

Amir Teicher, Social Mendelism. Genetics and the Politics of Race in Germany, 1900–1948, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2020, XIV–268 p., 3 tabl., 16 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-108-73074-7, EUR 26,99.

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This is an informative study on an important theme: the influence of Mendelism on German eugenics and racism, especially its impact on Nazi policies. However, some aspects of Teicher's work are misleading.

The achievements in this work are many. Teicher states that »the present book argues that Mendel's theory of heredity had a far-reaching impact on how Germans and Nazis thought about society, purity, national renewal and medical dangers« (p. 5). He provides excellent discussions of how Mendelian genetics penetrated the German scientific community – especially in psychiatry and anthropology – to prove this. According to Teicher, the key figures introducing Mendelism into German science were the anthropologist Eugen Fischer in 1913, the geneticist Fritz Lenz in 1912, and the psychiatrist and eugenicist Ernst Rüdin in 1911.

As renowned scientists embracing Mendelism, Rüdin, Fischer, and Lenz are central figures in this story. They also were not reticent about applying Mendelian thinking to social and political problems. Further, all three were participants in policy discussions about eugenics and race during the Third Reich. The most important Nazi policies influenced by Mendelism were compulsory sterilization and the Nuremberg Laws. Teicher argues that Mendelism influenced the categories of people targeted for sterilization in the 1933 law. More importantly, in the official Nazi commentary on the law, Mendelism played a central role. Also, educators during the Third Reich stressed the Mendelian underpinnings of the sterilization law.

Concerning the Nuremberg Laws, which forbade Jews from having sexual relations with Germans, Nazi scientists and physicians claimed Mendelian support for a variety of positions. Because they could not agree about how to apply Mendelism, Teicher admits, »[I]acking the ability to biologically recognize, define or delineate the Jewish race, the Nazi regime found no other alternative but to digress from a scientific solution to a practical solution, namely, ancestral research« (p. 170). However, Teicher points out that Mendelism informed other aspects of Nazi anti-Semitism.

Most of Teicher's book is quite good, but there are two problems that could create misunderstandings. First, the view that Mendelism spawned eugenics and racial anthropology is anachronistic. Second, Teicher ignores a huge body of evidence



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demonstrating the importance of social Darwinism in shaping the discourse that he is discussing.

The problem with this book starts with the frontispiece blurb. It begins: »Who was the scientific progenitor of eugenic thought? Amir Teicher challenges the preoccupation with Darwin's eugenic legacy by uncovering the extent to which Gregor Mendel's theory of heredity became crucial in the formation – and radicalization – of eugenic ideas« (p. 1). The terms »progenitor« and »formation« suggest that Mendelism spawned eugenics, which is anachronistic. Throughout the book, Teicher completely ignores the pre-Mendelian roots of the eugenics movement. Mendelism was rediscovered in 1900, but Darwinian biologist Ernst Haeckel had promoted infanticide as a eugenics measure already in 1870, Wilhelm Schallmayer published the first German book entirely devoted to eugenics in 1890, and Alfred Ploetz, the key organizer of the German eugenics movement, published his first major book on the topic in 1895. Many other scientists and physicians embraced eugenics before the advent of Mendelism, but Teicher never mentions this. Despite discussing Rüdin, he never divulges that Rüdin first learned eugenics in the late 1880s from the University of Zurich psychiatrist August Forel. Of course, I am not denying that Mendelism influenced eugenics discourse in the early 20th century, as Teicher demonstrates. However, obviously Mendelism did not form the core of eugenics thought, because most eugenics ideas existed before 1900.

Anachronism also haunts Teicher's discussion of racial anthropology: he never discusses the many pre-Mendelian precursors to scientific racism. For instance, he never mentions Ludwig Woltmann, whose book »Politische Anthropologie« (written in 1900), laid out his basic views of scientific racism that powerfully influenced German anthropology. Indeed, University of Leipzig anthropologist Otto Reche republished Woltmann's works during the Third Reich, and Fischer praised Woltmann's racial theories. Again, Teicher is correct that Mendelism influenced discussions on race, but most of the ideas of Nordic racism and anti-Semitism preceded, and were independent of, Mendelism.

Indeed, one of the central tenets contributing to eugenics and racial anthropology was social Darwinism, but Teicher misleadingly tries to minimize its influence. Only one paragraph discusses the historiography on social Darwinism, and it casts doubt on its importance, just as the few scattered references to Darwinism throughout the book usually minimize its importance. To be sure, once, he admits that »Mendelian principles and Darwinian reasoning were meshed together« in eugenics thought (p. 5), but he never explains how, despite the fact that many of the figures he discusses – such as Rüdin, Fischer, and Lenz – were avid social Darwinists.

More surprisingly, Teicher neglects the neo-Darwinian synthesis in Germany, which synthesized Darwinism with Mendelian genetics. Thomas Junker's work, »Die zweite Darwinsche Revolution« (2004),

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is absent from the bibliography, as are other works on the neo-Darwinian synthesis. Nor did Teicher consult Gerhard Heberer's edited volume »Die Evolution der Organismen« (1943), the most important work to publicize the neo-Darwinian synthesis in Germany. Three of the four anthropologists contributing essays on human evolution to that book were SS officers, and the other was Reche, whose essay was laced with social Darwinist racism. Reche stated: »To sum up: All of the processes already mentioned concerning the origin of humans and the breeding of its races can be explained genetically. Without the appearance of hereditary differences, without selection and elimination, the formation of highly evolved races and tribes capable of high performance could never have come into existence and never have brought about a higher human culture.« Here, Reche captured what unfortunately Teicher does not: Darwinism and Mendelism worked together in contributing to Nazi ideology. We do not have to choose one or the other.

However, if we ask which was more important in shaping Nazi ideology, I suggest we consider three factors. First, social Darwinism had an earlier and more formative effect on eugenics and racial anthropology than did Mendelism. Second, many Nazis stressed social Darwinist themes far more often than Mendelian ones (e. g., »Mein Kampf«). Third, while Mendelism did shape discourse related to eugenics and racial crossing, social Darwinism influenced not only both of these arenas, but also many other features of Nazi ideology, such as racial inequality, racial struggle, military expansionism, living space (»Lebensraum«), an evolutionary view of morality, and others. I explain these in my book, »Hitler's Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress« (2009), which Teicher did not consult.



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