distinctions, i.e. an all-encompassing concept of race that ultimately meant what eugenicists deemed to be fit. Caleb Williams Saleeby, a medical doctor and outspoken supporter of eugenics, wrote several guides aimed at parents, but primarily women, to emphasize the importance of racial instinct. In his 1915 publication, *Parenthood and Race Culture: An Outline of Eugenics*, he explains, “Woman is Nature’s supreme instrument of the future. The Eugenist is therefore deeply concerned with her education, her psychology, the conditions which permit her to exercise her great natural function of choosing the fathers of the future, the age at which she should marry, and the compatibility between the discharge of her incomparable function of motherhood and the lesser functions which some women now assume.”⁴⁷ The rhetoric Saleeby employs suggests eugenics to be a means of empowering women, whereby their decisions and actions dictate the future of the nation. However, his language also reveals a biological imperative that is dictated by eugenics discourse: such a role of selecting a partner and nurturing a child are biological and therefore natural to women – to go against such instinctual practices would be unnatural and therefore unfit for society. In other words, women’s empowerment in eugenics rhetoric is only in their ability to maintain the status of fitness by the very standards set out by eugenicists, thereby demonstrating the biopower that controls the everyday activities.

The repeated appeals to women’s role in the British eugenics movement resonated with a number of educated women, resulting in women advocating for other women to join the cause and fulfill their national duty. By 1914, women made up nearly half the membership of the EES, and a number of them were regularly appealing to women through a claim to “mothercraft,” or the education of women on their roles as mothers.⁴⁸ Framed within medical discourse and supported by a number of women doctors, mothercraft shifted from practical parenting advice to the mother’s obligation to the nation. In Elizabeth Sloan Chesser’s *Woman, Marriage, and Motherhood* (1913), pitched, in part, as her medical advice to women, she includes a chapter entitled, “Motherhood and Eugenics,” which is bookended by chapters that discuss moral degeneracy and motherhood. This rhetorical decision of

⁴⁷ Caleb Williams Saleeby, *Parenthood and Race Culture: An Outline of Eugenics* (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1909; 1915), xv.

⁴⁸ Greta Jones, “Women and Eugenics in Britain: The Case of Mary Scharlieb, Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, and Stella Browne,” *Annals of Science* 51 (1995): 482.

chapter placement emphasizes the eugenic imperative to mothers in a recruiting rhetoric and warns of the potential dangers of not adhering to eugenic motherhood. This chapter focusses primarily on justifying eugenics, with only a single paragraph dedicated directly to the role of motherhood within the eugenics agenda. That role, as nurturer, is imagined as central to the nation and its future: “the home is the heart of life, the cradle of the race, the unit of the State, and it is upon the mothers of the race that the character of future generations will to a large extent depend [...] The eugenist is fundamentally concerned with woman as mother.”⁴⁹ The exaltation of motherhood reinforces traditional Victorian values but offers women a stronger sense of purpose that turns motherhood into a political act: to be a good, eugenic mother was to shape the nation.

Not surprisingly, such rhetoric did not sit well with women who advocated for more direct involvement in politics (such as voting) or the higher education of women. Addressing these concerns, Saleeby offered “Eugenic Feminism,” which advocated for both physical and foster motherhood, extolling women as “Nature’s supreme organ of the future” and suggesting that most feminism aligns with eugenic interests.⁵⁰ Although Saleeby does not dedicate a chapter to Women’s Suffrage, he does note his support: “I believe in the vote because I believe it will be eugenic, will reform the conditions of marriage and divorce in the eugenic sense, and will service the cause of [...] ‘preventive eugenics,’ which strives to protect healthy stocks from the ‘racial poisons,’ such as venereal diseases, alcohol, and, in a relatively infinitesimal degree, lead.”⁵¹ This statement describes the focus of the rest of the book, which appeals to feminists’ concerns regarding the legal status of women, gender equality in the home, and women’s opportunity to reach their potentials, and which Saleeby imagines as biological and therefore eugenic. As noted by Cecily Devereux, “his Eugenic Feminism was at least partly a deceptive rhetorical strategy seeking to draw middle-class women’s rights activists *back* to home and duty, albeit with the vote and a markedly increased cultural value as progenitors of future generations.”⁵² Still, it appealed to many feminists because of their purported importance as tied to their white, middle-class identities. In other words, feminists saw their importance elevated through something that was seen as biological and stable, allowing for a continued importance and political role by accepting the eugenic imperative. These ap-

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, *Women, Marriage, and Motherhood* (London: Cassell, 1913), 212.

⁵⁰ Caleb William Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood: A Search for Principles* (London: Mitchell Kennerley, 1911), 25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵² Cecily Devereux, *Growing a Race: Nellie L. McClung and the Fiction of Eugenic Feminism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 43.

peals to women granted them a self-importance that was used to further the power/knowledge of the eugenics movement. In embracing the rhetoric of eugenics, they were reaffirming the need for its existence and the manuals they produced that further supported that existence.

Nazi eugenics relied on a similar appeal to women through motherhood, elevating “the motherly spirit,” as Erna Günter phrased it, “the source of all that is eternal.”⁵³ As with the British eugenics movement, that motherly spirit was extended beyond physical motherhood to surrogate or “spiritual mothers,” those women who could not bear children, but could still serve the nation by caring for and educating children or by forming bonds with women in the borderlands.⁵⁴ Much like the British rhetoric, all women were imagined through the lens of motherhood, whether physical, spiritual, or eventual. However, the importance of women to Nazi eugenics was much more explicit in their rhetoric and actions because theirs was state-sponsored and not merely advisory, as was the case in Britain. Thus, the rhetoric had tones of revering women, as seen above; at the same time, the rhetoric evoked a national imperative. A member of the *NS-Frauenschaft* (Nazi Women’s Group) asserted, “marriage is not merely a private matter, but one which directly affects the fate of a nation at its very roots.”⁵⁵ This rhetoric, much like that of the British eugenics movement, situated women as “the central figure if not the head of the family. Woman as mother and housewife ruled over a small kingdom of her own.”⁵⁶ Even more than with British eugenics, this rhetoric created a false sense of power: the household kingdom only existed in adherence to and in support of the Nazi eugenics program. Thus, women’s power only extended as far as the Nazis allowed it. Such restrictions are notable in the classification of unmarried women as *Staatsangehöriger* (“subjects of the State”), a classification shared initially with Jews and the restrictions to employment and higher education opportunities that began in 1936.⁵⁷ The exception to this categorization was the single woman who agreed to participate in the *Lebensborn* program and produce Aryan children – but this required state inference with motherhood itself, reinforcing a biopower that creates mothers.

⁵³ Erna Günter, “Wir Frauen im Kampf um Deutschlands Erneuerung,” *Frauen Warte* 2, no. 17 (1934): 507, trans. Randall Bytwerk. Calvin German Propaganda Archive.

⁵⁴ Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the ‘Volk:’ The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology,” *Signs* 3, no. 2 (1977): 374; Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents of Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 31.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28.

⁵⁶ Rupp, 369.

⁵⁷ Robert N. Proctor, “Nazi Biomedical Policies,” in *When Medicine Went Mad: Bioethics and the Holocaust*, ed. A. L. Caplan, 32 (Totowa: Humana Press, 1992).

Such classification of unmarried women was an act of biopower that was countered with physical rewards for reproductive mothers. The Nazi party valued “the *four-child family* ideal,” and beginning in 1939, Hitler established the Honor Cross of German Motherhood, with delineations of bronze for four children, silver for six, and gold for eight.⁵⁸ In describing the award, Reich Physician Gerhard Wagner noted that “the prolific German mother is to be accorded the same place of honor in the German Volk community as the combat soldier, since she risks her body and her life for the people and the Fatherland as much as the combat soldier does in the roar and thunder of battle.”⁵⁹ This rhetoric appealed to women’s sense of duty and the unity of the nation as all in a war to secure the health of the national body. The physical embodiment of biopower through the medal was extended to gestures that reinforced the status of these women: Nazi youth were commanded to “show his respect for her through the obligatory salute of all members of the youth formations of the party.”⁶⁰ This gesture, paired with the medal, embodied the rhetoric of biopower and created knowledge through objects and signals that reinforced the militarism of eugenics. At the same time, however, the visual representation of fertility was a means of shaming those women who were unable (or unwilling) to reproduce as many children as possible. Thus, the Honor Cross of German Motherhood was a means of controlling female bodies by way of displaying their biological capabilities, thereby mandating the continuation of their reproduction and perpetuating the biopower of Nazi eugenics.

III. Conclusion

Comparison of British and Nazi eugenics rhetoric reveals not only the British influence on the Nazi program, but also the proliferation of eugenics as biopower, understood through how power/knowledge functions to create and support biopower. Their shared rhetoric demonstrates how biopower can be constructed rhetorically to assert power over physical bodies, even when not, strictly speaking, employed by the state, as is the case for much of British eugenics. The difference between the eugenics programs – and one reason why the Nazi movement was so expansive and effective – was the movement from rhetorical biopower to actual biopower, which the British eugenics movement failed to achieve beyond the Mental Deficiencies Act of 1913. The British

⁵⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁹ Quoted from the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Dec. 25, 1938, in George L. Mosse, *Intellectual, Cultural, and Social Life in the Third Reich*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 45.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 46.

eugenics movement muddled the rhetorical and eugenics water by shifting the argument of what constituted unfitness. The shift from the lower classes to so-called inferior races was workable because of existing policies marginalizing both groups, but the further shift to feeble-mindedness undermined the previous categorizations. Feeble-mindedness existed in the middle and upperclasses (though believed to be in less degree), which required addressing multiple inferior groups simultaneously without a political mandate – an approach that led to little success for the British eugenicists. Conversely, the Nazi eugenics program employed a scaffolded approach to their rhetoric and eugenic policies, marginalizing one group through first language and then policies, and then moving quickly to the next. The effect was the solidification of biopower, so that it was easier to build upon existing policies and strengthen the medico-scientific discourse that allowed for the existence of such biopower. Juxtaposing the rhetoric of these two movements demonstrates how rhetoric functions within power/knowledge and the creation of biopower that begs for further consideration of the continued use of biopower in eugenics-based rhetoric today.

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