

Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse About “Modernity”

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IN recent years the outlines of a new master narrative of modern German history have begun to emerge in a wide range of publications. This narrative draws heavily on the theoretical and historical works of Michel Foucault and Detlev J. K. Peukert, and on the earlier work of the Frankfurt School, Max Weber, and the French theorists of postmodernism. In it, rationalization and science, and specifically the extended discursive field of “biopolitics” (the whole complex of disciplines and practices addressing issues of health, reproduction, and welfare) play a key role as the marker and most important content of modernization. Increasingly, this model has a function in German historiography similar to that long virtually monopolized by the “*Sonderweg* thesis”: it serves as a broad theoretical or interpretive framework that can guide the construction of meaning in “smaller” studies, which are legitimated by their function in confirming or countering this broader argument.

This article seeks to critique this model in two ways. First, there is a strong tendency to see in the elaboration of biopolitical discourse in Germany a drift toward totalitarianism. I will argue that the more recent literature suggests that we need to expand our interpretive framework, placing biopolitics in modern Germany in the context of a history that “explains” not only 1933, 1939, 1942, or 1945, but also the democratic welfare states of the 1920s and 1960s. Second, I will argue that it is now increasingly evident that we need to understand “biopolitics” not only as a project of elites and experts, but as a complex social and cultural transformation, a discourse — a set of ideas and practices — that shaped not merely the machinations of social engineers, but patterns of social behavior much more broadly.

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Modernity and Biopolitics

In the 1980s and early 1990s discussion of modernity in Germany was focused on a debate over the relationship between National Socialism and “modernization” as a broad social process.¹ From the middle of the 1990s, there was a clear shift in focus from social modernization to discursive “modernity” — from the examination of social structures to the examination of the modern understanding of the human condition. There appears now to be broad agreement that the modern frame of mind is characterized by three key tendencies.

First, modernity was characterized by a distinctive “*Machbarkeitswahn*” or belief that things are doable, that anything can be done — or even by an “*Allmachtswahn*” or illusion of omnipotence.² This belief that society could be comprehensively “renovated” (Peter Fritzsche), this fury of design, was expressed in any number of social engineering projects, such as urban planning, public health and social welfare, educational reform, and so forth. The moderns, in Germany as elsewhere, were in this sense profoundly optimistic; they believed that they could remake their social world as they chose.

Second, however, they were also haunted by a sense of permanent crisis. They were constantly unsettled by the undermining and relativization of older (Christian) values, the collapse of older social structures and patterns of social interaction, the emergence of apparently chaotic new social forms (the modern city, popular or “mass” culture, the proletarian milieu), and the massive new problems of the emerging new social order (pollution, urban public health disasters, criminality, industrial conflict, etc.). They oscillated between these two extremes — optimism and a belief in progress, coupled with a sense of profound threat, a fear of dissolution, collapse, chaos, degeneration.

Finally, science played a key role in defining both the optimism and the pessimism of modernity. On the one hand, it was constantly “discovering” — naming, defining, measuring, quantifying, investigating — new problems, new threats. On the other hand, it was also constantly “discovering” solutions to those problems, new fields of inquiry and expertise and new technologies to

1. See particularly Norbert Frei, “Wie modern war der Nationalsozialismus?,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 19 (1993); Günter Könke, “‘Modernisierungsschub’ oder relative Stagnation?,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 20 (1994); Hans Mommsen, “Noch einmal: Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 21 (1995); and Axel Schildt, “NS-Regime, Modernisierung und Moderne: Anmerkungen zur Hochkonjunktur einer andauernden Diskussion,” *Tel Aviv Jahrbuch für Deutsche Geschichte* 23 (1994).

2. Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?” *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996) and “Nazi Modern,” *Modernism/Modernity* 3 (1996); Detlev Peukert, “Der ‘Traum der Vernunft,’” in idem, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1989), 68. See also, among many others, Michael Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik: Eugenische Sozialtechnologien in Debatten und Politik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1890–1933* (Bonn, 1995), 29 and S. N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129 (2000): 5.

contain and resolve them. Science was the language both of crisis and of design; in it, each implied the other. At the same time, as a legitimating strategy for this scientific faith, the moderns insisted on the autonomy of scientific from all other forms of thought (religious, moral, political). Science must be sovereign, a “total” system of knowledge; it could only do its work if it were completely free to pursue its own logic. Many historians refer to this belief as a commitment to “instrumental rationality” or sometimes “scientism.”³

The biomedical sciences play a crucial role in this model of modernity. What Ulrich Herbert, among many others, called “the biologization of the social” appears here as a (often, the) central defining characteristic of modernity.⁴ This focus reflects the centrality of Darwinist evolutionary theory to the scientific “faith” of the entire period from the 1860s to the Third Reich. Darwinism naturalized, so to speak, the moderns’ belief in the possibility (or inevitability) of progress; but it also naturalized their sense of existential threat, of the iron necessity of change if dissolution and extinction were to be avoided. The biomedical sciences were also arguably uniquely central to the project of renovating the human world, of defining and investigating the problems and potentials of human beings and human populations. Eugenics in particular — the study of the (alleged) inheritance of physical, intellectual, and social characteristics in human populations — has occupied a key place in this emerging model. The fear of degeneration neatly summed up the moderns’ sense of crisis, and at the same time eugenics expressed the almost religious sense of possibility at the heart of modernity, by holding out the promise of transcendence, of improving the actual material of humanity itself. Thus, eugenics can be seen as a kind of transmission belt directly linking Darwinist evolutionary science to the project of social engineering.

In this account, then, the history of modern Germany is above all the history of a particular national variant of biopolitics. I will use the term here in the broad sense in which I believe it to be widely understood among historians today — as an extensive complex of ideas, practices, and institutions focused on the care, regulation, disciplining, improvement, and shaping of individual bodies and the collective “body” of national populations — the “*Volkskörper*,” as it was sometimes called in Germany.⁵ Biopolitics in this sense includes medical practices from individual therapy and regimes of personal hygiene to the great

3. There is a convenient summary of this diagnosis of modernity in Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, 1991), esp. 6–13, 38–39.

4. Ulrich Herbert, “Rassismus und rationales Kalkül,” in “*Vernichtungspolitik*”: Eine Debatte über den Zusammenhang von Sozialpolitik und Genozid im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland, ed. Wolfgang Schneider (Hamburg, 1991), 28.

5. The locus classicus is Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York, 1990).

public health campaigns and institutions; social welfare programs, again from individualized care for particular populations to larger-scale and quasi-universal programs such as social insurance and tax policies intended to encourage particular demographic outcomes; the whole complex of racial science, from physical anthropology to the various racial theories; eugenics and the science of human heredity; demography; scientific management and occupational health; and at least potentially the full range of related disciplines and practices such as psychiatry and psychology, discourses of self-improvement (nudism, vegetarianism, fitness and nutrition fads, temperance), regimes of beauty, and the like.

The overarching aim of all these disciplines was to create a more powerful and prosperous society by maximizing health and efficiency. All of them operated through the creation of expert knowledge centered around the project of the “normalization” of the individual and his or her physical characteristics and (social and private) behaviors, and the corresponding “pathologization of difference” — the definition of some characteristics and behaviors as healthy and natural, and of others as diseased, unhealthy, unnatural, and in need of containment, stigmatization, treatment, or elimination.⁶ This dual process is central to the functioning of biopolitics as a conceptual framework and as a set of social practices — it serves as the critical legitimating discourse for policy, and defines its targets and ends.

Ute Planert has summed up this whole field of discourse and its treatment in the literature by speaking of a complex of disciplines and practices focused on the “threefold body” of the nation: the individual body, the reproductive body (*Gattungskörper*), and the national body (*Völkskörper*).⁷ Planert draws on a wide range of the recent international literature, reflecting the prominence of this model in the recent literature on almost all national histories. Obviously, however, this conception of modernity is particularly attractive to historians of Germany. Since the middle of the 1980s, an avalanche of scholarship has explored in detail the racial, welfare, and medical policies of the National Socialist regime. This scholarship has moved Nazi racial and eugenic thought and policy to the center of our understanding of the nature and dynamic of the National Socialist regime. The focus on the centrality of biopolitics to modernity allows us to “locate” and make sense of this new picture of the Nazi racial

6. See Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca, 1985) and Werner Sohn and Herbert Mehrrens, eds., *Normalität und Abweichung: Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte der Normalisierungsgesellschaft* (Opladen, 1999). For good discussions see the essays in Scheider, *Vernichtungspolitik*; Steven T. Katz, “Technology and Genocide,” in Katz, *Historicism, the Holocaust, and Zionism* (New York, 1992); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1989).

7. Ute Planert, “Der dreifache Körper des Volkes: Sexualität, Biopolitik und die Wissenschaften vom Leben,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 26 (2000).

state in two critically important ways. First, it establishes an important set of continuities between the imperial, Weimar, and Nazi periods. Second, it establishes an important set of commonalities between Germany and the rest of the modern world.⁸ Bracketed in this way, Nazism appears not as a bizarre and inexplicable eruption, but as a product of the ongoing and ubiquitous biopolitical project of modernity; it was a product of the normality of modern scientific culture, of the modern project of universal renovation guided by science. It is not so much a rupture in modern world and German history as a particular variant of modernity.

The “biopolitical” account of modern German history is exciting and fruitful, then, partly because it makes the Nazi racial state that has emerged in the literature of the past fifteen to twenty years a comprehensible, explainable phenomenon with identifiable and direct historical roots in the general social and cultural development of modern Western societies, rather than a barbaric and irrational anomaly. At the same time, I would argue that this model is useful also because it gives us a conceptual framework more conducive to an appreciation precisely of the extraordinary modernity of modern Germany. The “*Sonderweg*” model influential in the 1970s and 1980s was fixated on the failure of Germany to modernize — on the continued power of old elites and backward values. Yet as many critics remarked during the course of the great debate in the 1980s on the *Sonderweg*, this focus on the “premodern” and antimodern in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany simply did not do justice to the realities of German society in that period.⁹ Not surprisingly, Geoff Eley, a leading architect of the initial challenge to the *Sonderweg* thesis, has also been a leading advocate of the new account. Also not surprisingly, historians not only of the Nazi period but also of Weimar Germany — for example Peter Fritzsche, Cornelia Osborne, Young-sun Hong, and Atina Grossmann — have made important contributions to the elaboration of this model.¹⁰ The *Sonderweg* debate focused on the German Empire, and on what was *not* happening there, as the key to understanding modern Germany; the new model is at least equally interested in what *was* happening in the Weimar Republic. Germany appears here not as a nation having trouble modernizing, but as a nation of troubling modernity.

8. For a recent review of the international literature see Frank Dikötter, “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics,” *American Historical Review* 103 (1998).

9. For the key text see Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford, 1984).

10. Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?”; see also Fritzsche’s *Germans Into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Cornelia Osborne, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany: Women’s Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Basingstoke, 1992); Young-sun Hong, *Welfare, Modernity, and the Weimar State* (Princeton, 1998); Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Rights, 1920–1950* (New York, 1995).

In fact, the broad conclusions drawn from this model are, obviously, often focused on the issue of continuity — on the relationship between modern scientific biopolitics and National Socialist racial policy. Thus Detlev Peukert observed in 1982 that National Socialism “pushed the utopian belief in all-embracing ‘scientific’ final solutions of social problems to the ultimate logical extreme”; Zygmunt Bauman held in 1991 that the Nazi disaster was “simply a radical expression of the universal ambitions inherent in modern mentality,” legitimated by “the century and a half of post-Enlightenment history, filled with scientific propaganda”; Geoff Eley argued in 1996 for a “reperiodizing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to stress the coherence of the years between the 1890s and 1930s as a unitary context in which definite themes of national efficiency, social hygiene, and racialized nationalism coalesced,” and remarked that “the ground for the Final Solution was being discursively laid” even in the period before the Great War through the diffusion of “eugenicist and related ideologies of social engineering”; and Thomas Rohkrämer argued in 1999 that National Socialism “shows modernity’s most fatal potential.”¹¹

While the new narrative of German modernity is clearly convincing and useful, I believe that in important ways this broad interpretive approach no longer offers a convincing synthesis of the more recent literature. The importance of the discursive framework of biopolitics is clear. However, that framework was much more complex, and less coherent, than the new narrative often allows for. That complexity and incoherence need to be built into our theorizations of German modernity — at the expense of the almost exclusive focus on the problem of National Socialism. As the literature has become more detailed, our picture of biopolitics and its potentials has become more nuanced; the prevailing understanding of what the history of biopolitics reveals about modernity is, by comparison, still rather two-dimensional.

This article will look critically at a range of recent literature on specific elements of the broader biopolitical discourse, focusing on eugenics and social welfare. Needless to say, my purpose here is not to “debunk” the emerging master narrative of biopolitical modernity in Germany. Rather, my aim is twofold: to take stock of the more recent literature, point out some ways in which it has stretched our broader interpretive framework, and to suggest some ways in which that paradigm might be modified, refined, and extended.

11. Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany* (New Haven, 1987), 248; Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 29; Geoff Eley, “Introduction 1: Is There a History of the *Kaiserreich*?”, in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, ed. idem (Ann Arbor, 1996), 31, 28; Thomas Rohkrämer, “Antimodernism, Reactionary Modernity, and National Socialism: Technocratic Tendencies in Germany, 1890–1945,” *Contemporary European History* 8 (1999): 50.

Eugenics, Continuity, and Complexity

The literature on the race hygiene/eugenics movement in Germany is immense, and still growing rapidly. After an early focus on social Darwinism in the 1960s and 1970s, a spate of studies in the 1980s focused on the leading figures in the early race hygiene movement, their ideas, and their efforts at institution-building. Major works included those of Peter Weingart, Jürgen Kroll, and Kurt Bayertz, Robert Proctor, Hans-Walther Schmuhl, and Sheila Faith Weiss.¹² In the 1990s, the focus shifted to the reception and elaboration of eugenic ideas within the various political-ideological milieus in early twentieth-century Germany. Key recent examples include works by Michael Schwartz, Richard Weikart, and Manfred Kappeler on socialism; Ingrid Richter, Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, Kurt Nowak, and Michael Schwartz on the Christian confessions; Richard Wetzell, Peter Becker, and Jürgen Simon on criminology; Sigrid Stöckel and Jürgen Reyer on social welfare; Paul Weindling's many publications on medicine; and Ann Taylor Allen — among others — on radical feminism.¹³

12. See Peter Weingart, Jürgen Kroll, Kurt Bayertz, *Rasse, Blut, und Gene: Geschichte der Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988); Peter Weingart, "The Rationalization of Sexual Behavior: The Institutionalization of Eugenic Thought in Germany," *Journal of the History of Biology* 20 (1987); Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene, Nationalsozialismus, Euthanasie: Von der Verhütung zur Vernichtung 'lebensunwerten Lebens' 1890–1945* (Göttingen, 1987); Benno Müller-Hill, *Murderous Science* (Oxford, 1988, orig. 1984); Sheila Faith Weiss, *Race Hygiene and National Efficiency: The Eugenics of Wilhelm Schallmeyer* (Berkeley, 1987) and "The Race Hygiene Movement in Germany, 1904–1945," in *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Britain and Russia*, ed. Mark B. Adams (New York, 1990).

13. See Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik* and idem, "'Proletarier' und 'Lumpen': Sozialistische Ursprünge eugenischen Denkens," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 42 (1994); Richard Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein* (San Francisco, 1999); Manfred Kappeler, *Der schreckliche Traum vom vollkommenen Menschen: Rassenhygiene und Eugenik in der sozialen Arbeit* (Marburg, 2000); Ingrid Richter, *Katholizismus und Eugenik in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich* (Paderborn, 2001); Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Sozialer Protestantismus im 20. Jahrhundert: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Inneren Mission 1914–1945* (Munich, 1989) and Kaiser and Martin Greschat, eds., *Sozialer Protestantismus und Sozialstaat: Diakonie und Wohlfahrtspflege in Deutschland 1890–1938* (Stuttgart, 1996); Kurt Nowak, "Euthanasie" und Sterilisierung im "Dritten Reich": *Die Konfrontation der evangelischen und katholischen Kirche mit dem Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses und der "Euthanasie"-Aktion* (Halle, 1977); Richard Wetzell, *Inventing the Criminal* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Peter Becker, *Verderbnis und Entartung: Eine Geschichte der Kriminologie des 19. Jahrhunderts als Diskurs und Praxis* (Göttingen, 2002); Jürgen Simon, *Kriminalbiologie und Zwangssterilisation* (Münster, 2001); Sigrid Stöckel, *Säuglingsfürsorge zwischen sozialer Hygiene und Eugenik* (Berlin, 1996); Jürgen Reyer, *Alte Eugenik und Wohlfahrtspflege* (Freiburg, 1991); Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 1989) — and his many other publications; Ann Taylor Allen, "German Radical Feminism and Eugenics, 1900–1908," *German Studies Review* 11 (1988); Ursula Ferdinand, *Das Malthusische Erbe: Entwicklungsstränge der Bevölkerungstheorie im 19. Jahrhundert und deren Einfluss auf die radikale Frauenbewegung in Deutschland* (Münster, 1999); and the literature cited in Edward Ross Dickinson, "Reflections on Feminism and Monism in the Kaiserreich, 1900–1913," *Central European History* 34 (2001).

While much of the literature is very much shaped by the project of uncovering the roots of National Socialist racial policy, virtually every major study since the middle of the 1980s has also stressed what Ingrid Richter calls the “pluralistic development of German eugenics/race hygiene.”¹⁴ Paul Weindling’s magisterial study of racial thought in German medicine energetically rejected any simple teleology connecting eugenics to the National Socialists’ racial policies; in the recent German literature Michael Schwartz in particular has built on such skepticism, asserting that eugenics was not merely a “component of the German disaster” but rather a “fundamental problem of the development of modern science and societies” and rejecting “the simple teleological assignment to the ‘Third Reich’ and its crimes of a phenomenon that, from 1890 on, occupied intellectuals and scientists of every orientation [*couleur*] and nationality.”¹⁵ This is now virtually the consensus view among historians. Eugenics was discussed widely throughout most of the ideological and social communities making up a very diverse society; it was given varying inflections and interpretations in each; and it could be compatible with virtually any political or ideological position. In fact, what emerges from the literature of the 1990s is a picture of a varied, complex, and diffuse body of discussion and discourse, rather than a focused or coherent set of ideas — much less a “movement.” Eugenics, as Schwartz asserted in 1995, was “highly complicated, many-layered” and made up of many subdiscourses that were “disunited, competing, and in part conflicting with each other.”¹⁶

There were a number of fundamental assumptions that *were* shared by all eugenics advocates. One was that there were significant differences between individuals, and that those differences were rooted in heredity. A second was that these differences were differences in “quality” — that they could be arranged in a hierarchy from good to bad, from better to worse. Some people were normal, some better (stronger, healthier, smarter, more moral, more socially responsible), and some were inferior. The wealthy and creative were judged to be of “higher value” (*höhenwertig*), while the poor, recidivists, and those suffering from inherited “defects” were “of less value” (*minderwertig*). Finally, almost all eugenicists at least tentatively defined value and normality in economic or financial terms: the “*Minderwertigen*” were conceived of as cost centers in an imagined societal balance sheet.¹⁷

14. Richter, *Katholizismus*, 18.

15. Weindling, *Health*, 6–10; Michael Schwartz, “Konfessionelle Milieus und Weimarer Eugenik,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 261 (1995): 403.

16. Michael Schwartz, “Biopolitik in der Moderne,” *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (1995), 346.

17. There is a particularly good concise discussion of the fundamental ideas of eugenics in Weingart, “Politik und Vererbung,” in *Wissenschaft auf Irrwegen: Biologismus — Rassenhygiene — Eugenik*, ed. Peter Propping and Heinz Schrott (Bonn, 1992).

While most eugenicists shared these fundamental assumptions, however, the conclusions different groups drew from them diverged in very significant ways. Eugenic ideas and eugenic recommendations were heavily inflected by other idea-systems and other values in various ideological and cultural milieus: socialist, racist, Christian, liberal, social-reforming, psychiatric, and so forth. Different groups reached divergent conclusions as to how best to solve the “problems” defined by eugenics.

There appears to be growing agreement now as to how to make some sense of this diversity. Eugenics in Germany is generally grouped into two main “wings” or “branches”: a more radical, racist, and right-wing grouping, with its focus in Munich (and also in Freiburg) and including Friedrich Lenz, Ernst Rüdin, and Alfred Ploetz; and a more moderate, antiracist, and politically diverse and “progressive” (liberal, socialist, or moderate Christian conservative) grouping, with its focus in Berlin and including Alfred Grotjahn (socialist), Hermann Muckermann (Catholic), and Hans Harmsen (Protestant). Many (though by no means all) in the Munich wing were explicitly racist and anti-Semitic, believing in the superiority of the Nordic or Aryan “race” over other “races,” and often in the particularly destructive influence of “the Jews” on other races. This position was explicitly rejected by most in the Berlin branch. Those associated with the Munich branch also tended to focus more on the project of eliminating the “inferior” through sterilization or even euthanasia, while the Berlin branch focused more on raising fertility rates in the “normal” population. These differences were sufficiently clear, by the Weimar period, that the two groups frequently used different labels to describe their ideas: the Munich branch tended to use the term “race hygiene,” while many in the Berlin branch preferred the English word “eugenics” (*Eugenik*).¹⁸

There appears to be a growing consensus also that the more moderate Berlin branch was becoming the dominant one within German eugenics as a whole by the second half of the 1920s. More politically savvy, more closely connected to the national and the largest state government, and more deeply connected to the key political forces in the republic, this group increasingly dominated the institutional structure of eugenics and its public face.¹⁹ It received important financial and institutional support from the national and Prussian governments, and appears to have found a somewhat wider audience outside purely academic, medical, and civil service circles.

18. See particularly Sheila Faith Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement,” esp. 9–11, 33–35. See also Hans-Peter Kröner, “Wissenschaft und Politik: Das Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik im ‘Dritten Reich,’” in *Vom Vorurteil zur Vernichtung?*, ed. Erich Geldbach (Münster, 1995), 54; Weingart, “The Rationalization,” 187–88; Weindling, *Health*, 316–18.

19. See particularly Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik*, 14.

For the later 1920s in particular this schema may be less useful than it is for the imperial period. By the second half of the 1920s many Social Democrats close to the Berlin wing were among the most active advocates of negative eugenic programs (such as forcible sterilization) targeting relatively small groups of “asocial” individuals, as a necessary complement to positive fertility incentives and social welfare programs for “normal” people.²⁰ Further, even for the imperial period I would argue that there was a third major “branch” of eugenics: the radical feminist grouping around the Bund für Mutterschutz (League for the Protection of Mothers, formed in 1905). From the outset this organization had close ties to the radical left wing of socialism; that was a tendency reinforced during the years of the war and revolution. The league pursued a broad agenda of social and sexual reform, and was regarded by the largely academic and medical (and almost exclusively male) eugenic mainstream as being unable to “claim to have any race hygienic value at all” (Ploetz).²¹ But the commitment at least of many of the leading figures in the league to eugenics was intense; and in fact many supported the more popular eugenic proposals, such as mandatory exchange of health certificates by couples planning to marry, or sterilization of the *Minderwertigen*.²² Eugenics appears, therefore, to fall into a pattern familiar in most fields in the imperial and Weimar periods: a radical right wing, a more moderate governmental center, and a radical left wing.

In any case, it is abundantly clear that differences were great enough to warrant caution in generalizing about eugenics as if it were a unified phenomenon. What is less explicitly clear from the current literature is that eugenics was not of much practical importance.²³ Eugenics not only was not coherent enough to be characterized as a “movement”; it also did not have many committed adherents, and it had virtually no influence on policy at any time before 1932.

For the imperial period, this fact is unmistakable. By 1913 the Society for Race Hygiene had only some 425 members.²⁴ Many were academics of some public standing, and the ideas of the eugenicists were much more widely influential than the tiny size of this organization suggests. What is more, the League for the Protection of Motherhood had four thousand members by 1907 (though it is not clear how many shared the enthusiasm for eugenics evident

20. The key text here is Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik*; see particularly the summary on 329–33, 336.

21. A. Ploetz, “Bund für Mutterschutz”, *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie* 2 (1905): 317; see also Nowacki, *Der Bund für Mutterschutz (1905–1933)* (Husum, 1983), 21–22.

22. See Dickinson, “Reflections” for references to the extensive literature on the league.

23. See Christiane Dienel, *Kinderzahl und Staatsräson: Empfängnisverhütung und Bevölkerungspolitik in Deutschland und Frankreich bis 1918* (Münster, 1995), 135.

24. Weindling, *Health*, 147. The organization was even smaller for most of the 1920s (318–19). See also Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement,” 25.

among the leadership).²⁵ Nevertheless, clearly by the standards of the day these were very small organizations indeed. The mass organizations of the women's and union movements, charitable organizations like the Protestant Women's Auxiliary, or groups like the Popular Catholic Association (Volksverein für das katholische Deutschland) numbered their members in the tens and even hundreds of thousands. In a more closely related field, the German Society for Combating Venereal Diseases (Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten) had a membership of 5,000 in 1912.²⁶ No doubt many members shared the eugenic concerns of colleagues in the Society for Race Hygiene, and some were members of both. But it seems to me telling that twelve times as many people joined an organization devoted to discussing preventive public health measures in one quite specific area of health policy than joined the leading eugenics organization. Not surprisingly, no eugenic measures were ever (to my knowledge) actually adopted, whether by legislation or by administrative agencies at any level, under the empire.

At first glance the 1920s seem to present a very different picture. In the context of economic crisis, stubborn high unemployment, and the expansion of welfare provision for all kinds of populations (and accordingly also the rising cost of supporting institutional populations), eugenics appears to have become markedly more appealing. The Prussian medical bureaucracy in particular was active in advocating eugenic policy, but other medical establishments — for example in Saxony and Thuringia — also did so. The Prussian Welfare Ministry created a Commission for Race Hygiene and Population Policy in 1920, which subsequently advocated measures such as tax breaks to encourage childrearing, or even child allowances paid by the state. From 1920, pamphlets encouraging medical examinations were distributed to all applicants for marriage licenses in Prussia (though there was no specific mention of heredity as an issue in them).²⁷ From 1922 the Prussian welfare ministry advocated the introduction of compulsory premarital health exams, with the aim of steering couples away from unions that might produce “inferior” offspring. That initiative failed, but in 1926, following a favorable report by the Prussian State Medical Council, the ministry issued a decree instructing administrative agencies to establish eugenically oriented marriage counseling clinics. By 1930, there were some two hundred such clinics in Prussia. By 1928, there was active discussion of the insertion of eugenic clauses into the national criminal code — introducing voluntary sterilization as grounds for partial commutation of sentences for recidivists, for

25. Bernd Nowacki, *Der Bund*, 56.

26. Siegfried Borelli, Hermann-Joseph Vogt, Michael Kreis, eds., *Geschichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten* (Berlin, 1992), 28.

27. Text in Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, Kurt Nowak, and Michael Schwartz, *Eugenik — Sterilisation — “Euthanasie”: Politische Biologie in Deutschland, 1895–1945* (Halle, 1992), 56–57.

example, or legalizing abortion on eugenic grounds. finally, both within key organizations interested in social policy and in the national parliament, there was discussion throughout the 1920s of the possibility of introducing permanent institutionalization (*Bewahrung*, or roughly protective custody) for persons judged to be “asocial.” Social Democrats and Catholics were particularly active on this issue. At least some advocates regarded *Bewahrung* as a eugenic measure.²⁸

This period also saw a rapid expansion of eugenic organizations, and of the discussion of eugenics outside government. Again, in part this activity reflected growing interest among civil servants. In 1923 the first chair in race hygiene at a German university was created, in Munich. Two years later the Prussian Ministry of Welfare helped to found an alternative to the Society for Race Hygiene, called the Union for Population Improvement and the Study of Heredity (Bund für Volksaufartung und Erbkunde). Under the leadership of high civil servants in the Prussian government, and with funding from the Prussian and national ministries, the group managed to recruit some 1,500 members by the beginning of the 1930s. In the meantime, the Society for Race Hygiene itself was evolving in a similar direction. The headquarters of the society was moved from Munich to Berlin in 1922; its longtime conservative leaders, Max von Gruber and Friedrich Lenz, were shunted aside as “honorary chairmen,” while Otto Krohne, an official in the Prussian ministry of welfare, took over the real leadership of the organization. By 1929 it had some five hundred members, by 1931 a little more than a thousand. In September of 1931, not surprisingly, the two groups finally merged.²⁹

Eugenics also achieved a new level of scientific respectability with the creation in 1927 of a national institute for human heredity, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, or KWI. Ernst Rüdin’s psychiatric institute in Munich, formed in 1918, was also made a Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in 1924, and was a second center of hereditarian science. And by the late 1920s some medical associations, in particular, increasingly regarded eugenic principles as a legitimate foundation for medical intervention, and advocated enabling legislation (such as the legalization of voluntary sterilization, or of eugenic abortion).³⁰

While moderate eugenic and population-policy ideas predominated within both the state governments and nongovernmental organizations, the broader

28. On eugenics in the Weimar period see Reyer, *Alte Eugenik*; Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement”; and Richter, *Katholizismus*. My summary in this and the next paragraphs is derived largely from these works. On *Bewahrung* see particularly Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung* (Cologne, 1986); Andreas Wollasch, *Der katholische Fürsorgeverein für Mädchen, Frauen und Kinder* (Freiburg, 1991). For the debate on the criminal code see Michael Schwartz, “‘Proletarier’ und ‘Lumpen,’” 566–67 and Richter, *Katholizismus*, 230–31.

29. See Schwartz, “Konfessionelle Milieus,” 418–19; Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement,” 36.

30. See Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement,” 34–36 and Weingart et al., *Rasse*, 241–43.

discussion of heredity and genetics did include much more radical voices. In 1920, for example, two Freiburg doctors published an appeal for the legalization of “euthanasia” for the severely retarded; and in 1923, a Saxon medical official published a demand for the introduction of compulsory sterilization of the “inferior” that was widely discussed and debated. The importance of these outbursts is not that such positions were regarded as viable by any substantial number of eugenics advocates — which they very clearly were not. Rather it is that they were taken seriously enough to spark active public discussion, and that such discussion helped to establish the boundaries of “respectable” or “reasonable” eugenic thinking and eugenic policies, thereby helping to define and legitimate the more “moderate” approach common within the major organizations and governmental bodies.³¹

Clearly, then, in the course of the 1920s eugenics passed through an important process of maturation. And yet, if we look more closely, it is easy to unravel the picture of a new scientific discipline defining itself and then moving to gain a purchase on policy. In fact, with the exception of a few resolutions in favor of the development of population policies with eugenic elements, and despite the massive outpouring of welfare and public health legislation in the new republic, it appears that the number of eugenic measures actually passed through German parliaments in the 1920s was the same as under the empire — zero. Attempts in 1928 to introduce eugenic sterilization into the criminal code failed. So did the attempt to legalize eugenic abortion. While some groups — notably the SPD in Prussia — supported the idea of compulsory sterilization, even most of the leadership of the eugenic organizations and almost all government agencies explicitly rejected such ideas.³² No law on *Bewahrung* was ever passed (despite the fact that it was supported by many social workers and welfare experts for reasons having little or nothing to do with eugenics). And while the Prussian government, in particular, subsidized eugenic organizations, as Weingart, Kroll, and Bayertz put it, “these sums remained within the range of those paid out to substantially less significant organizations, and do not suggest that there was any systematic support for racial hygiene in the Prussian administration.”³³ And while eugenic organizations grew particularly during the depression, it is nevertheless suggestive of the overall situation that in 1926 the

31. For texts from the discussion of forcible sterilization and “euthanasia,” for example, see Kaiser et al., *Eugenik*, 79–94, 95–96. For the history of eugenics in the 1920s see particularly Reyer, *Alte Eugenik*; Richter, *Katholizismus*; Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement”; Weindling, *Health*; and Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik*.

32. See Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement,” 26, 39; Richter, *Katholizismus*, 201, 204, 304; Stöckel, *Säuglingsfürsorge*, 55, 65–70, 88–90, 95, 309, 370; Schwartz, “Konfessionelle Milieus,” 438–39 and *Sozialistische Eugenik*.

33. Weingart et al., *Rasse*, 272–73.

socialist eugenics expert Alfred Grotjahn observed that it was high time for eugenics to move beyond “the narrow circle of a few enthusiasts and professors [*Gelehrten*].”³⁴

In fact the one major piece of eugenic policy actually implemented by a German government, voluntary premarital eugenic counseling under the Prussian decree of 1926, was an abject failure. The majority of those who sought out the counseling clinics were not affianced couples concerned about the quality of their prospective offspring, but unmarried couples seeking advice on and assistance with fertility control. These were, in other words, people who wanted to avoid having babies at all. In fact, since many eugenicists believed that the forethought required for fertility limitation was evidence of mental and hence eugenic superiority, the counseling clinics could easily be seen as having achieved exactly the opposite of what their creators intended.³⁵

As for other eugenic policies, there appear to have been none. Social welfare and public health experts discussed eugenics; but they did nothing about it. Some scholars have pointed to an apparently growing number of (illegal) sterilizations by some doctors and clinics; but since in most cases the justification given was the “social indication,” it is almost certain that in the great majority of these cases sterilization was in fact a form of contraception, and not really “eugenic” at all.³⁶ It is telling, moreover, that despite genuine interest among medical academics, there was still, in 1933, exactly one chair in race hygiene at a German medical school.³⁷

By the onset of the Great Depression, then, eugenics advocates in Germany appear to have accomplished strikingly little in concrete terms. In fact, if we compare the successes of eugenicists in Germany with those of their counterparts in the United States or the United Kingdom, what is impressive is how vanishingly little practical influence eugenics had in Germany even at the end of the 1920s. As the above summary suggests and as subsequent events would show, at least among a limited number of ministerial bureaucrats and within key nongovernmental organizations eugenics *had* effectively established itself as a credible science and a credible basis for an alternative — or more accurately a supplementary — policy structure, should the existing biopolitical policy framework (public health, social insurance, social welfare) fail. That was an impressive and historically important achievement; but it hardly makes eugenics

34. Grotjahn, *Die Hygiene der menschlichen Fortpflanzung* (Berlin, 1926), 54.

35. See particularly Kristine von Soden, *Die Sexualberatungsstellen der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin, 1988) and Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, 10–11, 46–77.

36. See Reyer, *Alte Eugenik*, 102; Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, 73.

37. There were only some 25–30 courses in race hygiene and related topics offered at German universities each semester through the late 1920s, with a jump to about 35–40 in 1932. See Maria Günther, “Die Institutionalisierung der Rassenhygiene an den deutschen Hochschulen vor 1933” (Ph.D. diss., University of Mainz, 1982), 61.

the keystone of the broader biopolitical discourse. In fact, it now seems evident that eugenics was still essentially a very small and somewhat isolated part of that discourse. While the institutional framework of social welfare, public health, and social insurance had been under construction for well over half a century by 1930, eugenics was still not really *politikfähig* — not really a viable basis for actual policies.

The depression dramatically changed this situation. By early 1931 at the latest, the social welfare system appeared to be in existential crisis, and the incipient antiwelfare backlash of the later 1920s was gaining ground rapidly. As the financial crisis deepened, the economic, cost-benefit analysis central to eugenic thought gained appeal and credibility. By May of 1931 a special commission on eugenics within the national umbrella organization of the Protestant charities, headed by Hans Harmsen, adopted resolutions in favor of voluntary sterilization. In January of 1932 the conference of Prussian provincial executives (the *Staatsrat*) asked the government of that state to do everything it could to lower the cost of care for the *Minderwertigen* (though it did not mention sterilization). The Center Party and the national government abandoned their opposition to negative eugenics in the course of the year. And in July of 1932 the Prussian state health council held a conference on “Eugenics in the Service of National Welfare,” which established a commission to draw up eugenic legislation. The law this commission drafted called, among other measures, for the legalization of voluntary sterilization for those clearly suffering from hereditary ailments. Of course, in the case of the mentally ill or mentally handicapped (and the majority of those targeted for sterilization were classed “feeble-minded” or “idiots”), permission would be granted by the legal guardian; “voluntary” was in this sense something of a euphemism.³⁸

When the Nazi regime took power, therefore, legislation introducing negative eugenic measures was already in process in the largest state in Germany. In this sense, the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny of July 1933 was clearly the product of a longer-term development. More fundamentally, the fiscal crisis doubtless merely realized a potential for the adoption of negative eugenic measures for which the way had been paved by the spread of key eugenic assumptions — the presumed importance of heredity, the stigmatization of the “inferior,” economic calculations about human beings, and so forth.

And yet, as numerous studies have pointed out, we should be careful not to overestimate the degree of continuity between late Weimar and Nazi eugenic policy. Even in the depths of the economic crisis in 1932, the Prussian state health council actually rejected (despite lively internal discussion, and in part for

38. For the text of the draft legislation see Kaiser et al., *Eugenik*, 100–2.

purely political reasons) compulsory sterilization. So too did both Harmsen's Protestant commission on eugenics and — though it passed a strongly pro-eugenic resolution — the 1932 conference of the *Deutsche Ärztevereinsbund* (National League of Doctors' Associations). Among Catholics, sterilization was formally ruled out at the beginning of the decade by papal encyclical; in any case Hermann Muckermann, head of the KWI's eugenics section and the most active Catholic advocate of eugenic sterilization, had explicitly rejected forcible sterilization and euthanasia in 1929.³⁹ No public or private organization approved of the idea of "euthanasia" (the murder of the *Minderwertigen*). In fact, Harmsen's commission explicitly rejected both that and eugenic abortion, and even objected to the use of the term *Minderwertigen* (since "hereditary health is not identical with high value"), while the Prussian State Health Council rejected both active euthanasia and passive neglect "even of hopeless cases."⁴⁰ Even Fritz Lenz, the bad boy of German eugenics, rejected forcible sterilization and euthanasia in late 1932 and early 1933.⁴¹ Thus, all the key elements of Nazi racial policy — compulsory sterilization (from 1933), eugenic abortion (from 1935), and euthanasia (from 1939) — were actually explicitly rejected by almost all the institutions driving the adoption of eugenic policy in the final years of the Weimar Republic.

What is more, the new regime intervened decisively to transform the major eugenic organizations. Hermann Muckermann was removed from his post as director of the eugenics section of the KWI in Berlin; he, Eugen Fischer, and Otmar Verschuer were relieved of their positions in the leadership of the Society for Race Hygiene, and replaced by leading exponents of the Munich branch of eugenics — particularly Ernst Rüdin, who became Reichskommissar for the organization in November of 1933. Almost half of the chairmen of the society's local chapters were replaced. The journal of the *Bund für Volksaufartung und Erbpflege* was banned and its editor, Artur Ostermann, dismissed.⁴² Verschuer, Fischer, Lenz, and Rüdin went on to active and successful

39. Hermann Muckermann, "Wesen der Eugenik und Aufgaben der Gegenwart," *Das kommende Geschlecht* 5, nos. 1/2 (Berlin, 1929): 30.

40. See "Eugenische Tagung des preussischen Landesgesundheitsrates," *Eugenik* 2 (1932): 187; Hans Harmsen, "Evangelisch-kirchliche Stimmen zur eugenischen Forderung," *Eugenik* 2 (1932): 265, 266; "Eugenische Entschliessung des Deutschen Ärztevereinsbundes," *Eugenik* 2 (1932): 233; Schwartz, "Konfessionelle Milieus," 435; Richter, *Katholizismus*, 304; Kaiser et al., *Eugenik*, 100, 109–10, and 185; and *Die Eugenik im Dienste der Volkswohlfahrt* (Berlin, 1932), 20–21, 55–56, 59, 72, 76, 81–83, 105.

41. See Fritz Lenz, "Zur Frage eines Sterilisierungsgesetzes," *Eugenik* 3 (1933): 74–75; Stefan Kühl, "The Relationship between Eugenics and the so-called 'Euthanasia Action' in Nazi Germany," in *Science in the Third Reich*, ed. Margit Szökösi-Janze (New York, 2001), 198.

42. See Weiss, "The Race Hygiene Movement," 41; Reyer, *Alte Eugenik*, 96; Schwartz, "Biopolitik in der Moderne," 345; and Kröner, "Wissenschaft und Politik," esp. 55–56. Lenz replaced Muckermann as head of the eugenic section of the KWI.

careers in the Nazi biomedical establishment, and eventually joined the NSDAP between 1937 and 1940; Muckermann and other moderates were shunted aside and silenced. Needless to say, the fate of the radical left eugenicists was considerably worse. Julius Moses, the SPD's leading health and eugenics expert after Alfred Grotjahn's death in 1931, was killed in a concentration camp, as was Max Rosenthal, president of the League for the Protection of Mothers; Helene Stöcker, the group's chief spokesperson, fled the country in February of 1933 and died in exile in New York ten years later; the clinics and counseling centers opened by socialists and feminists were shut down, the leaders of the popular birth-control movement (many of whom were interested in eugenics and favored sterilization, for example) jailed.⁴³

We may draw some brief conclusions from this story. First, there clearly was no especially convincing fit between eugenic ideas and totalitarian politics. Second, the Nazis adopted and supported one particular variety of eugenic thought. They were not driven by "the" logic of eugenics; rather, they pursued "a" logic of eugenics. Third, the Nazis imposed this particular variety of eugenics on a biopolitical "establishment" — a complex of institutions, disciplines, practices, and policies — that was not very excited about eugenics of *any* variety, much less the racist negative eugenics the Nazis favored.

How do we sort out the elements of continuity and discontinuity in this pattern? While debate will no doubt continue, there is now something approaching a plausible consensus on this question. The development of eugenic thought since the 1890s — or for that matter of Darwinian thought since the 1850s — was, as Geoff Eley put it in 1996, a "condition of possibility" for Nazi eugenic policy.⁴⁴ What made mass murder a reality, however, was not the inheritance of eugenic thinking, but the emergence of a "*Massnahmenstaat*" — a political system that operated by administrative fiat rather than by law. The massively radicalized sterilization policy adopted by the Nazis — which eventually effected some 400,000 persons — could only be implemented by a regime that had effectively silenced open discussion among eugenic experts and among the broader public; and the murder of some 70,000 in the Nazis' euthanasia program, and some tens of thousands in less organized fashion later, could only be implemented as a conspiracy by a regime that abhorred legality and silenced critique. This is a conclusion that was common already in the seminal works on eugenics in the 1980s, and was stated with particular vehemence by

43. On Stöcker and Rosenthal see Christl Wickert, *Helene Stöcker, 1869–1943: Frauenrechtlerin, Sexualreformerin, und Pazifistin: Eine Biographie* (Bonn, 1991), 190–91; on Moses, Michael Schwartz, "Euthanasie"-Debatten in Deutschland (1895–1945)," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 46 (1998): 630; on Rüdin et al., Weiss, "The Race Hygiene Movement," 48.

44. Eley, "Introduction 1," 28.

Hans-Walter Schmuhl in 1987; it is now virtually unchallenged.⁴⁵ Detlev Peukert pointed out in 1989 that the silencing of public dissent and the abrogation of legality were the key steps toward mass murder in the Third Reich; the “vital factor” leading to mass murder was “the character of the Nazi dictatorship.”⁴⁶ Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, Kurt Nowak, and Michael Schwartz stated this view with particular clarity in 1992, arguing that:

Without the context of the . . . growing erosion of the state of law in favor of the *Massnahmenstaat*, the National Socialist “euthanasia” could not have been implemented. Even then, it still required the state of emergency of the war and extensive, if not very effective secrecy to put it into motion. Whatever the long-term preconditions may have been, this specific “solution” to the problem, the “extermination of life unworthy of life,” became possible only under the conditions of the “Third Reich.”⁴⁷

In short, the development of the science of human heredity and the ambition of total social “renovation” (Fritzsche) made Nazi policies theoretically possible, made them imaginable. What made them real was the creation of a totalitarian dictatorship. To put it in few words: no dictatorship, no catastrophe.

In an important programmatic statement of 1996 Geoff Eley celebrated the fact that Foucault’s ideas have “fundamentally directed attention away from institutionally centered conceptions of government and the state . . . and toward a dispersed and decentered notion of power and its ‘microphysics.’”⁴⁸ The “broader, deeper, and less visible ideological consensus” on “technocratic reason and the ethical unboundedness of science” was the focus of his interest.⁴⁹ But the “power-producing effects in Foucault’s ‘microphysical’ sense” (Eley) of the construction of social bureaucracies and social knowledge, of “an entire institutional apparatus and system of practice” (Jean Quataert), simply do not explain Nazi policy.⁵⁰ The destructive dynamic of Nazism was a product not so much of a particular modern set of ideas as of a particular modern political structure, one that could realize the disastrous potential of those ideas. What was

45. Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene*, 20, 129, 134, 361. See also Weingart et al., *Rasse*, 523; the authors refer to eugenics as a “*Bedingungsrahmen*” (“condition of possibility”) for euthanasia. Even Peukert concluded that what made Nazi eugenics different from Weimar eugenics was precisely “the fact that its critics are forced into silence.” See Detlev J. K. Peukert, “The Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’ from the Spirit of Science,” in *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, ed. Thomas Childers and Jane Kaplan (New York, 1993), 244.

46. Peukert, “The Genesis,” 244, 247.

47. Kaiser et al., *Eugenik*, xxiv. For a similar judgment see Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene*, 20.

48. Eley, “Introduction 1,” 25, 29.

49. *Ibid.*, 28.

50. *Ibid.*, 30; Quataert, “Introduction 2: Writing the History of Women and Gender in Imperial Germany,” in *Society*, ed. Eley, 102; for a still clearer formulation of these ideas see Eley, “Ordinary Germans,” esp. 17.

critical was not the expansion of the instruments and disciplines of biopolitics, which occurred everywhere in Europe. Instead, it was the principles that guided how those instruments and disciplines were organized and used, and the external constraints on them. In National Socialism, biopolitics was shaped by a totalitarian conception of social management focused on the power and ubiquity of the *völkisch* state. In democratic societies, biopolitics has historically been constrained by a rights-based strategy of social management. This is a point to which I will return shortly. For now, the point is that what was decisive was actually politics at the level of the state.

A comparative framework can help us to clarify this point. Other states passed compulsory sterilization laws in the 1930s — indeed, individual states in the United States had already begun doing so in 1907. Yet they did not proceed to the next steps adopted by National Socialism — mass sterilization, mass “eugenic” abortion and murder of the “defective.” Individual figures in, for example, the U.S. did make such suggestions. But neither the political structures of democratic states nor their legal and political principles permitted such policies actually being enacted. Nor did the scale of forcible sterilization in other countries match that of the Nazi program. I do not mean to suggest that such programs were not horrible; but in a democratic political context they did not develop the dynamic of constant radicalization and escalation that characterized Nazi policies.

The radicalizing dynamic of the Nazi regime was determined, however, not only by its structure but also by its ideology. The attentive reader will have noticed a degree of conceptual slippage in many of the quotations used in the foregoing pages between ethnic racialism and eugenics, between “eugenic” murder and the Final Solution. This slippage between “racialism” and “racism” is not entirely justified. After the rigors of the Goldhagen debate, it takes some sangfroid to address the topic of anti-Semitism in Germany at all. But it appears from the current literature that there was no *direct* connection between anti-Semitism and eugenic ideas. Some German eugenicists were explicitly racist; some of those racist eugenicists were anti-Semites; but anti-Semitism was not an essential part of eugenic thought. As Peter Fritzsche — among many others — has pointed out, racism really is at the heart of the Nazi “discourse of segregation,” and the “fantastic vision” of all-out racial war that motivated the Nazis is not explained merely by the logic of enlightened rationalism, technocracy, and scientism.⁵¹ Eugenics did not “pave the way” for the murder of millions of Jews. Ethnic racism — and particularly anti-Semitism — did.

Of course, eugenics, racism, and anti-Semitism were part of a complex of

51. Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?” 648; “Nazi Modern,” 10. For an early statement of this view see Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene*, 14.

related ideas and practices that *did* derive partly from that Enlightenment tradition. Nazi anti-Semitism was a product of the marriage of Christian tradition and modern biologicistic thought. The fear of being overwhelmed by “the Jews” might also be an extreme (and metaphoric) expression of that peculiarly modern sense of crisis discussed at the outset of this essay.⁵² And finally, modern anti-Semitism was clearly an instance of the broader “pathologization of difference” characteristic of biopolitical modernity, and indeed of the whole project of classification and categorization as it was applied to people. In short, again, Nazi anti-Semitism was partly a product and subset of the broader discursive framework of biopolitics. In this sense, it does make sense to speak of sterilization, “euthanasia,” and the Holocaust as genealogically related. And historically there were of course important concrete connections between the two policies: techniques and personnel were transferred from the T-4 “euthanasia” program to the extermination camps.

And yet, it is clear that anti-Semitism and eugenics did not imply, presuppose, or necessitate each other. The Nazi variant of biopolitical modernity was in fact quite idiosyncratic. It is very difficult to assess the place of explicitly ethnic racist thinking in the development of eugenics; but despite a resurgence of interest in the differing “character” and fate of ethnic groups after about 1927, on the whole ethnic racism appears to have become gradually less interesting to eugenicists from the late imperial period forward. The Nazis shifted the balance quite suddenly and forcibly in favor of ethnic racial thought after 1933. It may be that the growing influence of eugenics made National Socialist thinking more plausible for many people in the early 1930s; but it seems equally likely that the moderation of eugenics in the 1920s may have increased the appeal of the Social Democratic Party (as the strongest advocate, among the non-Nazi political parties, of eugenic policies) while actually discrediting the Nazis’ more dated ideas.⁵³

In fact, it may be useful to consider not only what eugenic ideas and euthanasia policy contributed to the implementation of the Final Solution, but also how momentum toward the Final Solution shaped Nazi eugenics. The context for Nazi eugenic policies was shaped fundamentally by the Nazis’ sense that Germany was in a permanent racial war with “the Jews” (or communists and democrats, which in the Nazi worldview amounted to the same thing). The urgency of Nazi eugenic policy — the scope of forcible sterilization, the murder of tens of thousands of “defective” people — derived not just from the

52. See Fritzsche, “Nazi Modern,” esp. 11, 12, 15.

53. For the classic instance of what might be called racial characterology in the late 1920s, see Fritz Lenz’s chapter of Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer, and Fritz Lenz, *Menschliche Erblichkeitslehre* (Munich, 1927), 519–83.

“normal” fear of degeneration typical of eugenics since its inception, but also from a quite extraordinary understanding of the immediacy of racial confrontation.

The possibility of National Socialist racial policy, then, can be placed specifically in a particularly idiosyncratic subsegment of the diverse world of biopolitical ideas. The biologization of the social helps to explain why some Germans thought of “the Jews” as a separate “race”; it does not explain why some Germans thought that was a problem. Some racists, for example, thought of “the Jews” as a particularly creative group who were a valuable asset in the struggle of the “white” races against the “yellow” and “black”; and some eugenics enthusiasts poked fun at racism as such.⁵⁴

In a particularly provocative passage, Michael Schwartz has suggested that, “each political system in Germany between 1890 and 1945 produced that variant of eugenic science which it ‘needed.’”⁵⁵ In 1996, Peter Fritzsche, similarly, posed the rhetorical question, “Doesn’t politics choose its own science at least as much as science prefigures political regimes?”⁵⁶ Both, I think, are making explicit a conclusion that is broadly present, though not often forcefully stated, in the more recent literature: that the realization of the potentials of modernity is a product of choices between alternative possible ideas, and alternative possible policies. To make this kind of suggestion is not to argue that Nazism “perverted” a modern science that was itself value-free and “innocent.” The point is rather that politicians, like scientists themselves, choose from among a broad range of ideas (of greater or lesser credibility) generated by the intellectual and institutional complex of modern science. They also choose what policy conclusions to draw from those ideas. Of course, as Richard Wetzell has remarked, this interpretation has implications for our understanding of the moral significance of National Socialism, as well.⁵⁷ Modernity and science were not responsible for the crimes of the Nazis. The Nazis were.

Haunted Histories of Modernity

This issue is important, I believe, in part because the project of ferreting out the contribution of biopolitical discourses to the construction of National Socialism so dominates the literature, creating a sense of impending disaster that I believe has all too strongly shaped the questions we, as historians, are asking about the history of modern biopolitics. I want to give two examples that I believe reveal

54. See for example Christian von Ehrenfels, “Rassenproblem und Judenfrage,” in Ehrenfels, *Metaphysik*, ed. Reinhard Fabian (Munich, 1990), 339; Alfred Grotjahn, *Geburten-Rückgang und Geburten-Regelung im Lichte der individuellen und der sozialen Hygiene* (Berlin, 1921), 153; Bruno Meyer, “Etwas von positiver Sexualreform,” *Sexual-Probleme* 4 (1908).

55. Schwartz, “Konfessionelle Milieus,” 408.

56. Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?” 648.

57. Wetzell, *Inventing the Criminal*, 11, 289–90.

the way this focus constrains our collective historical imagination. I do so not in order to point out that my colleagues are “wrong,” but to suggest how powerfully our imaginations and our questions are shaped by the specter and spectacle of National Socialism.

In a brilliant review article published in 1996, Peter Fritzsche posed the question “Did Weimar Fail?” Fritzsche gave voice to a healthy skepticism regarding the tendency in the literature to imply that the history of social welfare programs is only part of the prehistory of National Socialism. The “darker vision of modernism” presented by Detlev Peukert, he suggested, “is compelling but not wholly persuasive.” The “spirit of science” itself, he argued, does not introduce “quite so automatically a ‘discourse of segregation’ without the application of racist politics”; and he asked “to what extent are reformist practices invariably collusions in disciplinary regimes?” And yet, Fritzsche’s reflections are haunted by almost unrelieved foreboding, which merely accurately reflects the tone of the literature he was reviewing. He suggested that “the central theme of this scholarship . . . is the regimentation and discipline of citizens in often dangerously imaginative ways”; it “establishes significant continuities between the Weimar era and the Third Reich”; the history of the republic reveals the “dark shadows of modernity.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the conceptual framework Fritzsche set up seems to take totalitarianism, war, and mass murder as the end-point of “continuity.” Taking up a question asked by Gerald Feldman, Fritzsche suggested that the Weimar Republic was neither a gamble nor an experiment, but rather a laboratory of modernity. From this perspective, Fritzsche asserts, perhaps Weimar should be regarded as “less a failure than a series of bold experiments that do not come to an end with the year 1933.” The failure of political democracy “is not the same as the destruction of the laboratory.” Thus, the “coming of the Third Reich was not so much a verification of Weimar’s singular failure as the validation of its dangerous potential.”⁵⁹

Fritzsche’s was a wonderful metaphor for Weimar Germany, a period of enormous creativity and experimentation in any number of fields; and it is surely also a fruitful way to conceive of the relationship between Weimar and Nazi Germany. And yet — again, as Fritzsche’s more skeptical comments pointed out — the laboratory *didn’t* simply stay open; the experimenters *didn’t* simply keep experimenting; not *all* the experiments simply kept running under new management.⁶⁰ Particular *kinds* of experiments were not permitted in the Third Reich: those founded on the idea of the toleration of difference; those that defined difference as a psychological, political, or cultural fact to be understood and managed, rather than as a form of deviance or subversion to be

58. Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” 649, 632.

59. *Ibid.*, 647, 631, 656.

60. For an example using specifically this language, see Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, 136–37.

repressed or eliminated; those founded on the idea of integration through self-directed participation (as opposed to integration through orchestrated and obedient participation); and those that aimed at achieving a stable pluralism. There were many such experiments under way in the Weimar period; given the extent to which the political fabric of the Weimar Republic was rent by ideological differences, they were often of particular importance and urgency.

Many of those experiments appeared to be failing by the end of the 1920s; and that in itself was a critically important reason for the appeal of the ideas championed by the Nazis. The totalitarian and biological conception of national unity was in part a response to the apparent failure of a democratic and pluralist model of social and political integration. And yet, many of those very same experiments were revived, with enormous success, after 1949. Examples from my own field of research might include the development of a profession of social work that claimed to be a value-neutral foundation for cooperation between social workers of radically differing ideological orientation; the development of a psychoanalytic, rather than psychiatric, interpretation of “deviance” (neurosis replaces inherited brain defects); and the use of corporatist structures of governance within the welfare bureaucracy. These mechanisms did not work perfectly. But they *were* a continuation of “experiments” undertaken in the Weimar period and shut down in 1933; and they *did* contribute to the stabilization of a pluralist democracy. That was not a historically trivial or self-evident achievement, either in Germany or elsewhere. It required time, ingenuity, and a large-scale convergence of long-term historical forces. We should be alive to its importance as a feature of modernity.

As Fritzsche’s review makes clear, then, much of the recent literature seems to imply that National Socialism was a product of the “success” of a modernity that ends in 1945; but it could just as easily be seen as a temporary “failure” of modernity, the “success” of which would only come in the 1950s and 1960s. As Paul Betts recently remarked, we should not present the postwar period as a “redemptive tale of modernism triumphant” and cast Nazism as merely a “regressive interlude.” But neither should we dismiss the fact that such a narrative would be, so to speak, half true — that the democratic welfare state is no less a product of modernity than is totalitarianism.⁶¹

A second example is Geoff Eley’s masterful synthetic introduction to a collection of essays published in 1996 under the title *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*. Eley set forth two research agendas derived from his review of recent hypotheses regarding the origins and nature of Nazism. One was to discover what allowed so many people to identify with the Nazis. The

61. Paul Betts, “The New Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 37 (2002): 541.

second was that we explore the ways in which welfare policy contributed to Nazism, by examining “the production of new values, new mores, new social practices, new ideas about the good and efficient society.” Eley suggested that we examine “strategies of policing and constructions of criminality, notions of the normal and the deviant, the production and regulation of sexuality, the . . . understanding of the socially valued individual . . . the coalescence of racialized thinking . . .”⁶² So far so good; but why stop there? Why not examine the expanding hold of the language of rights on the political imagination, or the disintegration of traditional authority under the impact of the explosive expansion of the public sphere? Why not pursue a clearer understanding of ideas about the nature of citizenship in the modern state; about the potentials of a participatory social and political order; about human needs and human rights to have those needs met; about the liberation of the individual (including her sexual liberation, her liberation from ignorance and sickness, her liberation from social and economic powerlessness); about the physical and psychological dangers created by the existing social order and how to reduce them, the traumas it inflicted and how to heal them? In short, why not examine how the construction of “the social” — the ideas and practices of the modern biopolitical interventionist complex — contributed to the development of a *democratic* politics and humane social policies between 1918 and 1930, and again after 1945?

Like Fritzsche’s essay, Eley’s accurately reflected the tone of most of those it introduced. In the body of the volume, Elizabeth Domansky, for example, pointed out that biopolitics “did not ‘automatically’ or ‘naturally’ lead to the rise of National Socialism,” but rather “provided . . . the political Right in Weimar with the opportunity to capitalize on a discursive strategy that could successfully compete with liberal and socialist strategies.”⁶³ This is correct; but the language of biopolitics was demonstrably one on which liberals, socialists, and advocates of a democratic welfare state could *also* capitalize, and did. Or again, Jean Quataert remarked — quite rightly, I believe — that “the most progressive achievements of the Weimar welfare state were completely embedded” in biopolitical discourse. She also commented that Nazi policy was “continuous with what passed as the ruling knowledge of the time” and was a product of “an extreme form of technocratic reason” and “early twentieth-century modernity’s dark side.” The implication seems to be that “progressive” welfare policy was fundamentally “dark”; but it seems more accurate to conclude that biopolitics had a variety of potentials.⁶⁴

62. Eley, “Introduction 1,” 30.

63. Domansky, “Militarization and Reproduction in World War I Germany,” in *Society*, ed. Eley, 462.

64. Quataert, “Introduction 2,” 103.

Again, the point here is not that any of the interpretations offered in these pieces are wrong; instead, it is that we are, collectively, so focused on unmasking the negative potentials and realities of modernity that we have constructed a true, but very one-sided picture. The pathos of this picture is undeniable, particularly for a generation of historians raised on the Manichean myth — forged in the crucible of World War II and the Cold War — of the democratic welfare state. And as a rhetorical gesture, this analysis works magnificently — we explode the narcissistic self-admiration of democratic modernity by revealing the dark, manipulative, murderous potential that lurks within, thus arriving at a healthy, mature sort of melancholy. But this gesture too often precludes asking what *else* biopolitics was doing, besides manipulating people, reducing them to pawns in the plans of technocrats, and paving the way for massacre. In 1989 Detlev Peukert argued that any adequate picture of modernity must include both its “achievements” and its “pathologies” — social reform as well as “*Machbarkeitswahn*,” the “growth of rational relations between people” as well as the “swelling instrumental goal-rationality,” the “liberation of artistic and scientific creativity” as well as the “loss of substance and absence of limits [*Haltlosigkeit*].”⁶⁵ Yet he himself wrote nothing like such a “balanced” history, focusing exclusively on Nazism and on the negative half of each of these binaries; and that focus has remained characteristic of the literature as a whole.

What I want to suggest here is that the function of the rhetorical or explanatory framework surrounding our conception of modernity seems to be in danger of being inverted. The investigation of the history of modern biopolitics has enabled new understandings of National Socialism; now we need to take care that our understanding of National Socialism does not thwart a realistic assessment of modern biopolitics. Much of the literature leaves one with the sense that a modern world in which mass murder is not happening is just that: a place where something is not — yet — happening. Normalization is not yet giving way to exclusion, scientific study and classification of populations is not yet giving way to concentration camps and extermination campaigns. Mass murder, in short, is the historical problem; the absence of mass murder is not a problem, it does not need to be investigated or explained.

Social Welfare and the Political Valences of Biopolitics

I would like to return, then, to the question: in what ways did modern biopolitics contribute to the building of a democratic political order in Germany? What else, besides National Socialist racial policy, did the discourse of biopolitics make possible? For what else was the biopolitical discourse of the turn of

65. Peukert, “Der ‘Traum,’” 69.

the century a “condition of possibility”? What other choices did it create, besides the ones the Nazis made? Taken together, the more recent literature on the development of welfare programs in Germany now allows us to reach some definite conclusions.

Welfare policy has been a key field of inquiry for those elaborating the new vision of German modernity as biopolitical nightmare. In fact, Detlev Peukert formulated his own highly influential version of that account in the context of a study of a particular branch of child welfare policy. In his *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung* (The Limits of Social Discipline), child welfare appeared as a cautionary tale regarding the “inner, structural pathologies of social assistance,” and more generally about the “pathogenesis of modernity.” Using correctional education in reformatories as a case study, he argued that the project of social policy was essentially a form of “inner colonialism,” a bourgeois attempt to impose a set of alien norms and values from without and “above”; indeed, it was guided by a “totalitarian claim to validity” for bourgeois social and behavioral norms.⁶⁶ Like colonialism and totalitarianism, it was characterized from the beginning by a “tendency toward dehumanization,” because there was no room in bourgeois reformers’ “utopias of order” for those who would or could not conform. The ideal of “education for all” expanded the “life-chances of individuals from the lower classes, opened the way for them to culture and prosperity. But at the same time, it meant also an even more determined declaration of war [*Kampfansage*] against those who . . . would not allow themselves to be educated.” For “the ‘ineducable’ beyond the pedagogical province, no right to life remained.” The idea of the “implementation of a final solution to the problem of the asocial [people]” was a “further conclusion” (*Folgerung*) implicit in the project of universal socialization.⁶⁷ At the end of Peukert’s book stood the National Socialist drive to pass a Law on Community Aliens, which would have put the “antisocial” completely at the mercy of the police, and the creation in 1940 of two special “youth concentration camps” for ineducable delinquents.

Again, Peukert was very aware that he was writing the history of only one kind of modernity, and that the most destructive potentials of modern social engineering discourse were only to be realized in a very specific historical context. The “Final Solution” was, as he remarked, “one among other possible outcomes of the crisis of modern civilization,” and one possible only in the context of the concatenation of economic, social, and political disasters through which Germany passed in the two decades before 1933. The fact that Nazism was “one of the pathological developmental forms of modernity does not imply that barbarism is the inevitable logical outcome of modernization,” which also

66. Peukert, *Grenzen*, 21, 307, 309, 311.

67. *Ibid.*, 293, 309, 19, 67, 309, 307, 295.

created “opportunities for human emancipation.” And yet, again, the history that Peukert actually wrote was the history of disaster — a disaster that, frequently, *does* seem at least highly likely. The “fatal racist dynamic in the human and social sciences,” which consists in their assignment of greater or lesser value to human characteristics, does “inevitably become fixated on the utopian dream of the gradual elimination of death,” which is “unfailingly” frustrated by lived reality. In periods of fiscal crisis the frustration of these “fantasies of omnipotence” generates a concern with “identifying, segregating, and disposing of” those judged less valuable.⁶⁸ In the most detailed exposition of his analysis, *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung*, Peukert argues that, given the “totalitarian claim to validity” of bourgeois norms, only the two “strategies of pedagogical normalization or eugenic exclusion” were open to middle-class social reformers; when the one failed only the other remained. Yet the failure of pedagogical normalization was preprogrammed into the collision between middle-class “utopias of order” and the “life-worlds” of the working class, which were rendered disorderly by the logic of industrial capitalism.⁶⁹ Again, in Peukert’s model it seems to me that it is really only a matter of time and circumstance before the fundamentally and necessarily murderous potential of modernity is unleashed.

A number of major studies in the 1990s, in contrast, emphasized the importance of the break in the development of social policy in 1933. These works consolidated the consensus regarding the importance of the economic and political crisis of the early 1930s and the destruction of democracy and the rule of law. Beyond that, however, they also suggest that the conceptual foundations of Nazi social, medical, and racial policy were actually quite distinct from those of Weimar policy — despite the fact that they were recognizably part of the broader discourse of modern biopolitics. They point out, too, that there was an important institutional caesura in welfare policy between 1933 and 1939. In the third volume of their history of poor relief in Germany (1992), for example, Florian Tennstedt and Christoph Sachse concluded not only that the destruction of democratic elements in the welfare system by the Nazis had reversed the developments of the Weimar period, but also that the triumph of racist principles in Nazi welfare policy “points to a completely new understanding of social policy.” While there had been exclusionary tendencies in welfare policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the development of social policy over time had actually been “characterized by a dynamic of inclusion.” Nazi policy, which aimed at “the hardening of racial inequalities,” thus “sought a radical break with a central and secular developmental tendency of modernity.”⁷⁰ Hans-Uwe Otto

68. Peukert, “Genesis,” 236, 241.

69. Peukert, *Grenzen*, 77.

70. Sachse and Tennstedt, *Der Wohlfahrtsstaat im Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart, 1988), 274, 275, 276, 277.

and Heinz Sünker concurred in a volume published in the same year: the National Socialist instrumentalization of welfare was driven by a “radicalization of critiques of the welfare state already familiar in the Weimar period” and constituted an “abandonment of the . . . generally social-integrative function” of social policy.⁷¹ Stefan Schnurr argued that the Nazi “welfare” system broke with earlier social policy in that it was guided explicitly by a “social-biological explanation of social problems” and by “openly exterminatory intent”; “interest in this form of radical, goal-rational translation of social-biological and eugenic ideologies into social policy, guided by naked cost-benefit calculations, is not to be found in the leading contemporary conceptualizations of social work.”⁷² In a definitive study of Weimar child welfare policy published in 1996, Markus Gräser held that the shift toward eugenic and biologicistic models and toward exclusion of the “inferior” in the later 1920s and in the depression “completely contradicted the inclusionary tendency of welfare policy.”⁷³ Finally, Young-sun Hong’s magisterial study of Weimar social policy, published in 1998, delivered a pithy summary statement: “The Nazi project for the racial reconstruction of society,” she held, “implied a fundamental redefinition of the meaning of welfare which stripped the concept of all liberal-Christian connotations” derived from the founding traditions of social policy; “continuities at the level of technique were themselves refunctionalized as they were subordinated to an antithetical system of substantive ends.”⁷⁴

To some degree these analyses sidestep the issue Peukert raised. The definition of individuals and groups as “outside” the norm, and subsequently a deep concern with those “intractable” or stubborn “cases” who refused help in integrating themselves into “normal” society, were inherent in the *inclusionary* project of social policy. This is the lasting contribution of Peukert to our understanding of German welfare history. And whatever the extent of the “refunctioning” of welfare systems by National Socialism, more fundamentally the point is simply that those systems — and often the personnel active in them — were there to be refunctionalized.

71. Hans-Uwe Otto and Heinz Sünker, “Volksgemeinschaft als Formierungsideologie des Nationalsozialismus: Zur Genesis und Geltung von ‘Volkspflege,’” both in *Politische Formierung und soziale Erziehung im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Hans-Uwe Otto and Heinz Sünker (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), esp. 65, 68; see also Heinz Sünker, “Sozialpolitik als ‘Volkspflege’ im Nationalsozialismus: Zur faschistischen Aufhebung von Wohlfahrtsstaatlichkeit,” *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 23 (1994).

72. Stefan Schnurr, “Die nationalsozialistische Funktionalisierung sozialer Arbeit: Zur Kontinuität und Diskontinuität der Praxis sozialer Berufe,” in *Politische Formierung*, ed. Otto and Sünker, 138, 139. See also Michael Prinz, “Wohlfahrtsstaat, Modernisierung, und Nationalsozialismus: Thesen zu ihrem Verhältnis,” in *Soziale Arbeit und Faschismus* ed. Hans-Uwe Otto and Heinz Sünker (Frankfurt am Main, 1989).

73. Marcus Gräser, *Der blockierte Wohlfahrtsstaat: Unterschichtsjugend und Jugendfürsorge in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1995), 158, 13.

74. Hong, *Welfare*, 276.

I would argue, moreover, that there was no very clear distinction, at the level of ultimate *aims*, between “inclusive” and “exclusionary” biopolitics. From the beginning the conceptual vocabulary of social welfare shared many key terms with that of eugenics (and later National Socialism). *Menschenökonomie* (human economy), the health of the national body (*Volkskörper*), the basis of national power in the number and health of the population, and cost-benefit analysis were all central elements of the discourse of welfare and social reform in Germany from the last third of the nineteenth century onward. The aim of the architects of the welfare state was much less to do good or be humane and ethical than it was to create a more powerful, productive, and stable society. This was the conceptual world of modern biopolitics. In short, the discourse of the early welfare state was unmistakably part of that broader modern discourse of biopolitics to which eugenics (among many other things) also belonged.

To give one significant example: Friedrich Naumann, a leading left-liberal social reformer and advocate of political democratization, remarked in his programmatic *Neudeutsche Wirtschaftspolitik* of 1902 that “the most important factor in the shaping of culture [*Kulturgestaltung*] is the quantity and quality of the human material itself.” He went on to urge his listeners to “picture for yourself humanity as an army at war,” in which no level of morale and no weapons technology could compensate for lack of physical strength and endurance.⁷⁵ Or again: Arthur Schlossmann, a political associate of Naumann and a leading figure in the campaign against infant mortality, told an assembly of notables in the industrial Rhineland in 1906 that:

In an age in which military strength is the foundation for the political position of a state relative to other states, every addition to the population must be most welcome, because it increases our influence in the concert of nations. And here in Düsseldorf, in the center of west German industry, I need not explain in detail what it means if we have 500,000 more people every year, if every year 500,000 new workers mature who can be welcome helpers in production for the world market and who are at the same time consumers for all that is produced. Population growth means heightened consumption and heightened consumption means heightened profits.⁷⁶

Such quotations could be multiplied at will.

And yet, the conclusions of the recent literature on social welfare, and the (implicit or explicit) critique of more teleological approaches to the relationship between welfare and National Socialism, are entirely justified with respect to the question of *means*. National Socialism *did* bring about a fundamental

75. Friedrich Naumann, *Neudeutsche Wirtschaftspolitik* (Berlin, 1902), 11–12.

76. Schlossmann, “Über die Organisation des Vereins für Säuglingsfürsorge im Regierungsbezirk Düsseldorf,” *Concordia* 15 (19098): 242. On Schlossmann see Weindling, *Health*, 200–2.

rupture in the development of the welfare state, specifically with respect to *how* the creation of the good society was to be accomplished.

For one thing, it would be easy to make too much of the exclusionary dynamic of inclusionary welfare theory. Again, one example must suffice. In his programmatic essay on social welfare published in 1918, Christian Jasper Klumker — another associate of Naumann, holder of the first chair in social work in Germany at the University of Frankfurt, and one of the intellectual fathers of the modern German child welfare system — explicitly rejected the crass “rationalistic utilitarian conception of life,” that judged people only by their earnings. The poor, he held, “are not simply worthless for economy and society, rather there is in them no small potential” — a creative and noneconomic potential that could be tapped to the good both of the individual poor person and of society.⁷⁷ It should be no surprise that Klumker was very skeptical of hereditarian theories of “ineducability” in the Weimar period; nor should it be surprising that he was dismissed in 1933, after calling a strike of his fellow academics at the University of Frankfurt in response to the Nazi purge of Jewish professors.⁷⁸

In fact, again, hereditarianism and eugenics were never a particularly influential part of early twentieth-century biopolitical discourse. For most of their history before 1933 welfare and eugenics were intellectually and politically opposed to each other. From its beginnings, the founders of eugenics had voiced the fear that welfare programs would keep alive individuals of inferior heredity, allow them to reproduce, and thus sabotage the evolutionary process. I would suggest that this is one reason why eugenics, especially before the late 1920s, was not particularly influential in Germany. Too many of its advocates were antiwelfare kibitzers who engaged in an enormously unrealistic and impolitic program of highly theoretical criticism (perhaps we could call it *Nörgelei*?) from the sidelines, while the mainstream of those concerned with biopolitics were busily engaged in arguably the greatest and most successful institution-building project in modern German history — the construction of the multifaceted welfare system, from social insurance through public health to programs in support of child and family welfare.

Again, some examples: in 1910, in the pages of the journal of the Society for Race Hygiene, one district physician suggested that the “physiological minimum of child mortality . . . is not the physiological optimum.” At that very moment, a massive campaign against infant mortality — what one advocate called a “popular movement” in 1908 — was creating infant and maternal

77. Christian Jasper Klumker, *Fürsorgewesen* (Leipzig, 1918), 15–18.

78. On Klumker see Franz Lerner, “Klumker, Christian Jasper,” in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* vol. 12 (Berlin, 1986), 144–45; Reyer, *Alte Eugenik*, 73–74.

health clinics all over the country.⁷⁹ In 1913, at a moment when child welfare advocates were laying out a program for a national child welfare system based on the universal right of each and every child to health, education, and socialization for effective citizenship, Ignatz Kaup warned of the “danger of indiscriminate welfare policy.” As infant mortality approached the single digits in the early 1920s, Friedrich Lenz was still suggesting that an infant mortality rate of 10 percent would be a reasonable “healthy” minimum.⁸⁰ In hindsight, the musings of eugenicists appear enormously significant; but at the time, they were largely irrelevant.

These differences reflect a more fundamental divergence, however. The new centrality of negative eugenics in the Nazi biopolitical complex genuinely did parallel and express a profound discursive shift, a shift in the underlying principles and strategy of biopolitical management in Germany. As the studies named above point out, the language of the Weimar welfare state was a language of entitlements and rights. For all its makers’ visions of national power, efficiency, and universal normalization, the Weimar welfare system was anchored in and mandated by the 1919 constitution as a required response to construed social rights held by every citizen — the right to employment or other provision for basic needs; the right to assistance in raising a large family; the right to education for “physical, mental, and social competence”; the right to collective bargaining, and so forth.⁸¹ The legislature of the new state strove valiantly to realize many of these rights through concrete legislation in the course of the 1920s.

This language of rights did not come out of nowhere in 1919. It was in fact the dominant vocabulary of the social reform project as it had emerged in the course of thirty — or more — years of discussion and institution building, particularly among left-liberals and Social Democrats at the municipal level. The purpose of that project was to create social stability and progress, economic growth and prosperity, and national unity and power in the context of the new, postliberal, commercial-industrial social order. The means to achieve this end was simple: to create a set of entitlements and rights that would give every citizen the material, intellectual, and organizational resources to shape his or her own life in a rational manner, in the teeth of proletarianization, industrial consolidation, and urbanization.⁸² In this system health, professional competence, or

79. Grassl, “Die Bekämpfung der Kindersterblichkeit vom Rassenstandpunkt”, *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie* 7 (1910): 190; Schlossmann, “Über die Organisation,” 239.

80. Ignatz Kaup, “Was kosten die Minderwertigen dem Staat?,” *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie* 10 (1913); Lenz cited in Stöckel, *Säuglingsfürsorge*, 86.

81. See *Reichsgesetzblatt* 1919, no. 152, 11 August 1919; English in Elmar M. Hucko, ed., *The Democratic Tradition: Four German Constitutions* (New York, 1987), 185–86 and 176.

82. See for example Holger J. Tober, *Deutscher Liberalismus und Sozialpolitik in der Ära des Wilhelminismus* (Husum, 1999), here 403; Karl Holl, Günther Trautmann, and Hans Vorländer, eds., *Sozialer Liberalismus* (Göttingen, 1986); Alastair P. Thompson, *Left Liberals, the State, and Popular*

active citizenship were constructed as a set of “needs,” and those needs as the origin of a set of “rights” to have them met.

In the Weimar model, then, the rights of the individual, guaranteed formally by the constitution and substantively by the welfare system, were the central element of the dominant program for the management of social problems. Almost no one in this period advocated expanding social provision out of the goodness of their hearts. This was a strategy of social management, of social engineering. The mainstream of social reform in Germany believed that guaranteeing basic social rights — the substantive or positive freedom of all citizens — was the best way to turn people into power, prosperity, and profit. In that sense, the democratic welfare state was — and is — democratic not despite of its pursuit of biopower, but because of it.

The contrast with the Nazi state is clear. National Socialism aimed to construct a system of social and population policy founded on the concept of individual duties, on the ubiquitous and total power of the state, and on the systematic absorption of every citizen by organizations that could implant that power at every level of their lives — in political and associational life, in the family, in the workplace, and in leisure activities. In the welfarist vision of Weimar progressives, the task of the state was to create an institutional framework that would give individuals the wherewithal to integrate themselves successfully into the national society, economy, and polity. The Nazis aimed, instead, to give the state the wherewithal to do with every citizen what it willed. And where Weimar welfare advocates understood themselves to be constructing a system of knowledge and institutions that would manage social problems, the Nazis fundamentally sought to abolish just that system by eradicating — by finding a “final solution” to — social problems.

Again, as Peukert pointed out, many advocates of a rights-based welfare structure were open to the idea that “stubborn” cases might be legitimate targets for sterilization; the right to health could easily be redefined as primarily a duty to be healthy, for example. But the difference between a strategy of social management built on the rights of the citizen and a system of racial policy built on the total power of the state is not merely a semantic one; such differences had very profound political implications, and established quite different constraints. The rights-based strategy was actually not very compatible with exclusionary and coercive policies; it relied too heavily on the cooperation of its targets and of armies of volunteers, it was too embedded in a democratic institutional structure and civil society, it lacked powerful legal and institutional

Politics in Wilhelmine Germany (Oxford, 2000); Jan Palmowski, *Urban Liberalism in Imperial Germany: Frankfurt am Main, 1866–1914* (Oxford, 1999).

instruments of coercion, and its rhetorical structure was too heavily slanted toward inclusion and tolerance.

This, then, is the transformation created by the Nazis. Here too, just as in the literature on eugenics, it has become clear that it was not so much a rupture at the level of goals or biopolitical discourse, as a rupture at the level of strategy — of political principle, political organization, and political practice. The decisive differences are to be found not so much in biopolitical discourse as in issues of institutional structure, regime form, and citizenship.

The central point here is really not whether the continuities or the discontinuities between Weimar (or Wilhelmian) and Nazi social policy are more important. Whether one reaches the one or the other conclusion, the question here is still the same: as Hans-Uwe Otto and Heinrich Sünker put it in 1989, whether or “in what manner social work, on the basis of its causes, conditions, and forms, contributed to the stabilization of power and the imposition of normal and terroristic standards under National Socialism.”⁸³ The question of the connection between social policy and fascist politics is debated; that of the relationship between the development of social policy and that of democratic political structures and practices in the years before 1933 and after 1949 is *not*. We seem always to end up talking about the same thing: the Nazis.

Eighty years after the creation of the Weimar Republic, and fifty after the creation on German soil of one of the most stable and successful of modern democratic welfare states, this almost exclusive focus on the question of the relationship between welfare and fascism is increasingly untenable. As Greg Eghigian remarked in a review of 1999, “Perhaps it is time for historians of the Weimar welfare state to look beyond the ‘failure of liberal politics’ in 1933 in order to make sense of liberalism’s astounding resurgence in the second half of the twentieth century.”⁸⁴ The term “liberalism” does not entirely describe either the Weimar welfare system or that of the Federal Republic; but the question Eghigian is asking here is the critical one. As the editors of a recent issue of the *European History Quarterly* devoted to the problem of democracy put it, “historians have not been inclined to see democracy as a problematic concept. They are far less likely, for example, to dwell on the ‘nature of democracy’ than on the ‘nature of fascism’ because the answer, by comparison, appears obvious.” While acknowledging the work of nineteenth-century historians who have begun to trace the development of democratic values and patterns of political

83. Hans-Uwe Otto and Heinz Sünker, “Nationalsozialismus, Volksgemeinschaft und soziale Arbeit,” in *Soziale Arbeit*, ed. Otto and Sünker, 10.

84. Greg Eghigian, review of Marcus Gräser, *Der blockierte Wohlfahrtsstaat* (Göttingen, 1995) and of Siegfried Weichlein, *Sozialmilieus und politische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1996), in *Central European History* 31 (1998): 461.

participation, they hold that, “For the twentieth century . . . , this work has hardly commenced.”⁸⁵

This criticism is of course not entirely accurate. To give just one example, Geoff Eley has explored the development of both the radical Right and more progressive reform groupings for close to three decades, and has for some years been at the forefront of the effort to uncover the roots of postwar democracy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁶ And while Eley’s work focuses on the century-long struggle of the European Left to achieve democratic reform, others, like Noel Cary, have traced the roots of Christian Democracy in Germany back to the turn of the twentieth century.⁸⁷

And yet, it is true that this work has yet to be built into our theorizations of the potentials of modernity. Tellingly, for example, the history of biopolitics, to which Geoff Eley has made such important theoretical contributions, barely surfaces in his history of modern European democracy — and then as a deficit in the thinking of the Left.⁸⁸

The need to theorize the place of the democratic welfare state in biopolitical, social-engineering modernity is, however, obvious. This is a state form that — in local variations — was built in the course of the 1950s and 1960s in almost every European country in which people had meaningful political choices, virtually regardless of which political party was in government, and has survived ever since without a single major political upheaval, and certainly without significant episodes of internal violence. (The only modern regime form that comes remotely close — and not very close, for that matter — to this record is the liberal parliamentary regime form installed in much of Europe in the last third of the nineteenth century.) The German case offers perhaps the most extraordinary example of the almost monolithic stability of this political system. It hardly needs to be said that the Third Reich, in contrast, survived for twelve years, and was effectively dead after eight.

I want to stress that my point here is not that the democratic welfare state is a “good” thing. There is plenty about it that is reprehensible and frightening. It does wonderful things — the things it was built to do — for people; but it also

85. Tom Buchanan and Martin Conway, “The Politics of Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe: Introduction,” *European History Quarterly* 32 (2002): 8, 9.

86. See particularly Geoff Eley, “Cultural Socialism, the Public Sphere, and the Mass Form: Popular Culture and the Democratic Project, 1900 to 1934,” in *Between Reform and Revolution: German Socialism and Communism from 1840 to 1990*, ed. David Barclay and Eric Weitz (New York, 1998); Geoff Eley, “The Social Construction of Democracy in Germany, 1871–1933,” in *The Social Construction of Democracy*, ed. George Reid Andrews and Herrick Chapman (New York, 1995); and Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002).

87. Noel Cary, *The Path to Christian Democracy: German Catholics and the Party System from Windthorst to Adenauer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

88. See Eley, *Forging*, 45, 186–87, 194, 197.

coerces, cajoles, massages, and incentivizes its citizens into behaving in certain ways. It “engineers” their lives, so to speak. It aims at achieving national power (now more often defined in economic rather than military terms, a discourse on skilled labor rather than on cannonfodder); it pathologizes difference; it disciplines the individual in myriad ways; it is driven by a “scientistic” and medicalizing approach to social problems; it is a creature of instrumental rationality. And it is, of course, embedded in a broader discursive complex (institutions, professions, fields of social, medical, and psychological expertise) that pursues these same aims in often even more effective and inescapable ways.⁸⁹

In short, the continuities between early twentieth-century biopolitical discourse and the practices of the welfare state in our own time are unmistakable. Both are instances of the “disciplinary society” and of biopolitical, regulatory, social-engineering modernity, and they share that genealogy with more authoritarian states, including the National Socialist state, but also fascist Italy, for example. And it is certainly fruitful to view them from this very broad perspective. But that analysis can easily become superficial and misleading, because it obfuscates the profoundly different strategic and local dynamics of power in the two kinds of regimes. Clearly the democratic welfare state is not only formally but also substantively quite different from totalitarianism. Above all, again, it has nowhere developed the fateful, radicalizing dynamic that characterized National Socialism (or for that matter Stalinism), the psychotic logic that leads from economic population management to mass murder. Again, there is always the potential for such a discursive regime to generate coercive policies. In those cases in which the regime of rights does not successfully produce “health,” such a system can — and historically does — create compulsory programs to enforce it. But again, there are political and policy potentials and constraints in such a structuring of biopolitics that are very different from those of National Socialist Germany. Democratic biopolitical regimes require, enable, and incite a degree of self-direction and participation that is functionally incompatible with authoritarian or totalitarian structures. And this pursuit of biopolitical ends through a regime of democratic citizenship does appear, historically, to have imposed increasingly narrow limits on coercive policies, and to have generated a “logic” or imperative of increasing liberalization. Despite limitations imposed by political context and the slow pace of discursive change, I think this is the unmistakable message of the really very impressive waves of legislative and welfare reforms in the 1920s or the 1970s in Germany.⁹⁰

89. Christoph Sachsse and Florian Tennstedt, “Sicherheit und Disziplin,” in *Soziale Sicherheit und soziale Disziplinierung*, ed. idem (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), esp. 11–14.

90. For a study characterizing Stalinism as one extreme of the European welfare state, see Steven Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995).

Of course it is not yet clear whether this is an irreversible dynamic of such systems. Nevertheless, such regimes are characterized by sufficient degrees of autonomy (and of the potential for its expansion) for sufficient numbers of people that I think it becomes useful to conceive of them as productive of a strategic configuration of power relations that might fruitfully be analyzed as a condition of “liberty,” just as much as they are productive of constraint, oppression, or manipulation. At the very least, totalitarianism cannot be the sole orientation point for our understanding of biopolitics, the only end point of the logic of social engineering.

This notion is not at all at odds with the core of Foucauldian (and Peukertian) theory. Democratic welfare states are regimes of power/knowledge no less than early twentieth-century totalitarian states; these systems are not “opposites,” in the sense that they are two alternative ways of organizing the same thing. But they are two very *different* ways of organizing it. The concept “power” should not be read as a universal stifling night of oppression, manipulation, and entrapment, in which all political and social orders are grey, are essentially or effectively “the same.” Power is a set of social relations, in which individuals and groups have varying degrees of autonomy and effective subjectivity. And discourse is, as Foucault argued, “tactically polyvalent.” Discursive elements (like the various elements of biopolitics) can be combined in different ways to form parts of quite different strategies (like totalitarianism or the democratic welfare state); they cannot be assigned to one place in a structure, but rather circulate. The varying possible constellations of power in modern societies create “multiple modernities,” modern societies with quite radically differing potentials.⁹¹

Biopolitics: Who Is Doing What To Whom?

This understanding of the democratic *and* totalitarian potentials of biopolitics at the level of the state needs to be underpinned by a reassessment of how biopolitical discourse operates in society at large, at the “prepolitical” level. I would like to try to offer here the beginnings of a reconceptualization of biopolitical modernity, one that focuses less on the machinations of technocrats and experts, and more on the different ways that biopolitical thinking circulated within German society more broadly.

It is striking, then, that the new model of German modernity is even more relentlessly negative than the old *Sonderweg* model. In that older model, pre-modern elites were constantly triumphing over the democratic opposition. But at least there was an opposition; and in the long run, time was on the side of that opposition, which in fact embodied the historical movement of modern-

91. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 100–2; S. N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple.”

ization. In the new model, there is virtually a biopolitical consensus.⁹² And that consensus is almost always fundamentally a nasty, oppressive thing, one that partakes in crucial ways of the essential quality of National Socialism. Everywhere biopolitics is intrusive, technocratic, top-down, constraining, limiting. Biopolitics is almost never conceived of — or at least discussed in any detail — as creating possibilities for people, as expanding the range of their choices, as empowering them, or indeed as doing anything positive for them at all.

Of course, at the most simple-minded level, it seems to me that an assessment of the potentials of modernity that ignores the ways in which biopolitics has made life tangibly better is somehow deeply flawed. To give just one example, infant mortality in Germany in 1900 was just over 20 percent; or, in other words, one in five children died before reaching the age of one year. By 1913, it was 15 percent; and by 1929 (when average real purchasing power was not significantly higher than in 1913) it was only 9.7 percent.⁹³ The expansion of infant health programs — an enormously ambitious, bureaucratic, medicalizing, and sometimes intrusive, social engineering project — had a great deal to do with that change. It would be bizarre to write a history of biopolitical modernity that ruled out an appreciation for how absolutely wonderful and astonishing this achievement — and any number of others like it — really was. There was a reason for the “*Machbarkeitswahn*” of the early twentieth century: many marvelous things were in fact becoming *machbar*. In that sense, it is not really accurate to call it a “*Wahn*” (delusion, craziness) at all; nor is it accurate to focus only on the “inevitable” frustration of “delusions” of power. Even in the late 1920s, many social engineers could and did look with great satisfaction on the changes they genuinely had the power to accomplish.

Concretely, moreover, I am not convinced that power operated in only one direction — from the top down — in social work. Might we not ask whether people actually demanded welfare services, and whether and how social workers and the state struggled to respond to those demands? David Crew and Greg Eghigian, for example, have given us detailed studies of the micropolitics of welfare in the Weimar period in which it becomes clear that conflicts between welfare administrators and their “clients” were sparked not only by heavy-handed intervention, but also by refusal to help.⁹⁴ What is more, the specific nature of social programs matters a great deal, and we must distinguish between

92. See for example Osborne, *The Politics* and Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*.

93. MB. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970* (New York, 1975), 130. By 1969 it had fallen to 2.3 percent (132).

94. See David Crew, “The Ambiguities of Modernity: Welfare and the German State from Wilhelm to Hitler”, in *Society*, ed. Eley; David Crew, *Germans on Welfare: From Weimar to Hitler* (New York, 1998); Greg Eghigian, *Making Security Social: Disability, Insurance, and the Birth of the Social Entitlement State in Germany* (Ann Arbor, 2000).

the different dynamics (and histories) of different programs. The removal of children from their families for placement in foster families or reformatories was bitterly hated and stubbornly resisted by working-class families; but mothers brought their children to infant health clinics voluntarily and in numbers, and after 1945 they brought their older children to counseling clinics, as well. In this instance, historians of the German welfare state might profit from the “demand side” models of welfare development that are sometimes more explicitly explored in some of the international literature.⁹⁵

In fact, even where social workers really were attempting to limit or subvert the autonomy and power of parents, I am not sure that their actions can be characterized *only* and *exclusively* as part of a microphysics of oppression. Progressive child welfare advocates in Germany, particularly in the National Center for Child Welfare, waged a campaign in the 1920s to persuade German parents and educators to stop beating children with such ferocity, regularity, and nonchalance. They did so because they feared the unintended physical and psychological effects of beatings, and implicitly because they believed physical violence could compromise the development of the kind of autonomous, self-reliant subjectivity on which a modern state had to rely in its citizenry.⁹⁶ Or, to give another common example from the period, children removed from their families after being subjected by parents or other relatives to repeated episodes of violence or rape were being manipulated by biopolitical technocrats, and were often abused in new ways in institutions or foster families; but they were also being liberated. Sometimes some forms of the exercise of power in society are in some ways emancipatory; and that is historically significant.

Further, of course we must ask whether it is really true that social workers' and social agencies' attempts to manipulate people worked. My own impression is that social policy makers grew increasingly aware, between the 1870s and the 1960s, that their own ends could not be achieved unless they won the cooperation of the targets of policy. And to do that, they had to offer people things that they wanted and needed. Policies that incited resistance were — sometimes with glacial slowness, after stubborn and embittered struggles — de-emphasized or even abandoned. Should we really see the history of social welfare policy as a more or less static (because the same thing is always happening) history of the

95. Examples include Margot Horn, *Before It's Too Late: The Child Guidance Movement in the United States, 1920–1945* (Philadelphia, 1989); Robert van Krieken, *Children and the State: Social Control and the Formation of Australian Child Welfare* (Sydney, 1992); Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston, 1880–1960* (New York, 1988); Bronwyn Labrum, “Family Needs and Family Desires: Discretionary State Welfare in New Zealand, 1920–1970” (Ph.D. diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2000).

96. See Hedwig Abel, “Die rechtlichen Grundlagen der körperlichen Züchtigung im Deutschen Reich und in den deutschen Ländern,” *Archiv für Soziale Hygiene und Demographie* 4 (1929): 358–62.

imposition of manipulative policies on populations? I believe a more complex model of the evolution of social policy as a system of social interaction, involving conflicting and converging demands, constant negotiation, struggle, and — above all — mutual learning would be more appropriate. This is a point Abram de Swaan and others have made at some length; but it does not appear to have been built into our theory of modernity very systematically, least of all in German history.⁹⁷

All of these questions, however, still address primarily the activities of technocrats and social managers. We are still asking how bad social engineering is. In fact, this entire discourse seems to be shaped by the fundamental suspicion that trying actively to create a better society is always and necessarily a bad thing — an undemocratic, manipulative, oppressive thing.⁹⁸ This assumption is rooted in a particular understanding of the micropolitics of expertise and professionalism. It is frequently argued that modern forms of technical knowledge and licensing create relations of dominance and subordination between experts and their “clients.” Thus Paul Weindling, for example, asserted that, “Professionalism, reinforced by official powers, meant that welfare defined new spheres for the exercising of coercion . . . The new technocracy of professions and welfare administrators might be seen as erecting antidemocratic and coercive social structures by extending the welfare state.” Michael Schwartz, similarly, observed in 1992 that “even in the democratic variant of science there was a tendency to technocratic elitism” and the “scientistic objectification of humanity.”⁹⁹ And Detlev Peukert reminded us that “rationalization as a strategy of experts inherently contained [*barg systematisch*] the danger of the technocratic arrogance of experts, the overwhelming of those affected by the catalog of norms for rational living derived from the expert knowledge of the professions, but not from the experience of those affected.”¹⁰⁰ Even more sinister, again, is the tendency of these same experts to exclude, stigmatize, and pathologize those they are not able to “normalize.” Zygmunt Bauman has presented the same case with a particular clarity, concluding that since modernity is “about” order, and order always implies its opposite, chaos, “intolerance is . . . the natural inclination of modern practice. Construction of order sets the limits to incorporation and

97. Abram de Swaan, *The Management of Normality: Critical Essays in Health and Welfare* (London, 1991), esp. 156–58. See also Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik* 241, and the literature (Niklas Luhmann, Stefan Breuer, Norbert Elias) cited there.

98. Again, Bauman’s formulation is revealing: for him, “making things better than they are” means making them “more pliable, obedient, willing to serve.” *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 39.

99. Michael Schwartz, “Eugenik und Bevölkerungspolitik,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 32 (1992): 434; Weindling, *Health*, 343 quoted in *ibid.*, 440.

100. Detlev Peukert, “‘Rationalisierung’ zwischen utopischem Entwurf und krisenhafter Zurücknahme,” in *idem*, *Max Webers Diagnose*, 79, 81.

admission. It calls for the denial of rights, and of the grounds, of everything that cannot be assimilated — for the de-legitimation of the other.”¹⁰¹

At its simplest, this view of the politics of expertise and professionalization is certainly plausible. Historically speaking, however, the further conjecture that this “micropolitical” dynamic creates authoritarian, totalitarian, or homicidal potentials at the level of the state does not seem very tenable. Historically, it appears that the greatest advocates of political democracy — in Germany left-liberals and Social Democrats — have been also the greatest advocates of every kind of biopolitical social engineering, from public health and welfare programs through social insurance to city planning and, yes, even eugenics.¹⁰² The state they built has intervened in social relations to an (until recently) ever-growing degree; professionalization has run ever more rampant in Western societies; the production of scientific and technocratic expert knowledge has proceeded at an ever more frenetic pace. And yet, from the perspective of the first years of the millennium, the second half of the twentieth century appears to be the great age of democracy in precisely those societies where these processes have been most in evidence. What is more, the interventionist state has steadily expanded both the rights and the resources of virtually every citizen — including those who were stigmatized and persecuted as biologically defective under National Socialism. Perhaps these processes have created an ever more restrictive “iron cage” of rationality in European societies. But if so, it seems clear that there is no necessary correlation between rationalization and authoritarian politics; the opposite seems in fact to be at least equally true.

Oddly enough, fundamentally our vision of science and the welfare state sounds rather like liberal and conservative critiques of science and the welfare state any time between the 1880s and the 1950s. Critiques of the iron cage of rationality and of the moral emptiness of instrumental and scientific rationality were commonplaces in the milieu of left-liberal social science, or in the milieu of conservative Christian social teaching, at the very moment when the whole complex of biopolitics was being aggressively constructed. Nor is the idea that Auschwitz was a product of the Enlightenment particularly new. Christian critics warned of the murderous potentials of Darwinist thought for decades before 1933, and by the 1950s Auschwitz could be taken by many critics of modernity as merely a confirmation of an analysis they had long championed — as when,

101. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 8. For a similar view see Nancy Stepan, “Race, Gender, Science, and Citizenship,” in *Cultures of Empire*, ed. Catherine Hall (New York, 2000), esp. 68.

102. See for example Grossmann, *Reforming*, 161; Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik*, esp. 12–14; and the older discussions of British eugenics in Diane Paul, “Eugenics and the Left,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45 (1984) and Michael Freeden, “Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity,” *Historical Journal* 22 (1979).

for example, in 1954 Hugo Müller saw in the impersonal rules and procedures of the welfare state a glaring example of a process of dehumanization, depersonalization, and alienation that began with Kant's commitment to abstract moral imperatives and culminated in a program of mass murder that sacrificed individual persons in the name of the abstraction "humanity."¹⁰³ And at root our vision shares something important with that of the conservative Catholic ministerial official Friedrich Rothe, who remarked before the FRG's Federal Council on Youth Affairs in 1957 that the "dissolution of ethical principles" that underpinned and resulted from the expansion of the welfare state was "unconsciously preparing our delivery into the hands of totalitarian forces."¹⁰⁴ This kind of analysis may or may not be partially correct; but it seems to me that we should take care not to allow our theorization of modernity to be overly influenced by the perspective of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, who viewed it with profound and not quite disinterested pessimism.

In any case, the focus on the activities and ambitions of the social engineers in the literature on biopolitical modernity has begun to reach the point of diminishing returns. In the current literature, it seems that biopolitics is almost always *acting on* (or attempting to act on) people; it is almost never something they do. This kind of model is not very realistic. This is not how societies work. The example of the attempt to create a eugenic counseling system in Prussia should be instructive in this respect. Here public health and eugenics experts — technocrats — tried to impart their sense of eugenic crisis and their optimism about the possibility of creating a better "race" to the public; and they successfully mobilized the resources of the state in support of their vision. And yet, what emerged quite quickly from this effort was in fact a system of public contraceptive advice — or family planning. It is not so easy to impose technocratic ambitions on the public, particularly in a democratic state; and "on the ground," at the level of interactions with actual persons and social groups, public policy often takes on a life of its own, at least partially independent of the fantasies of technocrats.

This is of course a point that Foucault makes with particular clarity. The power of discourse is not the power of manipulative elites, which control it and impose it from above. Manipulative elites always face resistance, often effective, resistance. More important, the power of discourse lies precisely in its ability to set the terms for such struggles, to define what they are *about*, as much as what

103. Hugo Möller, "Massengesellschaft und Du-Vergessenheit," *Die Sammlung* 9 (1954), quotation 575. There is a useful collection of critical essays on Weber in Scott Lash and Sam Whimster, eds., *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, (London, 1987).

104. Friedrich Rothe, "Gedanken zu einem Jugendhilfegesetz," *Archiv des Deutschen Caritas-Verbandes*, Rep. 319.4 (Sozialdienst Katholischer Frauen), no. E II.7, fasc. 4. On earlier critiques of Nazi modernity, see Schildt, "NS-Regime," 5.

their outcomes are. As Foucault put it, power — including the power to manage life — “comes from everywhere.”¹⁰⁵ Biomedical knowledge was not the property only of technocrats, and it could be used to achieve ends that had little to do with their social-engineering schemes.¹⁰⁶ Modern biopolitics is a multifaceted world of discourse and practice elaborated and put into practice at multiple levels throughout modern societies. And of course it is often no less economic — no less based on calculations of cost and benefit — at the level of the individual or family than it is in the technocrats’ visions of national efficiency.

In fact, the literature of the past twenty years has made it abundantly clear that a great deal of “official” biopolitical discourse generated by academics and civil servants was essentially reactive. A vast amount of discussion among eugenics, population policy, and welfare experts focused on the concrete “problem” of the demographic transition of the early twentieth century. It was the use of reproductive knowledge and reproductive technology by millions of Europeans to limit their fertility — the *Geburtenrückgang* or decline of births, in German parlance — that was the center of concern. While much of the historical literature stresses the role of science in shaping technocratic ambition, of course actually a large proportion of the technocrats’ discourse was concerned with orchestrating a return to more “natural” and less technologically-enabled reproductive patterns. The problem, particularly for the more influential moderate and pronatalist branch of eugenics, was not only how to apply modern science to humanity, but more importantly how to get humanity to stop applying modern science to itself.

Atina Grossmann, in her history of the organized mass popular movement for fertility control in Germany in the 1920s, has given us a good example of what this shift in perspective can reveal. Grossmann stresses the technocratic ambition and relatively conservative intent of many medical sex reformers, the power of the “motherhood-eugenics consensus” to shape and limit acceptable definitions of women’s social and sexual roles and aspirations in this period, and the prevalence of the rhetoric of “social health, medicalization, cost effectiveness, and national welfare.” And yet, in the final analysis she describes a powerful reform movement that helped to spread contraceptives and contraceptive knowledge widely among the German population. Popular groups were “increasingly insistent that the working class also had a right to the benefits of scientific progress” (in the form of contraceptive technologies); and while most of the medical establishment opposed the widespread use of contraceptives, the popular movement garnered critical support from radical socialists within the med-

105. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93, 147.

106. See for example Anna Bergmann, *Die verhütete Sexualität* (Hamburg, 1992); Karen Hagemann, *Frauenalltag und Männerpolitik* (Bonn, 1990).

ical profession. As Grossmann remarks, “the German case is instructive precisely because it illustrates the fallacies of setting up rigid categories of ‘popular’ and ‘professional.’”¹⁰⁷

In short: is the microphysics of modern power/knowledge always the microphysics of oppression, exploitation, and manipulation? Are technocratic elites always in charge of the imperatives of discourse — or do discourses have their own logic, which technocrats can define, escape or direct no more (or less) than can anyone else? Discourse may or may not be a locomotive, driving down a predetermined track and dictating individual decisions and fates by its own internal logic; but even if it is, the technocrats aren’t driving it, and in fact their schemes may get flattened just as effectively as the autonomy of the average citizen. Biopolitical policy as a field of state activity was often the product of technocratic “readings” of biopolitical discourse. But it was only one small part of a much broader process by which a large proportion of the German population came to define their needs and aspirations in new ways. We need not exaggerate the degrees of freedom that process generated to be able to appreciate that in some cases, to some extent, and sometimes willy-nilly, discourse and policy were actually a response to that broader process of redefinition — in short, to “demand-side” pressures.

Uncoupling “technocracy” from “discourse” is not yet enough, however. We should also be alive to the ways in which new social practices, institutions, and knowledge generated new choices — a limited range of them, constrained by all kinds of discursive and social frameworks, but nonetheless historically new and significant. Modern biopolitics did create, in a real sense, not only new constraints but also new degrees of freedom — new levers that increased people’s power to move their own worlds, to shape their own lives. Our understanding of modern biopolitics will be more realistic and more fruitful if we reconceptualize its development as a complex process in which the implications of those new choices were negotiated out in the social and discursive context. Again, in the early twentieth century many more conservative biopolitical “experts” devoted much of their energy precisely to trying — without any discernable success — to control those new degrees of freedom. For most social liberals and Social Democrats, however, those new choices were a potential source of greater social efficiency and social dynamism. State policy reflected the constant negotiation and tension between these perspectives.

Nor should we stop at a reexamination of knowledge and technology. It might make sense, too, to reexamine the process of institution-building, the elaboration of the practices and institutions of biopolitics. No doubt the creation of public and private social welfare institutions created instruments for the

107. Grossmann, *Reforming*, 18, 44, 47, 61.

study, manipulation, or control of individuals and groups. But it also generated opportunities for self-organization and participation by social groups of all kinds. Grossmann's birth control movement was but one instance of the explosive growth of the universe of associational life in the field of biopolitics, which itself was only one small part of a much broader development: the self-creation of a new, urban industrial social order, the creation of a self-government of society through myriad nongovernmental organizations. In these organizations, citizens were acting to shape their own lives in ways that were often fundamentally important as part of lived experience — of the “life world.” Of course there was nothing inherently democratic about these organizations or their social functions — many were authoritarian in structure, many cultivated a tendentially elitist culture of expertise, and some pursued exclusionary and discriminatory agendas. Nevertheless, they institutionalized pluralism, solicited participation, enforced public debate, and effectively sabotaged simple authoritarian government. Again, National Socialist totalitarianism was in part a response precisely to the failure of political, social, and cultural elites to contain and control this proliferation of voices, interests, and influence groups.¹⁰⁸

Private organizations, further, were not the only ones that helped to build habits and structures of participation. The German state deliberately recruited citizens and nongovernmental organizations to help it formulate and implement welfare policy. It had to, for no state could possibly mobilize the resources necessary for such a gigantic task. And of course often the policy initiative came from the other direction — from private organizations engaged in elaborating biopolitical discourses of various kinds, and working to mobilize the authority and resources of the state to achieve the ends they defined for themselves. That was an intended consequence of the creation of a democratic republic. As S. N. Eisenstadt wrote in 2000, an important part of the project of modernity was “a very strong emphasis on the autonomous participation of members of society in the constitution of the social and political order.”¹⁰⁹ Again, the massive, state-orchestrated mobilization of the German population in the Nazi period or in the German Democratic Republic (not least in welfare organizations) should remind us that such mobilization is not necessarily democratic in nature; this is a point made amply for the Weimar period too by, for example, Peter Fritzsche.¹¹⁰ But obviously, it *could* be, and in fact, before 1933 and after 1949 in the Federal Republic of Germany, very often was.

108. See Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill, 1985) and Margaret Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 2000). There is a good discussion of these issues in Geoff Eley, “The Social Construction.”

109. Eisenstadt, “Multiple,” 5. For an even more positive assessment of “Western modernity,” see Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture* 14 (2002): esp. 92, 99, 103.

110. See Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” 638; also his *Germans and Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York, 1990).

The Twentieth Century: Age of Biopolitics and Democracy?

We know that eugenics, public health, and welfare all appealed across the political, religious, and ideological spectrum, and around the world, in the early twentieth century. We know that strategies of biopolitical management that were in important ways fundamentally similar were adopted throughout the European world — in Sweden, Italy, France, England, the United States, even arguably in the Soviet Union — in this period, and in the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, and the two postwar German states. “The social” as a discursive field is modern, it is not a peculiarity of any national history. National Socialist racial policy was an extreme case of a general phenomenon. These patterns pose a simple but important question: what *was* the relationship between biopolitics and regime form?

One answer might be to argue — as Michael Schwartz and Peter Fritzsche have suggested — that regimes that arise for reasons having little to do with this aspect of modernity “choose” their biopolitics to suit their needs and principles. Victoria de Grazia, for example, has suggested that differing class coalitions determine regime forms, and that regime forms determine the “shape” of biopolitics.¹¹¹ This is obviously not the approach that has predominated in the literature on Germany, however, which has explored in great depth the positive contribution that modern biopolitics made to the construction of National Socialism. This approach may well exaggerate the importance of biopolitics; but, in purely heuristic terms, it has been extremely fruitful. I want to suggest that it might be equally fruitful to stand it on its head, so to speak. One could easily conclude from this literature that modern biopolitics “fits” primarily authoritarian, totalitarian, technocratic, or otherwise undemocratic regimes, and that democracy has prevailed in Europe in the teeth of the development of technocratic biopolitics. Again, however, the history of twentieth-century Germany, including the five decades after World War II, suggests that this is a fundamentally implausible idea. A more productive conclusion might be that we need to begin to work out the extent and nature of the positive contribution biopolitics has made to the construction *also* of democratic regimes.

Why was Europe’s twentieth century, in addition to being the age of biopolitics and totalitarianism, also the age of biopolitics and *democracy*? How should we theorize *this* relationship? I would like to offer five propositions as food for thought.

First, again, the concept of the essential legitimacy and social value of individual needs, and hence the imperative of individual rights as the political mechanism for getting them met, has historically been a cornerstone of some

111. See Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women* (Berkeley, 1992), 3.

strategies of social management. To borrow a phrase from Detlev Peukert, this does not mean that democracy was the “absolutely inevitable” outcome of the development of biopolitics; but it does mean that it was “one among other possible outcomes of the crisis of modern civilization.”¹¹²

Second, I would argue that there is also a causal fit between cultures of expertise, or “scientism,” and democracy. Of course, “scientism” subverted the real, historical ideological underpinnings of authoritarian polities in Europe in the nineteenth century. It also in a sense replaced them. Democratic citizens have the freedom to ask “why”; and in a democratic system there is therefore a bias toward pragmatic, “objective” or naturalized answers — since values are often regarded as matters of opinion, with which any citizen has a right to differ. Scientific “fact” is democracy’s substitute for revealed truth, expertise its substitute for authority. The age of democracy is the age of professionalization, of technocracy; there is a deeper connection between the two, this is not merely a matter of historical coincidence.

Third, the vulnerability of explicitly moral values in democratic societies creates a problem of legitimation. Of course there are moral values that all democratic societies must in some degree uphold (individual autonomy and freedom, human dignity, fairness, the rule of law), and those values are part of their strength. But as people’s states, democratic social and political orders are also implicitly and often explicitly expected to do something positive and tangible to enhance the well-being of their citizens. One of those things, of course, is simply to provide a rising standard of living; and the visible and astonishing success of that project has been crucial to all Western democracies since 1945. Another is the provision of a rising standard of health; and here again, the democratic welfare state has “delivered the goods” in concrete, measurable, and extraordinary ways. In this sense, it may not be so simpleminded, after all, to insist on considering the fact that modern biopolitics has “worked” phenomenally well.

Fourth, it was precisely the democratizing dynamic of modern societies that made the question of the “quality” of the mass of the population seem — and not only in the eyes of the dominant classes — increasingly important. Again, in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the expected level of the average citizen’s active participation in European political, social, cultural, and economic life rose steadily, as did the expected level of her effective influence in all these spheres. This made it a matter of increasing importance whether the average person was more or less educated and informed, more or less moral and self-disciplined, more or less healthy and physically capable, more or less socially competent. And modern social reform — “biopolitics” defined

112. Peukert, “Genesis,” 242, 236.

very broadly — seemed to offer the possibility of creating the human foundation for a society ordered by autonomous participation, rather than by obedience. This too was part of the *Machbarkeitswahn* of modernity; but this was potentially a democratic “*Wahn*,” not only an authoritarian one.

Fifth, historically there has been a clear connection between the concept of political citizenship and the idea of moral autonomy. The political “subject” (or citizen — as opposed to the political subject, who is an object of state action) is also a moral subject. The citizen’s capacity for moral reasoning is the legitimating postulate of all democratic politics. The regulation of sexual and reproductive life has long been understood in European societies to be among the most fundamental issues of morality. There is, therefore, a connection between political citizenship on the one hand, and the sexual and reproductive autonomy implied in the individual control that is a central element of the modern biopolitical complex, on the other. The association in the minds of conservatives in the late imperial period between democracy and declining fertility was not a panicky delusion; panicky it certainly was, but it was also a genuine insight into a deeper ideological connection.¹¹³

Perhaps it should not be surprising, therefore, that the first great homeland of eugenic legislation was the United States — the first great homeland of modern democracy. In fact the United States served both as a kind of promised land for racial and eugenic “progressives” in Germany, and as a worst-case scenario of “regression into barbarism” for those opposed to coercive eugenic measures.¹¹⁴ Nor should it be surprising that, apart from Nazi Germany, the other great land of eugenic sterilization in Europe in the 1930s was Scandinavia, where democratic governments heavily influenced by social democratic parties were busily constructing the most ambitious and extensive welfare states in the world.¹¹⁵

The lesson is not that modern democracy is “dangerous” or destructive, much less that it is crypto-fascist — that, as Jacques Donzelot put it, the 1930s was the age of “social fascism” and our own age that of “social sector fascism.”¹¹⁶ The relevant message is, rather, that it is time to place the less familiar history of modern democratic biopolitics alongside the more familiar history of modern totalitarian biopolitics. The dream of perfectibility — *Machbarkeitswahn* — is central to modernity. But social engineering, the management of

113. This is an issue addressed in Edward Ross Dickinson, “The Men’s Christian Morality Movement in Germany, 1880–1914: Some Reflections on Sex, Politics, and Sexual Politics,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003).

114. Weingart et al., *Rasse*, 287 (quotation), 363–64; Richter, *Katholizismus*, 201; Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement,” 26.

115. See Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, eds., *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland* (East Lansing, 1996).

116. Philippe Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York, 1979), 174–75, 187.

society, can be organized in different ways. Historically, totalitarian biopolitics was a self-destructive failure. Democratic biopolitics has, in contrast, been — not in any moral sense, but politically — a howling success. For the historian interested in modernity, that story is no less interesting or important than the story of the implosion of the Nazi racial state.

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