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# Perfecting Humankind: A Comparison of Progressive and Nazi Views on Eugenics, Sterilization and Abortion

by

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During 1996 and 1997 the world was shocked when there were revelations that many western democracies had engaged in forced sterilization of people for eugenic reasons. The dictionary defines eugenics as: "...a science concerned with improving...the human species, by such means as influencing or encouraging reproduction by persons presumed to have desirable genetic traits."<sup>1</sup> Another definition of eugenics is "well born."<sup>2</sup>

The term "eugenics" was first coined in 1883 by an Englishman, Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin.<sup>3</sup> However, it was in North America, especially the United States, that the eugenics movement really became established. In 1910, the first major eugenics research institution, the Eugenics Records Office, was founded, and in 1923, the American Eugenics Society was formed, with branches in 29 states by the end of the decade. By 1928 there were 376 college courses on eugenics, and the subject found its way into high school text books by the mid 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Canada was not immune. The province of Alberta passed a sterilization bill in 1928. Its sponsor was a rancher who felt that genetic lessons he had learned in cattle raising could be applied to humankind, and who stated: "If it is the quantity of production of the human race that is desired, then we don't need this bill. But if we want quality, then it is a different matter."<sup>5</sup> Evidence given in a 1996 lawsuit contended that a disproportionate number of those sterilized from this law were from ethnic minorities and the poor.<sup>6</sup>

The eugenics movement was also international. In the canton of

Vaud in Switzerland many mentally handicapped patients were forcibly sterilized according to a 1928 law, a copy of which Hitler would request in 1934.<sup>7</sup> Between 1935 and 1976 some 60,000 mentally ill individuals, single mothers with many children, gypsies, and persons of mixed race were forcibly sterilized in Sweden, so that a healthier Swedish race would not make demands on the country's elaborate welfare society.<sup>8</sup> Similar practices occurred in Denmark, Norway, and Finland starting in the 1920s and 1930s, and, as of 1997, were still operative in Belgium and Austria.<sup>9</sup> In the latter, the Austrian Ministry of Justice recently promised to curtail the rights of parents to authorize sterilization of their handicapped children after complaints were made public.<sup>10</sup>

To repeat, however, despite the fact that the eugenics movement was international, by far the most work surrounding it occurred in the United States.<sup>11</sup> The model for the Swedish program, in existence from 1935 to 1976, was the United States.<sup>12</sup> Gerald Self, author of *The Mad Among Us*, says that the drive for Aryan race supremacy began in the United States.<sup>13</sup> If one looks at the life of Margaret Sanger in the United States, we see an interest in more than just birth control. While Sanger did not draw a distinction between "fit" and "unfit" along racial lines, as Nazi Germany would later do, she still believed that there were "unfit", which she listed as: the poor, epileptics, alcoholics, the "feeble minded", criminals, those physically and mentally disabled, and the insane. Conversely, the fit were those who were intelligent, sane, healthy, and wealthy.<sup>14</sup>

Sanger also believed that the unfit should not reproduce. In her 1922 book, *Pivot of Civilization* (New York: Brentano's, p. 187) she said that she disagreed with having the "fit" have more children but definitely supported the discouraging of "unfit" from having children, by force if necessary.<sup>15</sup> Previously, in her *Birth Control Review* (October, 1921, p.5) she had said: "Possibly drastic and Spartan methods may be forced upon society if it continues complacently to encourage the chance and chaotic breeding that has resulted from our stupidly cruel sentimentalism."<sup>16</sup>

Sanger thus believed not only in birth control, but in the use of it along with sterilization to promote eugenics. She did not believe in abortion (which this article will discuss later), and Planned Parenthood had this position until her death in 1966. Her disavowal of abortion, however, while approving of birth control, sterilization (including forced sterilization) and eugenics, was a tactical move. It was the result of the advice given her by her lover, Havelock Ellis, who convinced her that industrial society was not quite ready for it. Previous to this, she had spoken about "the right to destroy."<sup>17</sup> Sanger had very close contacts with sex reformers in Germany, and it would be the United States and Germany

where the subject of eugenics and sterilization would arouse the most interest.<sup>18</sup>

### Germany Between Wars

This article will now analyze sexual politics in Germany during both the democratic years of the Weimar Republic after World War I (1918-1933), and the years of Nazi rule before World War II (1933-1939). As an historian of genetic issues has put it: "...when all is said and done, it is the LOGIC of eugenics far more than its racism that proved to be the most unfortunate legacy of the German race hygiene movement for the Third Reich."<sup>19</sup>

The cultural atmosphere of the almost fifteen years of democratic rule in Germany (Weimar) before Hitler, was lively and diverse. Berlin emerged suddenly as the most innovative, culturally, of all the capital cities of Europe, second only to Paris.<sup>20</sup> William Shirer speaks of most Germans during this time as being democratic, liberal, even pacifist.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, it is also a common notion that the coming of Nazi rule in 1933 "...opened up a chain of primitive drives and animalic forces that seem to separate the world before and after Hitler..."<sup>22</sup> If one analyzes sexual politics (especially eugenics, sterilization and abortion) during both of these periods, however, a different picture emerges. Weimar to Hitler is not a case of white going to black, but a shift in shades of gray.

There had been a steady decline in the German birthrate since the late 19th century; families averaged only one child each. Culturally sophisticated Berlin had the lowest birthrate of any city in Europe. There was a general fear of the numerous Slavs to the east. Hence, there was a desire to raise the birthrate ("quantity").<sup>23</sup>

There were, however, particular problems for women. Many males had been killed in World War I, many women were in menial jobs, and there was a housing shortage. The lack of males meant it was difficult for women to marry, and if they were fortunate enough to marry, their jobs and the lack of housing made it difficult to raise children. Due to this situation, the government of the state of Prussia, which covered almost two-thirds of Germany, set up marriage counseling centers, which dispensed advice about fitness for marriage and procreation, encouraging the having of "healthy" offspring by avoiding certain marriages.<sup>24</sup> This desire for healthy children ("quality") almost contradicted the desire for a higher birthrate ("quantity").

Our discussion thus turns to the matters of eugenics and sterilization in the Weimar democracy. The first major sex reform organization (those desiring unlimited birth control and the liberalizing,

preferably legalizing, of abortion) was the National League for Birth Control and Sexual Hygiene. This organization, and there were others like it, was also interested in eugenics and sterilization. Its Hamburg branch, for example, had lectures such as "Race Theory, Eugenics, and Sterilization," and "The Extermination of Unfit Life," in which they put forth the idea that collective welfare and fitness should be the chief concerns in reproduction. Sex reformers in this democracy believed in the perfectibility of the human race, worshipped the body, and were even convinced that the quality of intercourse affected the end product.<sup>25</sup>

Women or Socialist physicians were among the strongest advocates for legalization of abortion, as well as the most avid proponents of eugenic sterilization, never ruling out coercive sterilization, so as to separate the responsible from the "irresponsible", believing it to be clean, quick, permanent, with no costly follow up, and containing less of a stigma than abortion.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the activities of the Prussian state government, the sex reform societies, and prominent female and socialist physicians, the national government also became involved in eugenics and sterilization. In 1928, ministry officials at the Department of Health held secret sessions with the most prominent racial thinkers in Germany, in which they talked about the possibilities of forced sterilization and killing of the severely mentally disabled, among a number of other measures. The law, uneasiness about public opinion, and a desire for more knowledge about heredity, held them back.<sup>27</sup> As the Depression with all of its harshness descended on Germany, however, the Prussian State Council (remember, Prussia covered almost two-thirds of Germany) stated in 1932: "Do we not already have far too many inferior people who clearly swell the army of welfare applicants? Mankind would be spared an enormous amount of suffering if many of these people were never born."<sup>28</sup> This brings us now to a discussion of abortion in the Weimar democracy.

### **Abortion as a National Issue**

The campaign to legalize abortion, or to liberalize Section 218 of the 1871 national law that forbade it, was an issue for almost the entire history of the Weimar democracy. Some nineteen measures concerning reform/legalization were introduced between 1919 and 1932.<sup>29</sup> Most of the debate occurred from 1920 to 1930, before there was any sizable number of Nazis in the national parliament, the Reichstag.

Supported by the political left (Communists, Socialists, Democrats), advocates for liberalization or legalization made arguments, most of which are still being used today:

- Women needed to control their reproduction better, now that so many were workers as well as wives and mothers.
- It was difficult to raise children during the dislocation after the war and the inflation of the 1920s, not to mention the depression of the 1930s.
- The wealthy could get abortions, despite the law.
- The poor were getting abortions anyway, the law was unenforceable.
- The poor were frequently being harmed by the untrained and “quacks”.
- Children should be planned and wanted (this was the result of the eugenics movement).
- Unborn life was unconscious, while born women were conscious.
- Morality is a personal matter.
- The day would come when it would not be necessary, it was a “passing phase” society would go through.

Abortion was opposed by the political center and right (Center Party, Nationalists), as well as by churches and most physicians who warned about killing, moral decay, and Germany’s low birth rate.<sup>30</sup>

The result of the abortion debate was a compromise in 1926:

- Violation of Section 218 was reduced from the status of a felony to a misdemeanor.
- Penal servitude was replaced by simple imprisonment.
- Prison sentences ranged from three months to one day, plus a small fine.

Abortion remained illegal, however, and one could not become an entrepreneur, doing it as a business, for money. Penalties for this were for up to five years, and up to five years if the procedure was forced.<sup>31</sup>

When Hitler and the Nazis came to power in early 1933, there had already been well over ten years of activity and controversy in Germany surrounding the issues of eugenics, sterilization and abortion. The eugenics and sterilization (but not abortion, in large part due to Margaret Sanger’s tactical move) had been inspired by influences from the United States:

- The U.S. eugenics research going back to 1910.
- Sterilization laws in many U.S. states.
- Anti-immigration laws.<sup>32</sup>

These things would persist in the United States into the 1930s, during the early Nazi years and, to repeat, the contact between American and German eugenicists continued.

What were Hitler's attitudes concerning eugenics, sterilization, and abortion? One historian has stated: "...the language and concepts of eugenics [and sterilization]...were deeply rooted in even the most 'progressive' Weimar social health and welfare initiatives."<sup>33</sup> This same historian, however, takes great pains to state that the Weimar democracy has been different from Hitler: "To talk of sterilization, even to perform the procedure, or to consider the possibility of coercive sterilization [the attitude of Weimar] was not the same as to practice it with all the combined forces of medical, police, and legal power in a terrorist state [the activities of Hitler]."<sup>34</sup> The historian continued that there were considerable differences between Nazi medical figures who wanted a master race, and traditionally trained scientists who had legitimate projects in biological planning.<sup>35</sup>

In the matter of eugenics and sterilization, I find the differences between the Weimar democracy and the Nazi regime to be a matter of degree. In the first three years of the Nazi regime many lawyers, 32% of teachers, and 45% of physicians joined the Nazi party in order to advance their careers.<sup>36</sup> All journalists succumbed<sup>37</sup>, as had most businessmen.<sup>38</sup> Most Protestants, including clergy, supported the regime with their neutrality,<sup>39</sup> and the Catholic church signed a Concordat with the regime.<sup>40</sup> In other words, a large number of the elites of the Weimar democracy served the Nazi regime directly, or indirectly by their passivity, especially in the early years of Nazism

The many Weimar marriage, sex, and eugenic counseling centers were observed, judged and evaluated by the Nazis in order to use their files to target certain people for sterilizations.<sup>41</sup> By early 1934, some 205 eugenics courts had been started, deciding who would be worthy to procreate. During the first years of their operation there were about 100,000 applications urged by social workers for sterilization; 56,000 (28,000 on men and 28,000 on women) were carried out, as these courts, social workers, and physicians took decision-making from individuals.<sup>42</sup>

The purpose of Nazi use of eugenics courts and forced or pressured sterilizations was to keep the "unfit" from reproducing. In this, the Nazi regime was not that much different from American eugenicists and the Weimar democracy, except that the term "unfit" now had more of a racial interpretation, as if somehow this was worse than had been the interpretation before Hitler and the Nazis.

Nazi abortion policy also fit into this mode. The Nazis forbade abortions in order to increase the birth rate. In March, 1934, however, the Heredity Health Court in Hamburg rendered a judgment which stated that abortions on grounds of racial health were not an offense. In its decision, it referred to a Supreme Court decision during Weimar, exactly seven years

before, which had allowed the procedure for “medical indications”.<sup>43</sup> In June, 1935, therefore, the sterilization law was amended to allow abortions on eugenic grounds, and these abortions had to be followed by sterilization, technically dependent on the woman’s consent.<sup>44</sup> As one historian has put it: “The notion that abortion was now for the first time legal would have come as quite a surprise to the numerous physicians who were attacked as abortionists.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the fact that racial theories were the force behind this decision, there were some non-Nazis who approved because of the allowance of choice.<sup>46</sup> In 1938 the government announced that Jews could have abortions, since this could only benefit the German people.<sup>47</sup> Hence, *Jews, along with “unfit” Germans, had a “choice” most Germans did not.* What this meant was that the Nazis saw abortion as a very useful weapon, in other words, as an act of killing. The prosecution at one of the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials immediately after World War II stated this.<sup>48</sup> This was also spelled out twice more by the German Supreme Court many years after World War II.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Nazis, Weimar Summarized**

To summarize our comparison of sexual politics between the Weimar democracy and the Nazi regime:

- Both wanted an *increase in the birth rate*, or “quantity” of Germans.
- Both believed in *eugenics*, or “quality” of Germans.
- Both believed in *sterilization*. Weimar believed in use of force, but never used force, most likely because it was not around long enough to get the chance. The Nazis, who also believed in force concerning sterilization, did have the chance and used it.
- Both believed in *abortion* to certain degrees. Weimar liberalized the law in 1926, and the Nazis legalized the practice by measures in 1935 and 1938, but only for “unfit” Germans and non-Germans. Both believed in choice; even the Nazis, at least to World War II.
- Both believed in *governmental control* concerning population and sexual politics. The tension between individual freedom and the needs of the state (society) that had existed during Weimar was solved by Hitler.
- Both maintained *contact with American eugenicists* until World War II.

This article does not maintain that Weimar was the “seed” of Nazism, or that Hitler was the “fruit of the poisonous tree”. It is, however, a statement that Hitler and Nazism, at least as far as sexual politics went, were not the quantum jump from democracy most people, including most

historians, seem to think. This article, in other words, holds the thesis that decent people can do or condone horrible things,<sup>50</sup> even decent people living in democracies.

### Present Day Thought

Eugenics is a discredited science today.<sup>51</sup> There is also shock felt and expressed today about tricked and forced sterilizations of the past. Abortion, however, is now legalized in most democracies, with the boast from those who believe in its legalization, that there is "choice" in the matter. Sterilization (forced or voluntary, for eugenic reasons or not) prevents a life from happening. Abortion, on the other hand, takes a life that already has happened, because an unborn is the other patient in any pregnancy<sup>52</sup> and is no longer considered by science as a mere maternal appendage.<sup>53</sup> The Nazis, experts in killing, knew this. They, too, had even allowed choice, at least for a while.

The historian of eugenics mentioned at the beginning of this article has stated:

A parallel between the economic and social milieu of the United States today and that of Germany in the Weimar and especially Nazi periods emerges in the debate over health care. Then as now, the discussion centered on decisions about who should receive what kind of health care and for how long. Indeed, in Germany medicine was considered a national resource to be used only for those individuals who showed the greatest prospect of recovery and future productivity.<sup>54</sup>

There has been in the United States a drastic limitation on welfare, suggestions that welfare mothers be forcibly given infertility drugs and birth control devices (indefinite sterilization), and a general atmosphere of not wishing to have taxpayers' dollars spent on non-productive citizens.<sup>55</sup> Consider the following in the United States today concerning sterilization and abortion:

- Is it a coincidence that a disproportionate number of Planned Parenthood's birth control/abortion clinics today are in predominantly black-Hispanic areas, and that virtually all of Planned Parenthood's school-based clinics since the 1980s are in schools overwhelmingly non-white?<sup>56</sup>
- Is it a coincidence that Afro-Americans, who are only one-ninth of the population (12%) account for between one third and one half of all

abortions, and that in many black communities there are more abortions than births, sometimes by as much as a three to one ratio?<sup>57</sup>

- Is it a coincidence that the sterilization rate among blacks is 45% higher than whites, and that for Hispanics the rate is 30% higher, and further, that many of the sterilizations are pressured to obtain welfare?<sup>58</sup>

- Is it a coincidence that, over the years, Planned Parenthood has advocated compulsory abortion for out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and compulsory sterilization for those who already have two children?<sup>59</sup>

- Is it a coincidence that while China has put compulsory abortion and compulsory sterilization into motion, Planned Parenthood not only has not opposed this, but has helped fund it and has fought to have the U.S. government fund it?<sup>60</sup>

I would also mention from my own observations, the recent attempt by the managed health care industry to rush treatment for mastectomies and women giving birth to children. If enough people sign living wills, and there is an increase in the popularity of physician-assisted suicide, is it not possible for the managed health care industry to harass those who disagree with suicide and euthanasia? With a low birth rate, a high abortion rate, and increasingly aging population, there are enough elements in America for a frightening scenario. One does not need Hitler to have horror.

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