

The Comparative Study of Eugenics - Germany and Scandinavia

Seminar veranstaltet von
Gunnar Broberg und Nils Roll-Hansen
16. und 17. Juni 1988*

Teilnehmer: Mark Adams (Philadelphia), Gerhard Baader (Berlin), Bent Sigurd Hansen (Odense), Marjatta Hietala (Helsinki), Michael Hubenstorf (Wien-Berlin), Matthias Tydén (Uppsala), Paul Weindling (Oxford), Peter Weingut (Bielefeld), Wolfgang Wippermann (Berlin).

The history of eugenics (*Rassenhygiene*) has in recent years attracted much scholarship. So far, however, it has mainly been focused on the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic world. An increasing number of articles and books treating eugenics in other countries is on its way, covering Europe as well as other continents. The reason for this interest is obvious: eugenics has played an important though dubious role in 20th century social policy. One task for the historian is still simply to track what really happened, another to understand eugenics in its connections with general ideas and political systems. Was the racist and inhuman aspect of Nazi *Rassenhygiene* a necessary consequence of the early eugenic program? Which groups promoted eugenics? What was the role of science and of scientists in this development? What happened to eugenics after World War II? Was there a general pattern for eugenics in different countries?

Our purpose was to throw light on such questions by comparing Germany and Scandinavia. Such a focus seems natural considering the close relations that have existed between Germany and Northern Europe, as well as the similarities in general developments including eugenic laws up to 1933 — and later fundamental differences. Thus the recurring theme of continuity and change throughout the seminar.

Paul Weindling, speaking about "German Eugenics in an international context: Was there a Sonderweg?" stressed the necessity to treat eugenics in a broad social context and as part of the general hygienic movement in the early 20th century. To him the decisive years in the history of German eugenics were the period just after the war, ca. 1918-23, when German eugenics became radicalized and diverged from that of other Euro-

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pean countries. Nils Roll-Hansens's talk, "The role of the Geneticists in Scandinavian Eugenics", argued that progress in genetic knowledge had a moderating effect on the eugenics movement, contributing to a change from "mainline" to "reform" eugenics around 1930. It surveyed the opinions of prominent geneticists such as Wilhelm Johanssen, Herman Nilsson Ehle, Harry Federley and Otto Lous Mohr in this perspective. Finally he pointed out the continuity of application of the Scandinavian sterilization laws from their introduction in the 1930s until the 1950s. Peter Weingart in his paper on "Genetics and Eugenics in Germany — the Legend of Truth and Ethics" was sceptical of scientific progress as a moderating influence on eugenics. He argued that genetics in the Third Reich was fully abreast of international developments with researchers like Timofeev-Ressovsky and open access to the most recent results as well as non-racist eugenic theory. Gerhard Baader emphasized the continuity starting from 19th century Social Darwinism, through *Rassenhygiene*, to Medical Genetics; after World War II many of the leading proponents of *Rassenhygiene* continued to work in similar positions as before. Thus, the question in the title of his presentation "Social Hygiene and Racial Hygiene — Break or Continuity?" was given a clear answer. Gunnar Broberg's case study, "The Foundation of a Eugenics institute; The Swedish Institute for Race Biology", supported the view that in Sweden there was a break in the mid-thirties. In research policy that meant a change from anthropological grand-scale surveys to statistical medical genetics, the different strands represented respectively by the successive leaders of the institute Herman Lundborg and Gunnar Dahlberg; eugenic programs changed accordingly in the "reform" direction. Mark Adams, finally, showed the continuity in the work of Soviet eugenicists under the pressure of Marxist ideology and politics from the 20's and onward. As long as there existed a continuity at the level of research groups Philipchenko in Leningrad, Koltsov in Moscow and their students could under different labels continue the same research programs.

The discussion dealt with various questions of continuity or change, periodizations and labeling. There was no general agreement on these questions but, hopefully, fruitful debate. Nor was it possible to unite on the role of science, its possible normative functions and different predicaments in Scandinavian welfare states and totalitarian Germany in the 1930's. But the fruitfulness of a close comparison of eugenics in Germany and Scandinavia seemed clear. Because of the common cultural heritage these countries provide useful foils for each other in the search for historical explanations. Obviously, more work is needed, especially on the Scandinavian side in order to give a clearer profile to the eugenics movement. Very important in this respect is to pay more attention to the prac-

tice of eugenics in its political and social context, not just to manifestos and utopian dreams about the perfect biological and medical society.

On Friday the 17th, Wolfgang Wippermann guided an excursion to Dahlem to various sites of research institutes belonging to the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft and the Reichsgesundheitsamt. The motto of the excursion was "Dahlem und die Dialektik der Aufklärung: Rassenforschung in Berlin-Dahlem."

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