

"Eugenics, Genetics, and the Politics of Gender"

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Introduction

Eugenic ideas garnered extensive support in most European countries (and the U.S.) in the first half of the 20th century. New research results clearly show that the connection between politics, racial hygiene, eugenics, and gender order is much more complex than a discussion focussing on the Third Reich and the holocaust had us suspect. After 1933, eugenic efforts in Germany merged with National Socialist dictatorship and were made to serve anti-Semitism and the racial politics of the government and the Nazi euthanasia programme. Thus eugenics became a Nazi science. It is, however, much older and much more widespread.

Towards the end of the 19th century, "negative eugenics" became popular. Its success and acceptance can only be understood if you see it as a science and a social movement and, at the same time, an expression of a belief in progress, and a reaction to the fear of degeneration and decadence, which was part of the then prevalent conservative ideologies but found a great echo in the workers' movement as well.

In Scandinavia and Switzerland, democracy aiming for a healthy populace and theories of inheritance merged and caused the race-based exclusion of cultural minorities. Beyond all social and political differences though, ideas of social "normality" and strategies of scientific legitimation are discernible that show why, in most countries, the eugenic measures implemented by the Nazi regime found a positive echo until the 40s.

The term "eugenic" was coined by English anthropologist, explorer, and statistician Francis Galton. In his work "Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development" (1883), he translated the Greek "eugenes" as "good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities", advocating the improvement of the national "stock" by an active management of human reproduction. Without such an active policy of reproduction, eugenicists held, mankind was doomed to degenerate: modern medicine had perverted the "natural" evolutionist "survival of the fittest" by helping the unfit to survive. New research results clearly show that the connection between politics, racial hygiene, eugenics, and gender order is much more complex than a discussion focussing on the Third Reich and the holocaust had us suspect.

From this theoretical point of view and the knowledge of heredity, the control of male and female heredity was equally important. In the non-authoritarian European countries, especially the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland¹) and in Switzerland², eugenic politics – especially sterilization – was, however, to an extremely high degree forced on women, while in Nazi Germany half the victims of forced sterilization were men.³ By analyzing Swiss eugenic politics in comparison, I shall in particular ask for the reason of this gender bias and, more generally, for the meaning of gender order in this context and address the question of the relationship between eugenics and genetics.

My first argument (I) is, that the implementation and enforcement of eugenic politics in Switzerland, was only possible in such an explicit manner because these measures mostly concerned women and were based on social traditions that had, already before

the beginning of the 20th century, demanded control of the female body and the ability to reproduce.⁴

Closely connected to this is my second argument, which takes up the recent process of a re-evaluation of eugenics and especially the re-evaluation of the relationship between genetics and eugenics. After WW II, genetics had successfully established itself as a new science aiming at the individual as part of the process of enabling the individual to enlarge the possibility of choice, while eugenics had been aiming at the populace and arguing with the benefit of the gene pool; at least that is what geneticists said.

But eugenics was individualistic, too, trying to convince people who had to give their consent to eugenic measures such as sterilization. Eugenics and genetics are types of bio-power in the sense of Foucault, though the former is not only repressive and the latter not only enabling.⁵ Eugenics was a new science making use of the newly developed technical possibilities of medicine (sterilization), integrated the newly re-discovered Mendel's Law and last but not least attempted to achieve medical plausibility by new forms of statistic reasoning and proof. As Danish historian Lene Koch put it, "Recent historiography has shown that the eugenics of the interwar years had many faces and was more complex than previously believed. Ironically enough most eugenicists of the 1930s and 1940s considered eugenics a progressive, rational, and scientifically based humanitarian project".⁶

Nevertheless – and that is my second argument (II) – I would say that in the concrete measures applied to women there is not much of that politics of enablement, and this becomes especially obvious if you consider this from a long-term perspective.

Swiss Eugenics in Comparison

I.

Switzerland had been very active on an international level in eugenic societies. Swiss scientists like August Forel belonged to the pioneers of the new technology of sterilization. The Swiss Canton of Vaud introduced the first European law on sterilization in 1928. It was however to remain the only law on sterilization in Switzerland.

Much like other European countries and the U.S., Switzerland too thought eugenic measures had to be introduced to prevent a threatening "degeneration" of the population and increase the "quality" of the "people" – an approach which spread quickly and widely. The ideology of eugenics, based on different objectives and motives, entered into the concepts and imagination of the authorities and political decision-makers.

The concomitant range of measures in Switzerland included (marriage) counselling, a prohibition of marriage for the feeble-minded based on eugenic arguments in the 1912 Swiss Civil Code [ZGB], eugenics-based provisions on naturalization proceedings, and (compulsory) sterilization.

Important for the understanding of Swiss eugenic sterilization politics is that – unlike the Scandinavian countries – it was not based on national or cantonal laws (the Canton of Vaud being an exception). Sterilizations, that was the consensus among eugenicists and physicians, would only be accepted by Swiss society as a eugenic measure to prevent offspring suffering from hereditary diseases if they were undergone voluntarily.⁷ It is true that some vehement proponents of eugenic measures that targeted an "improvement" of the "genetic pool" of the populace blatantly implied that they approved, advocated, and actually demanded more extensive measures, that is, they demanded – such as e.g. one of Rüdin's disciples, Basel private lecturer, and school physician Carl Brugger – a legal basis for more far-reaching

measures⁸, but such enforced measures were not considered to be politically feasible. Thus, Hans Binder, a private lecturer on psychiatry at the University of Basel, chief physician of the Psychiatric Clinic and the Basel Marriage-Counselling Office was convinced that "the general attitude of the Swiss has us fear", that "a coercive law" should lead to a "reaction against all eugenic efforts".⁹ Voluntariness meant that any person able to act and of age would have to agree to a sterilization. In the case of persons incompetent to act, the agreement of a family member or guardian was demanded.

Thus, such measures could be considered medico-psychiatric and not political or juridical ones. This signalled that the state did not want to get involved, although state authorities and medical experts closely co-operated and there was an increasing if indirect involvement by the government.¹⁰

In the case of a sterilization, consent was necessary. And it was mostly women who gave their consent. It was not only the more recent research into gender history that became interested in these Swiss figures but already coeval psychiatry. Hans Steck, professor of psychiatry in Lausanne, declared himself amazed that among the 57 sterilizations carried in the Canton of Vaud only one concerned a man: "the uneven distribution of the genders concerned by the application of this law is striking, the majority of those sterilized were women." His attempt at an explanation: "this injustice is based on the aspect of voluntariness. We find, time and again, that women feel easier about accepting such an intervention than men. Men, after all, consider sterilization to be an actual castration in a psychological sense and to date it has proven a difficult prejudice to fight."¹¹

That women actually voluntarily submitted to sterilization is questionable once you study the approval procedure more in-depth. Thus patients' files at the Psychiatric Clinic and the Psychiatric Polyclinic in Basel show that women were pressured by, e.g., making their dismissal from the Psychiatric Clinic or an "Arbeitserziehungsanstalt" (work-house) contingent on their agreeing to a sterilization.¹² Or an abortion was only granted if a woman gave her consent to sterilization. It was women who were sterilized even if – in the case of the consent to a marriage – the husband was considered "hereditarily inflicted" and the couple had, therefore, been denied marriage. Other documents show that the authorities moreover threatened to withhold financial help. This also conforms to Scandinavian research, for there, too, the requisite consent was obtained fraudulently, enforced, or based on blackmail. Doctors were more reluctant to enforce that measure on men and, obviously, the protection extended by a democratic government to its citizens even against the excesses of its own officials, only applied to male citizens.

II.

These eugenic measures are of course a new development but they can partly be called a continuation of an older control exercised well into the 19th century on women: Founding a family (and thus procreation) was not a decision to be taken by individuals alone and the communal authorities could intervene because of a couple's insufficient economic situation. The strengthening of individual rights at the end of the 19th century had rendered the approval and consent to wed by the communities superfluous and any person of age was now allowed to marry. This was considered a problem by the communal authorities because of – they said – their obligation to care for the children in case of economic difficulties. Prohibition of marriage based on eugenic arguments or a consent to a marriage only given after a sterilization can be said to "balance" this loss. It can be seen as an attempt to re-establish, if only in a limited way, society's right. The modern legal system did no longer allow for the enforcement of a general control though. However, a control of outsiders or social outcasts, of "others", was deemed necessary. This also renders control of the "traditionally other", women that is, once again possible. And it mostly hit the same spectrum of women: the poor, the uneducated, or those not conforming to gender roles. They were now called "feeble-minded" "mentally retarded" or "morally corrupt".

The arguments the psychiatrists used to persuade or force women to give their consent were mostly individualistic. They did not argue in terms of the social benefit of the “Volkskörper”, but tried to “convince” women that it was for their own benefit if they did not have children. In the case of sterilization they used arguments like “you would not be able to cope with children”, “you are not queer or stupid, you are sick, you do not want sick children, do you?”, “if you do not agree to a sterilization you will not be released from the clinic because then you are in danger to become pregnant”.¹³

Seen from this point of view, the idea of distinguishing between eugenics as targeting the populace as such and genetics as targeting individual bodies becomes questionable. Obviously, the fact that eugenics was individualistic in this sense does not mean that it was enabling women to choose.

In Switzerland, eugenics did not lead to euthanasia and racist murder. The differentiation between “good” and “bad” genes was not based on a definition of race. Therefore, the scientific community felt no need to distance itself from eugenics after the war in as thorough a way as, for instance, in Germany. However, the Swiss development shows quite clearly that it was not necessary to link eugenics to a racist paradigm – although it was by no means totally absent – to release its potentials of social exclusion and marginalization. But in the context of the democratic or at least non-authoritarian European countries, it was the gender order and the tradition of control of the female body that was the indispensable basis for the success of eugenic policies.

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- ² *For Switzerland cf.* Keller, Christoph: *Der Schädelvermesser. Otto Schlaginhaufen - Anthropologe und Rassenhygieniker. Eine biographische Reportage.* Zürich 1995.
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- ⁴ Wecker, Regina: *Vom Verbot Kinder zu haben, und dem Recht keine Kinder zu haben. Zu Geschichte und Gegenwart der Sterilisation in Schweden, Deutschland und der Schweiz,* in: *Figurationen/ Heft: Reproduktion*, Hg. R. Wecker und A. Maihofer, 2003/2, pp. 111-119 and <http://www.figurationen.unizh.ch/>.
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- ⁵ Koch, Lene: *The Meaning of Eugenics: Reflections on the Government of Genetic Knowledge in the Past and the Present.* *Science in Context* 17, 3 (2004), pp. 315-33.
- ⁶ Koch, Lene: *The Meaning of Eugenics: Reflections on the Government of Genetic Knowledge in the Past and the Present.* *Science in Context* 17, 3 (2004), p. 329.
- ⁷ Vgl. z.B. Steck, Hans: *Die Durchführung des waadtländischen Sterilisationsgesetzes and Guggisberg, Hans: Die Aufgabe der Gynäkologen in der Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses,* in: Zurukzoglu, Stavros (ed): *Die Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses,* Basel 1938. .
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- ⁹ Binder, Hans: *Die uneheliche Mutterschaft. Ihre psychologischen, psychiatrischen, sozialen und rechtlichen Probleme,* Bern 1941, quoted from Joris, Elisabeth; Witzig, Heidi: *Frauengeschichte(n).* Zürich 1986, pp. 374/75.
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- ¹¹ Steck, Hans: *Die Durchführung des waadtländischen Sterilisationsgesetzes,* in: Zurukzoglu, p. 232.
- ¹² *„Eugenic Concepts and Measures in Psychiatry and Administration: On the Politics of Standardization, Integration and Exclusion. The Case of Basel-Stadt 1880-1960.“* Ongoing research project by Regina Wecker, Bernhard Küchenhoff, Sabine Braunschweig, Gabriela Imboden, Hans Jakob Ritter.
- ¹³ *„Eugenic Concepts and Measures in Psychiatry and Administration: On the Politics of Standardization, Integration and Exclusion. The Case of Basel-Stadt 1880-1960.“* Ongoing research project by Regina Wecker, Bernhard Küchenhoff, Sabine Braunschweig, Gabriela Imboden, Hans Jakob Ritter.