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Science under Nazism and Émigré Scientists after 1933 — The Case of Psychology



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to organize with Alfons Söliner a conference on émigré German-speaking scientists and their ideas after 1933, and to pursue research and writing for a book on émigré psychologists within this broader framework. While completing a book on Gestalt psychology in German culture during the previous year, I realized that to understand scientific change through enforced migration, it would be helpful to compare developments in the émigrés' science with those in German-speaking Europe under Nazism. In addition to doing research about émigré psychologists during 1990-1991, I therefore studied psychological research in Nazi Germany as well, taking advantage of the greatly improved access to archives in and around Berlin afforded by the changed political situation.

The case of psychology is interesting because it is strategically located along several axes: bridging the natural and the human sciences, and covering the entire range of possible niches between basic research and science-based professional practice. But here as elsewhere it is false to assume that the step from basic research to professional practice is also one from scientific autonomy to cultural determination. For in this discipline, as in others, cultural traditions and practical societal demands feed back on one another, sometimes in rather complicated ways.

Central to the situation of science in Nazi Germany was the constant struggle between proponents of technocratic and ideological conceptions for achieving Nazism's goals. In psychology, ideological adaptations included "characterological" typologies using racialist categories, psychological versions of "folkish anthropology" and a so-called "holistic psychology" (*Ganzheitspsychologie*). Far more important, however, was that such adaptations proved to be quite compatible with technocratic transformations of research programs already in place before 1933 to support the development of what I call "implicit instruments" for psychological assessment in the German Labor Front, in the *Wehrmacht* or in Nazi welfare organizations. A striking example of tension between ideological and technocratic transformations was twin research undertaken to support so-called "positive" eugenical selection. Such work often used "intuitive" methods to diagnose the racial "core" of character. In contrast, the work of the Department of Hereditary Psychology at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology in Berlin combined observations of behavior patterns along lines developed in the 1920s.

These and other examples pose a problem with relevance beyond the Nazi period: How does modernization as a social process in science or elsewhere relate to modernity as a form of thought? Holistic thought is conventionally associated with reactions against modernity, while statistical procedures and a probabilistic view of nature are central to modern natural- and social-scientific practice. Yet, under Nazism, holistic ideology proved quite compatible with technocratic functionalization, and science employing seemingly non-holistic statistical techniques was also supported when such work served Nazism's primary goals. Contrary to common conceptions of science and technology as neutral instruments that can be used or misused in different ways, I suggest that technocratic scientism is ideologically multivalent — capable, that is, of being interwoven with multiple political discourses and social policies. An initial discussion of these issues will appear in 1992 in a volume edited by Mark Walker and Monika Renneberg on science and technology before, during and after Nazism.

My research on émigré psychologists follows a turn in recent years from focusing on the émigrés' important contributions to science to considering the *processes* of cultural breakage and reconstruction that made them possible. Central to my work is the claim that there are culturally formed research styles in science, the internationalization or transfer of which to other cultural settings is by no means easy or simple. If this is so, then it is logical to ask whether and how enforced migration stimulated scientific change in both the émigrés' science and that of their erstwhile hosts. Relevant in psychology was the growing demand for statistical data on indi-

vidual differences in performance in the United States, versus the phenomenological studies of individual responses and subjectivity predominant in Germany before 1933. To illuminate the cultural refigurations of science that resulted when these research styles encountered one another, I compared two groups: the Gestalt psychologists as representatives of basic research in human cognition; and the group around Kurt Lewin combining basic research on action and emotion with applications-oriented research in child development, personality and social psychology.

The Gestalt theorists generally continued their phenomenological approach after their emigration. One leading member of the school, Wolfgang Köhler, adapted in part by entering the field of psychophysiology, which he himself termed "largely an American enterprise." But Gestalt psychology was criticized both for its anti-empiricist theoretical viewpoint and its alleged lack of measurement. This in fact meant use of a different style of measurement that did not incorporate statistical significance tests. Kurt Lewin's style of experimentation, which stressed the construction of ideal-typical situations in the laboratory, his reliance on research and discussion groups rather than working alone, and his unique mode of theorizing, which employed metaphors and analogies from physics and biology, all remained intact in America. But he applied them to new objects, i. e., to experiments with groups, for example in studies with Americans Ronald Lippitt and Ralph White of "democratic" and "authoritarian" leadership. And he combined phenomenological description and statistical inference in studies of frustration and regression in children with his former Berlin student Tamara Dembo and American co-worker Roger Barker. Lewin thus adapted actively to his new setting, uniting American with European co-workers and producing important innovations in a complex process combining acculturation to local scientific norms and continuing differences from those norms.

Initial reports of these results will appear in a special issue of the journal *American Psychologist* in 1992, in an essay collection on Kurt Lewin, and in a volume with the working title *Enforced Migration and Scientific Change*, presenting papers from the symposium on émigré scientists at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I plan to integrate the work into a comprehensive study of émigré psychologists, which will also consider émigrés' studies of Fascism and Anti-Semitism as well as their role in the development of clinical psychology.

During the fellow year I gave lectures on these topics at meetings of the American Historical Association in New York and the History of Science Society in Seattle, at the Free University and the Humboldt University in Berlin, as well as the universities of Göttingen, Bochum, Munich, Groningen and Amsterdam. I also presented papers on Gestalt psychology and

logical empiricism at symposia in honor of Hans Reichenbach in Hamburg and Berlin, and on the history of self-organization concepts in psychology at Bielefeld University. Discussions in an informal group of scholars in Berlin working on émigré scientists, which met at the Wissenschaftskolleg, enriched my thinking. Helpful as well were regular discussions with Fellows Alfons Söllner, Ulrich Beck, and Hans-Peter Krüger, with guests of the Rector Albert Hirschman, Herbert Strauss and Gerd Irrlitz, with Ronald Giere (spouse of Fellow Barbara Hanawalt), as well as with colleagues at the Free University and the Humboldt University of Berlin. The staff and facilities of the Wissenschaftskolleg were essential to the success of both the informal discussion group and the conference (see report). Special thanks to the library staff for providing me with sometimes difficult to find research materials, and finally to Wolf Lepenies for inviting me back to Berlin.