Articles

The Early Eugenics Movement and Emerging Professional Psychiatry: Conceptual Transfers and Personal Relationships between Germany and North America, 1880s to 1930s

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Abstract. French-Austrian psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel’s (1809-1873) Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine (1857) was fully dedicated to the social problem of “degeneration” and it became very attractive to German-speaking psychiatrists during the latter half of the 19th century. Auguste Forel (1848-1931) and Constantin von Monakow (1853-1930) in Zurich integrated Morel’s approach and searched for the somatic and morphological alterations in the human brain; a perspective of research that Ernst Ruedin (1874-1952) at Munich further prolonged into a thorough analysis of hereditary influences on mental health. This paper investigates the continuities and major differences within some early eugenic traditions of the emerging field of psychiatry in the German-speaking countries and North America.

Keywords. eugenics, psychiatry, trans-Atlantic relations, German-speaking countries and North America


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Zurich ont intégré l’approche de Morel dans leurs travaux et recherché des altérations somatiques et morphologiques dans le cerveau humain. Ernst Ruedin (1874-1952) à Munich a ensuite repris la même perspective de recherche dans son analyse minutieuse des influences héréditaires sur la santé mentale. Cet article constitue une investigation des continuités et des différences significatives dans les traditions eugénistes du champ émergent de la psychiatrie dans les pays germanophones et en Amérique du Nord.

Mots-clés: eugénisme, psychiatrie, relations transatlantiques, pays germanophones et Amérique du Nord

INTRODUCTION

Eugenic discourses at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century had remarkably widespread attraction not only to medical doctors or biological and social scientists. Eugenic programs promised to give a biological redefinition of human morality and particularly of the modern soul. This prospect likewise accounted for the fact that professional psychiatrists felt attracted by the specific implications that eugenic thought had for questions of diagnosis and psychiatric treatment. The individual case studies to be discussed in this article nevertheless follow a rather common perception of eugenics as a late 19th- and early 20th-century phenomenon. 

Quite frankly, biological scientists, psychiatrists, and social philosophers were not the only ones to have been influenced by ideas projecting an “improvement of the race” or the “breeding of social elites.” Eugenic thinking was highly popular with many public intellectuals and writers as well. Berlin literary scholar Eberhard Hilscher has gone so far as to diagnose Gerhart Hauptmann’s (1862-1946) writings as an instance of “the encyclopedic approach of the Late-Bourgeois Epoch.” And indeed, several of Hauptmann’s works deal with the contemporary eugenics discourse. Hauptmann scholars have long acknowledged that the literary figure of the eugenicist in Hauptmann’s 1889 drama was modeled on the German physician Alfred Ploetz (1860-1940). Compared to the negative portrayal of the dogmatic eugenicist in Hauptmann’s book Vor Sonnenaufgang, the framing of eugenics in his 1912 novel Atlantis strikes a more ambivalent note. Common themes and topics include “tiredness of Europe” (Europamuedigkeit), the “ship of fools” (Narrenschiff), along with the dilemmas of modernity. It is possible to see Hauptmann’s dramatic focus in this novel as a positive reception of the dogmatism of American eugenics, as represented by birth-control activist Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) in New York City. For Sanger, the central motivation for making contraception generously available to women was the eugenic one of directing marriages and planning of human reproduction.
Taking these preliminary considerations into account, it would be totally artificial to analyze the scientific versions of eugenics discourse in Germany and in the US separately. This is particularly pertinent in Hauptmann’s case, and it helps to identify some of the relationships which linked actors from disparate societal groups with one another. Through his brother Carl (1858-1921), Gerhart Hauptmann became acquainted with the later Munich racial hygienist Alfred Ploetz, as both went to the Breslau Gymnasium high school together. Ploetz, Carl, and Gerhart Hauptmann and other Breslau students formed an intellectual circle around common eugenic interests which came to be known as The Pacific (Der Pacific). Soon after its founding in 1883, Ploetz’s club “The Pacific” aroused the suspicions of the imperial police in Prussia because it assumed that this new group was providing a source of socialist agitation against the political establishment.

In 1886, “The Pacific” became the subject of legal action in the so-called Breslau Anti-Socialist Law Case. Ploetz followed another Pacific club member, Ferdinand Simon (1861-1912), and studied medicine, now during his political exile in Switzerland, under the controversial brain psychiatrist Auguste Forel (1848-1931). With his influential work on anti-alcoholism, temperance behaviour, and the support of early womens-rights activists, Forel had gained a wide following among socially progressive students. As early as 1892, Forel also justified the sterilization of the mentally ill as a “national sacrifice” similar to “that of the soldier in times of war”:

I was always of the opinion that there are too many feeble-minded, degenerated, and bad people […]. I am an opponent of quantity Malthusianism [the British social philosopher Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834)] but a friend of quality Malthusianism, i.e. a disciple of a conscious and reasonable eugenics as it was advocated by F[rancis] Galton [1822-1911].

Since the early 1890s, Forel had inaugurated an interdisciplinary discussion circle on issues of eugenics that attracted large numbers of refugees or foreign students from other parts of Germany, Russia, Austria, and Hungary. It is interesting to note that this illustrious group also included Ploetz and Carl Hauptmann, the Basel physiologist Gustav von Bunge (1844-1920), and the Innsbruck anthropologist Rudolf Poech (1870-1921). Reminiscing about his experiences in Forel’s circle, German novelist Hauptmann later noted that “at that time, questions of heredity had already been discussed widely in medicine and beyond in many other fields.”
ALFRED PLOETZ: NORTH-AMERICAN IMPRESSIONS AND EARLY GERMAN APPLICATIONS

In 1890, Ploetz had graduated as a physician with a dissertation on *The Testes of Frogs under the Influence of the Seasons: A Comparison of Rana Temporaria and Esculenta* from the University of Zurich. He soon married Pauline Ruedin (1866-1942)—the sister of Ernst Ruedin (1874-1952)—who was likewise trained as a medical doctor. During the very same year and in a state of emotional and professional uncertainty, Ploetz and his wife emigrated to Springfield, Massachusetts in the United States. Cultivating his eugenic ideals, Ploetz became caught up in ongoing post-Civil War debates about “breeding” and creating better U. S. citizens as a means of healing the societal wounds. To this end, he attended the University of Chicago for a time, studying under Lester F. Ward (1841-1913), John Coulter (1851-1928), and the early American eugenicist Charles Benedict Davenport (1866-1944). And from his new family home in Springfield, Ploetz set out on exploratory journeys to investigate utopian societies in Western Canada and the Northern States. Having practiced as a physician, Ploetz began to feel a great disillusionment with the limits of both American social reform politics and with contemporary medical research practice as well. Now Ploetz was also forced to confront the fact that despite many attempts, social-Darwinist and proto-eugenic thought had not made much practical progress in North America. He came to accept a belief, common among American eugenicists of the time, that modern society was a sickened entity. Ploetz later put forward an image widespread in pathological theory of human society as “a body made up of cells” (in 1904), and pointed out that the health of the social organism relied on the health of its individual members.

After his North American exploratory journeys, Ploetz opened a new medical practice in Springfield. In his free time he started a hereditary research project and began to breed chickens in his garden. As this interest in animal breeding and questions of heredity increasingly fascinated him, the wandering Ploetz set out anew and moved to Meriden in nearby Connecticut. By 1892, Ploetz had already compiled hundreds of family genealogies, and he now augmented this large data pile by gathering family-tree information on the mentally ill, alcoholics, and “socially deviant” with the help of a secret local German lodge. He envisaged this program as a way of guiding the competition between the races which had built modern American society.

The work in eugenics that Ploetz pursued as a temporary émigré physician in North America was also deeply rooted in late 19th-century sanitary and hygiene movements. Both Ploetz and the experimental biologist Davenport at Cold Spring Harbor held beliefs in
Nordic Supremacy, following the lines of Davenport’s definition of an “applied eugenics science” in both modern societies in general and psychiatry in particular:

The general program of the eugenicist is clear—it is to improve the race by inducing young people to make a more reasonable selection of marriage mates; to fall in love intelligently. It also includes the control by the state of the propagation of the mentally incompetent. It does not imply destruction of the unfit either before or after birth. It certainly has only disgust for the free love propaganda that some ill-balanced persons have sought to attach to the name. Rather it trusts to that good sense with which the majority of people are possessed and believes that in the life of such there comes a time when they realize that they are drifting toward marriage and stop to consider if the contemplated union will result in healthful, mentally well-endowed offspring. At present there are few facts so generally known that they will help such persons in their inquiry. It is the province of the new science of eugenics to study the laws of inheritance of human traits and, as its nature, importance and aims these laws are ascertained, to make them known.

Davenport increasingly built professional relations with German racial hygienists such as Ploetz and the physician Fritz Lenz (1887-1976), who in 1924 was also invited to describe the status of “Eugenics in Germany” for a special issue of The American Journal of Medical Genetics. Lenz specifically referred back to Ploetz, who had “noted in particular that the Anglo-Saxons of America would be left behind, unless they developed a policy that would change the relative proportions of the populations.” Germans understood the problem all too well. Lenz discussed, for example, Germany’s “decreased” population and the devastating effects of WWI, where “a fourth of the young manhood of Germany remained on the battlefield … It is not strange then, that a baffled and fatalistic spirit has manifested itself here and there.”

Ploetz’s major textbook, which summarized many of his earlier American experiences from the 1890s, served as an important starting point of the eugenic doctrine in 20th-century German medicine. In 1895, his volume was published under the title, Foundations of a Eugenics, Part I, The Efficiency of our Race and the Protection of the Defective (Grundlinien einer Rassenhygiene. Band I, Die Tuechtigkeit unserer Rasse und der Schutz der Schwachen). Ploetz’s book introduced the term “Racial Hygiene” (Rassenhygiene) to the German medical readership, before leading German psychiatrists—such as Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926) in Munich, Alois Alzheimer (1864-1915) in Frankfurt am Main, or Robert Sommer (1864-1937) in Giessen—hopped on the same bandwagon in the 1910s and 1920s. But where Galton had focused on rather general questions and the research applications of psychiatry-related eugenics by describing instances of social deprivation and general distribution of mental illness, the new eugenic psychiatrists sought distinct forms of “treatment”
(such as alcohol moderation, the prevention of venereal diseases, and early eugenics marriage counselling programs in the general practices of psychiatrists and neurologists), along with individual “correction” (as seen to be achieved through behavioural changes in the agrocolonies, work farms, and houses of mental asylums—often geographically far away from what was seen as the pathological conditions of the larger urban centres).36

As in the case of Ploetz, this differing development in early approaches from eugenics to applications in German psychiatry may be explained with specific reference to a growing academic interest in agriculture and animal breeding. Based on his own research on chicken heredity in America and relying on the vast data set from human family genealogies, Ploetz further developed the opinion that a widened understanding of hereditary processes would also help eugenicists, psychiatrists, state officials, and public health functionaries to identify and support the “best stock” of the German race in its multiplication.37 It is important to note that although Ploetz focused on “super-individual norms,”38 he clearly did not advocate eugenics programs that were associated with anti-Semitic actions.39

In a similar manner, Ploetz even jumped over his own shadow by addressing a number of decisions that overthrew his personal convictions. He was so stern to his family that after his return from the US—in 1898—he even divorced Pauline Ruedin because the marriage had remained “childless.”40 He then married Anita Nordenholz (1868-1957?) and moved to the town of Herrsching on Ammersee, where Ploetz found a new sphere of activity. The couple now had the expected two sons, Ulrich and Wilfrid, and a daughter, Cordelia—thus bringing the family situation perfectly “in line” with Ploetz’s theoretical views about the reproduction of the fittest.41 In the early 1900s, Ploetz began deviating from his long-held socialist ideals and came to believe in the principles of social Darwinism.42 This change is also reflected in the launching of the new journal Archive for Racial and Social Biology in 1904, and in the fact that Ploetz became a major driving force for the inauguration of the German Society for Racial Hygiene in 1905.43 In 1907, together with the Berlin anthropologist Fritz Lenz and the Munich psychiatrist Arthur Wollny (1889-1976), Ploetz helped to form a secret circle within the Society for Racial Hygiene known as the Circle of the Norda. This group was closely modeled on Forel’s group in Zurich.44 In 1910, Ploetz, Lenz, and Wollny developed their secret circle into the “Nordic Circle” (Nordischer Ring—later renamed as the Archery Club (Bogenclub)—that now aimed at integrating intellectual exchanges with sportive exercises, following the ideals of eugenics as both a social science and practice) of Munich, which would become the second most influential private circle in the eugenics movement in Germany. All these secret, lodge-like associations
were created around the accepted idea of “saving the Nordic Race.”

The virulent views of the Munich Circle Club were later integrated into the highly political “Expert Council for Population and Racial Politics” which Wilhelm Frick (1877-1946) inaugurated in 1933. Alfred Ploetz, Fritz Lenz, the Freiburg anthropologist Hans F. K. Guenther (1891-1968), along with psychiatrist Ruedin, who had by then joined the German Research Institute for Psychiatric Research, were active members of a subcommittee, the “Division on Racial Hygiene and Racial Politics,” that had been affiliated with the German Research Council (DFG). The example of Ploetz and the activities of the “Division on Racial Hygiene and Racial Politics,” demonstrate that by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, the core of the eugenic assumptions comprised a social diagnostic and therapeutic approach:

Apart from a brief exploration of the biological races in relation to their cultural values, I [Ploetz] will use the word merely as designating a human collective that exists through generations, while being based on the physical and mental qualities.

The materialist analysis of the kind of scientific socialism—which many of the above physicians, anthropologists, and psychiatrists had shared in their utopian pretensions—recognized political struggles and social contradictions mainly in terms of economic relations. By contrast, the eugenicist critique of modern society—as argued by Forel and Ploetz—increasingly perceived social ills in terms of the sickly, degenerate, or moribund strains in the “social body” of Western cultures. The healthy and natural body, as it came to be idealized in eugenic discourse, could only be achieved by undoing civilization’s ill effects, an undertaking in which psychiatrists like Kraepelin, Alzheimer, or Ruedin in Germany, Adolph Meyer (1866-1950) at Johns Hopkins University and G. Alder Blumer (1857-1940) at the State Asylum in South Dakota in the United States, along with Charles Kirk Clarke (1857-1924) from the Toronto General Hospital in Canada, were eager to come forward with clinical and public health solutions. The related trope of “degeneracy” of the mind and the brain often referred to the cramped housing conditions in major industrialized cities, poor diet of the urban proletariat, which became a class of those who could not cope with the strains of modern industrialism, as well as to money-marriages, aristocratic inbreeding, and the physical inactivity of the idle rich.

Fundamental to eugenic discourse, then, was the idea that culture, society, or the nation had to be regarded as an organism which was subject to mental debilities, and economic and social decay. The deployment of organic models in eugenics discourse and psychiatric applications has already been well documented. This reflects a broader tendency of evoking natural and organic models as an idealized corrective
to fragmented modern-life worlds, a tendency that visibly intensified as the 19th century drew to a close. Eugenists generally understood their mission as a medical one, i.e., the prevention and cure of individual and societal diseases; psychiatrists, in this regard, were no exception from the rule. Independent of the political, medical, or psychiatric approaches, eugenic programs came to be viewed not simply as a therapeutic measure for each individual but also in terms of Ploetz’s Rassenhygiene, in other words, as holding the solution to the “political responsibility for the causal [here: psychiatric] problem.”

EUGENICS, PSYCHIATRY, AND TRANS-ATLANTIC TRANSFERS

The 1880s and 1890s were also watershed years in the development of psychiatry and neurology in Germany, a period in which both fields were still seen as either belonging to one and the same discipline or as being an integral part of internal medicine. As a number of German and Austrian historians have pointed out, the cultural diagnosis of “growing nervousness” and “nervous degeneration” must be taken into account as a popular trope of the late 19th century. Although this has become a fairly accepted view, it is valuable to note that “nervousness” has usually been more associated with the psychiatric or even psychological part of the integrative field of German Nervenheilkunde. While American psychiatry and neurology had already split into two separate fields by 1874, Nervenheilkunde in Germany continued to include most psychiatrists and a great number of doctors and researchers in internal medicine right into the Weimar Republic. It therefore does not come as a great surprise that Wilhelm Erb (1840-1929), one of the foremost neurologists, used the following terms to discuss the question:

There can be no doubt that the political, social and cultural circumstances, and anything else that may here be included, have an extraordinary influence on the human nervous system. Nervousness [Nervositä] has indeed increased to an enormous degree. […] Its causes can easily be found in the spirit of our day [Zeitverhältnisse], in the modern way of life, in the progress and the sophistication of our culture, in the new creations of modern being [Dasein], and indeed in social intercourse [Verkehr].

When Erb gave this academic lecture as Principal of the University of Heidelberg, he addressed the issue of “nervous degeneration” at the height of cultural restoration in the Wilhelminian Empire. This is not surprising, although the audience listened to Professor Erb as the Director of the Clinic for Internal Medicine at Heidelberg and not as the kind of faculty member whom contemporaries had easily associated with the psychiatrists of their days. In his own scientific work, Erb (like Alzheimer or Forel at the same time) had made important anatomical
discoveries and introduced a number of clinical signs into medical diagnostics and psychosomatic medicine. Erb’s statement can hence serve as a guiding perspective through the second part of this paper, which will examine the postulated materialistic changes that contemporary psychiatric discourse associated with “nervous degeneration” and “bad genetic stock” as the effect of generally changing cultural conditions. It must be noted—as in Hilscher’s analysis in this article’s introduction—that this view not only reflected psychiatrists’ professional assumptions, but also a prevalent opinion among bourgeois Germans that “cultural degeneration” had rapidly increased since the turn of the century. A stronger concern for the individual body resulted in widespread medical reconfigurations, programs to sustain public health, and new cultural conceptions of psychiatric illness (often referred to as “inherited feeblemindedness” or “erblicher Schwachsinn”). Irrespective of the somatic or psychic pole of this spectrum, the medical reconfigurations took place in a general framework of discourse about “bodily and mental degeneration” that also lay at the core of eugenicists’ theorizing.

For the psychiatrists and neurologists alike, this was to have a continuing dimension until the first decade of the 20th century when different protagonists of the “German Society for Neurology and Psychiatry” (Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Nervenheilkunde; DGN) entered a debate concerning what they thought to be an increase in “functional nervous disorders” caused by the new life conditions of modern industrial societies. This proto-eugenic view had been around in the European discussion since the time of Vienna-born French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809-1873), who had postulated the existence of an original healthy and moral state of human society and diagnosed a subsequent deterioration as a consequence of people’s germ material alteration. Morel’s highly influential volume was fully dedicated to the psychiatric and social problem of “degeneration.” His book—the Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine et de ces causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives (1857/8)—was very well received by the emerging field of clinical and brain psychiatry, as its protagonists believed that it would help prove that mental diseases had a somatic basis.

However, it is interesting to note that not only clinical psychiatrists but a number of related approaches were also influenced by the broader scientific context of degeneration theories (theories de dégénérescence) and early eugenics thought within academic European psychiatry, especially among those individuals who worked with psychiatric patients at the same time. This is noteworthy, for example, in the works of the German-speaking psychiatrist Forel and the neuroanatomist Constantin von Monakow (1853-1930) from Zurich. Both physicians integrated Morel’s approach into their views about the pathological afflictions of the mind
and increasingly began to search for the morphological alterations in the human brain due to hereditary and “degenerative” influences, this view became even more prominent in the first two decades of the 20th century, during what Joachim Radkau has called The Age of Nervousness in German history between the times of Bismarck and the National Socialist Period. It is further reflected in the fact that the psychiatric and neurological discourse soon acquired widespread social and cultural currency. Following the prevailing views among clinical psychiatrists and neurologists (Nervenaerzte) about the degeneration of modern industrialized and urbanized societies, it was no longer possible to bridge the gap between the modernization processes and the cultural degenerative ones, seen as an effect of these developments particularly in the lower classes, within one more generation. However, as the Austro-Hungarian popular writer Max Nordau (1849-1923) prominently stated, the anticipation of a new “nerve body of the future,” which could cope with the subjective constraints of the achievements and demands of modern developments, became a highly attractive social ideal. In this sense, Nordau was both an influential cultural pessimist—who mapped the downfall of mankind in his highly influential book on Entartung (“Degeneration”) in 1892, but likewise retained his prophecies for a new and strong nerve man (“Nervenmensch”), who could arise through the application of new cultural practices aligned with the deeper biological understanding of the factors of human inheritance.

In a similar situation to that which Alfred Ploetz and others encountered in the US, German professional elites were obsessed with the idea that they had lost political control when the Wilhelminian Empire was defeated in 1918. In similar vein, Erb wrote in his letter of 2 February 1919 to his fellow neurologist Adolf von Struempell (1853-1925):

I really fear—without knowing the infamous conditions subjected on us [Germany]—that we have to envisage a complete downfall! And this is mainly due to the particular moral comportment of our so-called people, in all its degeneration, laziness, abstinence from work and its craving for pleasure—with all its consequences for the privation of coal, nutrition, and the state order of the Reich.

Arch-conservative Wilhelm Erb used his neurological training to frame his perception of Germany’s downfall and painted a neurasthenic world picture by conceptualizing the general conditions of modern life as inducing factors of nerve and mental disease, which are brought out by a number of predisposing dispositions of “bad hereditary stock” in a eugenics interpretation.

This argument was likewise taken up and prominently reformulated in Kraepelin’s famous article “On Degeneration” (Zur Entartungsfrage), which appeared in the influential Zentralblatt fuer Nervenheilkunde, Psychiatrie und gerichtliche Psychopathologie in 1908. Long before the war,
Kraepelin argued that the etiology of neurasthenia and related mental disorders depended on the general conditions of modern life. These views about nervous degeneration by the doyen of German psychiatry became so powerful that they even impacted approaches in social medicine and psychoanalysis later in the Weimar Republic. It was clear for Kraepelin that the war-traumatized had not become ill due to the external conditions of industrialized warfare, but because the nervous degenerate dispositions, which these individuals had since birth, had given rise to their “nervous diseases.”

War involves a great number of psychic causes of insanity. [Robert] Sommer proved that active service in peacetime only renders psychopathically predisposed persons ill and causes no more cases of mental disorders than those observed in the civil population, but years of war are usually accompanied by a considerable increase in mental diseases in the army. The reason for this behavior can partly be found in the frequency of chance causes, especially head injuries and acute diseases, but chiefly in the rather chronic exhaustion produced by physical overexertion, insomnia, and profound and lasting emotional excitation. Hence, the clinical pictures are, on the one hand, severe neurasthenic states and fright psychoses, on the other, concussion psychoses, exhaustion psychoses, epilepsy, and, above all, paralysis which appears essentially as a consequence of syphilis so frequently contracted during a campaign.

Until now, scholars have rather spuriously recognized that Kraepelin’s interest in “nervous degeneration” actually arose in close communication with the bacteriologist Max Gruber (1853-1927) at the Munich Institute for Hygiene. In fact, Gruber and Kraepelin mutually published “Wall Carts on the Alcohol Question” (Wandtafeln zur Alkoholfrage; Munich 1907), which went on travelling exhibitions, were used in public health campaigns, and which also appeared prominently in the Hygiene Display of 1911 in Dresden. Gruber had also been in close contact with the prominent medical publisher Julius Friedrich Lehmann (1864-1935), the latter being instrumental in the creation of the Munich circle of racial hygienists. Furthermore, he made German students acquainted with the development of eugenics in the United States through a well-known book—Reproduction, Heredity, Racial Hygiene (1911). In the same year he delivered an influential address to the annual meeting of the “German Society for Racial Hygiene”—comprising the large number of 21 psychiatrists, 31 physicians, and 12 biologists—in which he examined the falling birth rate in terms of eugenic arguments. Gruber’s views actually implied a major shift in concern away from the social origins of mental disease towards a purely biological perspective which envisaged modern changes in “collective culture” or the “folk body” directly altering the population’s genetic makeup. In his article On Degeneration, Kraepelin identified a number of medically relevant phenomena that were brought about through modern society
which he argued had to be addressed solely by the psychiatrists. In this respect, what could have been more devastating than WWI with its millions of casualties that translated into a negative selection from the *germ line*—as this became advocated by his colleagues Ruedin and Alfred Hoche (1865-1943)?

By explicitly formulating a psychopathology- and neurology-based degeneration hypothesis, both Ruedin—as the director of the Demographic Study Unit at the German Research Institute for Psychiatry in Munich serving as a major research hub for German, North American, and Scandinavian mental hygienists and eugenicists—and Hoche (as Director of the Clinic of Psychiatry at the University of Freiburg) continued Kraepelin’s eugenic and racial anthropological legacy.

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS, EXTERNAL RESEARCH SUPPORT, AND THE EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHIATRY**

Where there had been considerable debate among neurologists, psychiatrists, and other physicians about the real increase in the numbers and the diagnoses to be included in the group of so-called degenerate patients, the widespread phenomenon—following to the end of WWI—had now become “visible” to everyone: among the disabled soldiers, who returned from the fronts, approximately 500,000 displayed specific neurological and psychiatric conditions, a drastic situation beyond doubt.

Because they saw the Darwinian process of “natural selection” decelerated or even stopped in postwar Germany, physicians and anthropologists such as Ploetz came to perceive the health situation of the German people as “badly hurt in mind or body.” Ruedin and Hoche had further launched severe polemics against the social welfare programs before the Weimar Republic, but now became more agitated: in a Kraepelitian vein, Ruedin and Hoche saw welfare programs as unwarranted expenditures because they would secure the longevity of “low value” populations. The resulting increase in the numbers of the psychiatrically and neurologically ill would lead “to an unacceptable burden for the welfare state, especially as so little is currently known about the treatment and long-term development of these conditions.”

Their critique was also applied to the National Pension Law designed to meet the needs of the army of war-injured veterans returning back from the fronts in 1918.

And where somatic injuries and bodily mutilations could be compensated with wheel chairs, crutches, and arm-prostheses for re-integration into the industrial labour market, this proved to be a much greater problem with many psychiatric conditions, specifically addressed by the German clinical psychiatrist Oswald Bumke (1877-1950). He had
been trained in the Leipzig school of brain psychiatry (Gebrirnpsychiatrie) and became the successor of Kraepelin in the chair of psychiatry at the University of Munich in 1924. Bumke regarded it as the duty of these patient groups—suffering, for example, from dementia praecox, hereditary tissue degeneration, or alcoholism, etc.—to guarantee their further existence through their own means. This claim had, of course, been made before WWI—promoted by Bumke’s influential treatise On Nervous Degeneration (Ueber Nervose Entartung; 1912)—but with the political conditions of Weimar, it became much more widespread. Right- and left-wing psychiatrists both focused on “nervous degeneration” as a rhetorical means to strengthen their individual claims as under-laborers of an increasingly politicized health care field and particularly emphasized the cost-effectiveness of state-run mental health programs.

These conceptual changes and discipline-building developments occurred in a period of increasing academic exchanges and international relations, especially between young American physicians and European psychiatrists, bringing about significant modifications in the landscape on either side of the Atlantic. Between the establishment of the DFA and the declaration of war in the United States in 1917, nearly 200 students, graduates, and junior researchers from North America had traveled to Munich to work in the laboratories and clinical wards of the Institute.

A noteworthy example of an individual deeply enmeshed in trans-Atlantic relations was the Swiss-born psychiatrist Adolph Meyer, who already possessed well-established contacts with American colleagues from an earlier research visit in 1891, and later became a Full Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD, as well as a leading figure in U.S. psychiatry. Meyer represents a “central node” of the North American neuroscientific network and he was an important mediator and referee to the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) as the major funding institution of biomedical research and public health before WWII. His engagement and RF’s subsequent decision-making processes essentially fostered a pre-existing, tightening network of well-respected medical scientists between basic researchers, public health workers, and clinically active psychiatrists. RF’s financial support was certainly not confined to North America: from the 1920s, it had been one of the first foreign institutions reacting to the devastating effects of WWI on German medical research and higher learning institutions. In fact, the advent and recovery of many big scientific endeavors (Grossforschungsanstrengungen) in post-WWI Germany is inconceivable without taking RF’s major financial contributions into account, as it had been a conscious and planned creation. Officials saw their role in the postwar years as a source of financial aid to “help Germany out of its continued scientific isolation,” when “war and inflation had destroyed
a large part of local endowments and the public authorities had to step in, specifically funding the eugenics-related Institutes for Brain Research in Berlin-Buch, Anthropology in Berlin-Dahlem, and the DFA for Psychiatry in Munich.

Through the mediation of its Paris bureau as well as the strategic planning of Alan Gregg (1890-1957), the executive officer for RF’s advancement of brain research and psychiatry, this international funding body was also highly influential in the establishment of scientific relations between German and American psychiatrists and eugenic researchers. North American money thereby became a substantial funding source, which invigorated scholarly ties in “The Brain Triangle” formed by the DFA in Munich, the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute for Brain Research in Berlin, headed by Oskar Vogt (1870-1959), and Otfrid Foerster’s (1873-1941) Neurological Institute at the University of Breslau. But rather than being an altruistic engagement in German medical science, the supply of large sums of money for the development of innovative research institutions served trans-Atlantic exchanges between researchers on all levels: basic and clinical, non-experienced and advanced. Its individual funding program, in return, enabled a great number of German psychiatric and eugenic researchers to work on the other side of the Atlantic. In both directions, these individuals introduced and transplanted scientific practices, which became subsequently “enriched” with utilitarian ideals as well as prevailing societal perspectives on hereditary disease:

Another part of this general scheme has, however, been realized by the Kaiser-Wilhelm Society in promoting science in the field of physiology, and this is being able to open the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, for the study of the brain. Here are engaged: Oskar Vogt, Cecile Vogt [1875-1962], [Maximilian] Rose [1883-1939] and [Max] Bielschowsky [1869-1940]. The first of the above are working on the extension of the teaching on the localization of the brain cells, psychology of the ‘Neurosen’, and upon the peculiar characteristics connected with the problem of heredity […]

Adding to these large-scale commitments for the new brain research centers, RF funding programs were particularly active in international research exchanges and the support of backward transfers of knowledge which contributed to an atmosphere of receptiveness regarding the later Nazi-ideology. Especially the burgeoning fields of psychiatric eugenics and research into general hereditary diseases proved to be of central interest in the establishment of a racial science. Although the RF itself did not engage in prime ideological projects, it continued its funding activities in smaller endeavours:

The Forschungsanstalt in Munich is a conspicuous example owing to [Ernst] Ruedin, its nominal director, of the racial policy of the Nazi government and on the subject of that policy it is obvious that there are very deep as well as entirely
articulate opinions in this country both in the board and out. This feeling is such as to be irritated rather than placated by any distinction that is made between the declarations of the Director of the Institute and the non-political scientific needs or activities of one of the constituent departments. [...]101

As planned by its founder—the brain psychiatrist and experimental psychologist Emil Kraepelin—the DFA had been inaugurated as a psychiatric research institution in 1917 primarily as a unit of the clinical department of psychiatry and neurology of the University of Munich (while it took until 1928 before the fully autonomous institute could be built in Kreapelinstrasse 2, where it still remains today). It soon developed into a renowned centre for interdisciplinary research and a paradigm institution for neuroscience across the globe under the leadership of Walther Spielmeier (1879-1935) and Felix Plaut (1877-1940), who succeeded Kraepelin in the directorship of the institute and its departments:

Prof. Kraepelin who has always been able to attract a very capable body of workers about him planned a comprehensive institute covering both clinical and laboratory aspects of psychiatry [...]. Of the various activities planned, covered by six headings in his original scheme, four departments were working in 1925—anatomy, serology, genealogy, and psychology. [Further sections] hoped to be established are chemistry, physiology, biological inheritance, and statistics. Plans also include work in industrial problems and a clinic.102

Yet long before the Nazis gained power, Swiss-born eugenicist Ruedin had been made the head of the Institute (“geschaeftsfehrender Direktor”), but—in 1933—became additionally addressed as the permanent psychiatric “Fuehrer” aligned with his presidency of the “Gesellschaft Deutscher Nervenaerzte und Psychiater” (and internally in the DFA as well). This decision was likewise a significant turn away from the rotation principle of the acting director, yet the RF continued to shuffle additional money in during the year 1935, when the international monetary exchange rates became increasingly worrisome. It defended this step on the basis of the personal involvement of Spielmeier and Plaut as individual recipients of the contributions.103 Ruedin, however, always found ways to circumvent this strategy and channelled parts of this financial support into the DFA’s general endowment, thus securing its contribution to the Demographic Department’s research program on psychiatric eugenics and public mental health applications. RF’s continuing support of brain research centres and eugenic psychiatric projects can hence be seen as a direct expression of its own preoccupation with sustaining German-American research exchanges and training conditions of North American investigators in German medical and biological laboratories. When, for example, Willibald Scholz (1889-1971) became successor to Spielmeier, he immediately approached the RF
Paris office and received financial assistance; even after WWII, Scholz was able to impress the RF with the idea that “the genetic materials collected by Ruedin were really valuable” and could be added to by future eugenic research programs, making it “even more important as a source material.”

How far this collaboration and new trend in somatic brain psychiatry had developed became evidently clear in a report letter, written by Walter Spielmeyer in Ruedin’s Institute on 27 November 1934, in which Spielmeyer “re-informed” Gregg about the general change that contemporary clinical psychiatry had taken towards a full endorsement of racial and eugenics research.

CONCLUSION

This article has investigated continuities, differences, and breaks in the eugenic tradition within the emerging discipline of somatic brain psychiatry in Germany and North America. Apart from medicine and biological science, many local associations and circles had served as interfaces for the increasing popularity of eugenics on both sides of the Atlantic: The Berlin Society for Racial Hygiene, inaugurated in 1905, included as a secret circle the Nordische Abteilung (founded in 1910). In the same year, Ploetz turned his “Nordic Circle” (Nordischer Ring) association in Munich into a pre-Fascist “Secret Nordic Circle” (Geheimer Nordischer Ring) which, apart from racial-hygienic agitation and programs, attempted to initiate an intellectual reorientation returning to “old Indo-Germanic roots;” similar anti-modernist forms of social critique could be found in many applied eugenics programs on both sides of the Atlantic.

The findings presented in this article further emphasize the strong cultural influences on the field of psychiatry and its theoretical advances from bourgeois fears of “nervous degeneration” in Wilhelminian Society in Germany to Weimar discourses about the “neurology of disaster” and brain psychiatry’s return to conditions of “nervousness,” “war neurotics,” psychiatric trauma, and influences of hereditary disease. This characterization may seem overly medical, but in fact it is not: We are no longer dealing here with a medicalization of the cultural discourse in Nervenheilkunde as Joachim Radkau’s Age of Nervousness has suggested. When taking a closer look at psychiatry and neurology as emerging scientific disciplines at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, rather the “culturization” of medical discourse vice versa becomes practically tangible.

Although American, Canadian, British, Scandinavian, or German eugenics all contained unique elements, there was a lot of common ground even between the “national styles” of eugenic thinking. The British eugenics movement had been molded by Galton and Karl
Pearson (1857-1936) before it was transferred to the United States and Canada; in North-America it was particularly Davenport who kept close contacts with Lenz and was very well aware of Ruedin’s massive research program on psychiatric genetics and epidemiology in Munich and later Germany at large. Likewise, succeeding generations of eugenic supporters came from diverse political perspectives but they all shared the belief that the human species was endangered by effects of modernization and civilization along with the devastating contexts of armed conflict since the latter part of the 19th century. Nevertheless eugenic thinkers assumed that these “degenerative conditions and diseases” were to be prevented or eradicated by science and ensuing psychiatric applications. Modern society could be improved by “betterment” of the people’s stocks and the marginalization of the feeble-minded, the physically unfit, and the morally corrupt through planned restrictions on the reproduction of “inferior grades of humanity.”

Research-minded German brain psychiatrists of the late 19th century, such as Alzheimer who worked as a direct colleague with Kraepelin, promoted the view that basic research into those early forms of neuro-degenerative diseases (“hereditaere Degeneration des Gehirns”) should first be advanced before specific action could be taken. Later, psychiatrists like Hoche and Ruedin saw not much advantage in experimental basic research of human hereditary conditions. They strongly favoured statistical and clinical “phenotype” data-banking and meta-analyses for tracking the biological and psychological traits of the feeble-minded and mentally ill, helping to create state-planned public health actions in the psychiatric field. The engagement of clinical psychiatrists in discussions of eugenics measures also developed into a strategy of bolstering professional recognition and the renown of their own discipline, especially at the turn of the century. Psychiatrists and brain researchers such as Forel, von Monakow, and Ruedin had been instrumental in this regard as they developed a much bigger picture of their discipline as an all-encompassing social-medical program in which eugenics had a major role to play. Eugenic thought became thus an important discursive tool which served clinical psychiatry well in establishing its own professional identity vis-à-vis the biological and medical sciences. Likewise, the boundaries between the political right and left became challenged, since the eugenics movement cut across the fields of social traditionalism and progressivism both in wider public discourses as well as in the context of academic psychiatry and mental hygiene from the 1880s to the 1930s.

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NOTES


7 Alfred Ploetz subsequently became the model for the literary figure of the alcohol prohibitionist “Alfred Loth” in Gerhart Hauptmann’s Vor Sonnenaufgang, and Hauptmann also quoted in this drama from Gustav von Bunge’s (1844-1920) The Alcohol Question (Germ., 1887).


12 Carl Hauptmann also became a significant writer and poet. Current themes of modern medicine and eugenics—e.g., the alcohol question, mental or physical degeneration—had been present in his medical writings since the 1890s. Carl Hauptmann, *Metaphysics in Modern Physiology* (Dresden: Ehlermann, Germ., 1893).


19 Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) was also the son of a physician, the gynaecologist Dr. med. Friedrich Wilhelm Wedekind (1816-1888). As an introduction to his pro-eugenics thinking in the German-American context see: Friedrich Rothe, *Frank Wedekinds Dramen: Jugendstil und Lebensphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990).


26 Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics*, p. 74-76.


31 Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, p. 3-4 (emphasis added).

32 Renate Rissom, *Fritz Lenz und die Rassenhygiene* (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 1983); often these exchanges included the German émigré experimental biologist Leo Loeb (1869-1959) with whom Charles B. Davenport corresponded intensively. See also Washington University School of Medicine, Archives and Rare Books Division, Loeb, Leo, FC0002, Corr. C-Ha, Box 2.

33 Fritz Lenz, *Eugenics in Germany*, p. 224-26 (emphasis added).


Weindling, Health, Race, and German Politics, p. 305-98.

Richard Weikart, From Darwin to Hitler, p. 84.

Weindling, Health, Race, and German Politics, p. 305-98.

The Early Eugenics Movement and Emerging Professional Psychiatry


59 It is important to recognize, nevertheless, that in the North American context “feeblemindedness” had a slightly different meaning, as a behavioural rather than a somatic concept, and was often distinguished from the more salient psychiatric notions of “dementia praecox” (Kraepelin) or distinctive “schizophrenia” (Kurt Schneider, 1887-1967). As for the use of the term “feeblemindedness” in the eugenics discourse of the US, consult William H. Tucker, The Funding of Scientific Racism: Wickliffe Draper and the Pioneer Fund (Urbana-Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 32-47, which likewise details some of the professional connections between U.S. eugenics supporters and German racial anthropologists.

60 Roelcke, “Electrified Nerves, Degenerated Bodies,” p. 177-97.


62 Morel, Traité des dégénérescence physique.

63 Morel, Traité des dégénérescence physique.


66 From an earlier manuscript draft of von Monakow and Raoul Mourge for Zeitschrift fuer Psychologie, 115 (1921), 403-10, esp. 403-04. Archive of the Institute for Medical
History and Museum of the University of Zurich; Monakow, Constantin von, Correspondence, Box 2.

67 Radkau, Das Zeitalter der Nervosität, p. 263-353.


72 See also Andreas Killen, Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).


75 Weindling, Health, Race and German Politics, p. 21.

76 Lenz, Eugenics in Germany, p. 226.


78 Engstrom, Clinical Psychiatry in Imperial Germany, p. 194-203.


81 Ploetz qtd. after Lenz, Eugenics in Germany, p. 224.

82 This neo-Malthusian critique of social welfare programs is also pertinent to the other side of the Atlantic—for example in the polemics of Margaret Sanger.


84 For accomplishing this task, the Finance Ministry had set aside 1.2 billion marks, which later had to be raised to 4 billion, encompassing one-third of the Republic’s annual budget. See Crouthamel, Invisible Traumas: Psychological Wounds, p. 100-61.


87 Personal File Ruedin; Historical Archive of the Max-Planck-Society, Div. I, Rep. 1A, in a letter for funding application to the former Kaiser-Wilhelm Society as of 20 July 1928.

The Early Eugenics Movement and Emerging Professional Psychiatry


93 Emigré-psychiatrist Meyer also ranged high on Gregg’s influential support list of U.S. and Canadian brain science. See, for example, Archives and Rare Books Collection of the Becker Library, Washington University School of Medicine (RG1C15:2, Department of Neurology and Psychiatry, Series 2, Dr. Gregg’s List, Am Assoc. of Colleges Med. Schools, 1936), np.

94 Among the aids, with which the RF started the support of German biomedicine after the war, counted specifically eugenics literature since the early 1900s. With the help of the DFG, German psychiatrists, for example, had asked for a complete set of the “Galton Laboratory of National Eugenics—Lecture and Memoir Series”; see Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), 1.1/717/11/67, p. 6-8.

95 Europe officer Edwin R. Embree (1883-1950) in a diary entry of 10 November 1922; RAC.

96 RF officer John V. Van Sickle (1862-1939), visiting Frankfurt am Main on 15 May 1931; RAC.

97 Per Rudling even argues in “Eugenics and Racial Biology in Sweden and the USSR” that the Swedish Statens Rasbiologiska Institut had functioned as an inspiring model for the respective German Kaiser Wilhelm Institut in Berlin. The creation of the KWI fuer Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik in 1927, however, also drew on additional sources, such as the organization of the research institutions at the University of Oxford, the American Eugenics Record Office, and KWI experiences with its genuine research institutes such as the previously founded DFA for Psychiatry in Munich. Cf. Alexander von Schwerin, *Experimentalisierung des Menschen: Der Genetiker Hans Nachtsheim und die Erbpathologie, 1920–1945* (Goettingen: Wallstein, 2000); Weber, *Harnack-Prinzip oder Fuehrerprinzip? Erbbiologie unter Ernst Ruedin*, p. 409-22.

98 To a limited degree, this also included Canada, for example, with grants and travel fellowships given out to neurochemist J. B. S. Browne (b. 1873?), McGill/Goettingen, or neurophysiologist Velyien E. Henderson (1877-1945), University of Alberta/Berlin.

99 Allan Gregg, *What Is Psychiatry?* (MS. New York, 1941, 9 pp.), 9; 717/A 1.1/2/19; RAC.

100 MS Germ. Dep. School, 1935–36/KG 6.1/1.1/4/46, p. 8-9; RAC.


103 Letter of Alan Gregg to the psychiatrist Roy Grinker (1900-1993) in Chicago. Ill. Ag: GER, 106, 18 November 1935; RAC.

104 Alan Gregg’s Diary, 24 February 1950/717 DFA Psych. Res. 1945–48/50/1.1/717/10/58, 89; RAC.

105 Letter of Walter Spielmeyer to Alan Gregg from 27 November 1934; RAC 1.1/717/9/56, p. 108.


