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NEWS

A prominent historian of science dies and no one takes notice

tags: Daniel E. Gasman

by **Barry Mehler**

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Daniel E. Gasman, the noted historian of science who did ground breaking research on the scientific origins of fascism, died of a heart attack on December 19, 2012 in New York City. His death at the age of 79 went virtually unnoticed, despite the controversy over his work that had erupted after the publication of Robert J. Richards biography of Ernst Haeckel.

Dr. Gasman, a professor of European Intellectual history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice from 1971 to 2006, was best known for shaping our understanding of the relationship between science and fascism and specifically, the relationship between the German evolutionary theorist, Ernst Haeckel, and the rise of National Socialism.¹ At the time of this writing there have been no obituaries and not even John Jay College has publically acknowledged his death.

I first met Daniel Gasman as an undergraduate at

Yeshiva University where he taught from 1966 to 1970 while working on his dissertation which was published in 1971. It was Professor Gasman who inspired me to become a historian and my work in eugenics was a footnote to his inspiration.

Gasman had graduated from Brooklyn College in 1955 and received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in European Intellectual History in 1970. In 1963, Gasman married Lydia Csato, who would become a renowned Picasso scholar. They were divorced in 2000, but remained close until her death in 2010.² He is survived by his sister, Alice White of Brooklyn, New York.

When I began writing this obituary for my friend and mentor, the only comment on Dr. Gasman's passing was a Tweet by Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic Magazine*, on April 26th 2013. Shermer Tweeted, "Just learned Daniel Gasman died in Dec [2012]-author of the important book *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, linking Haeckel to Hitler."

The Tweet elicited one response, "Dan Gasman's book was a propaganda work that is mostly wrong and largely refuted by Robert J. Richards. Why laud it?"³ Of course, there were those who found Gasman's work laudable, including Professor Michael K. Richardson, the Van der Leeuw Professor of Developmental Biology at the University of Leiden, who observed that "Gasman's 'Scientific Origins of National Socialism' [1971] is widely recognized by historians and biologists to be a classic."⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, "one of the most influential evolutionary biologists of the 20th century"⁵ wrote in 1997 that he "greatly appreciated the insights that you [Gasman] provided to my own historical and biological studies."⁶

The silence around his death was initially baffling and deeply disturbing, but since I had only learned of his death in late May of 2014, nearly two years after his passing, I realized it was possible that there have been no obituaries of this important scholar

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because few are aware of his passing.

At the time of his death he was working on a monograph to bring together his thoughts on the controversy stirred by the publication of Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought*.⁸ Richards claimed that Gasman had condemned Haeckel to “the sulfurous region of sinister thought” and his work had been uncritically accepted “without scholarly scruple” by a surprisingly large number of highly respected scholars whose work otherwise showed a great deal of scholarly scruple. In a footnote taking up half a page, Richards cited “a few of the authors” who have “unquestioningly adopted Gasman’s thesis.” Richards short list included the following scholars: J.W. Burrow, Nicholas Goodnck-Clarke, Scott Gordon, Joseph L. Craves, Robert Jay Lifton, Richard M. Lerner, Daniel Pick, Pat Shipman, Milford Wolpoff and Rachel Caspari.⁹ This is certainly an impressive list of academics who have been supposedly duped by Gasman. And, unlike Sir Cyril Burt, whose shoddy and fraudulent work was accepted because of his influential position within academia. Gasman was not an academic politician and he had completely retired when the controversy began. His influence was based entirely on the arguments and evidence presented in his two monographs.

Richards’ book, aimed at exonerating Haeckel by attempting to turn Gasman on his head. Where Gasman showed that Haeckel was an antisemite, Richards claimed he had many Jewish friends¹⁰ and his work provided little support for National Socialism. Where Gasman claimed that Haeckelian Monism was nothing like Darwinism, Richards argued they were identical. Where Gasman argued that Haeckelian Monism provided the foundation

for the development of European fascism in general and National Socialism in particular, Richards claimed that “Hitler and the Nazis” emerged out of the “tangle of social, political, religious, and economic causes that snaked through the interwar period,” and that “Gasman's efforts exemplify what might be called the fallacy of mono-causality: the attempt to explain complex historical phenomena by appeal to one simple cause.”¹¹ Richards makes no attempt to untangle or even describe, “the tangle” he refers to. His intent is not to explain fascism or antisemitism, only to exonerate Haeckel. Thus, at the time of his death, Gasman was fighting to defend his integrity and scholarship, against a revisionist history which he saw as every bit as pernicious as Holocaust denial.¹²

¹ Gasman's two most influential works were, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in Ernst Haeckel and the German Monist League* (New York and London: MacDonald, 1971) and *Haeckel's Monism and the Birth of Fascist Ideology - Studies in Modern European History, number 33* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998.)

² Danny spoke of her often and his apartment had many of her portraits, including a portrait she had done of him. I got the impression that she was the love of his life. He told me that after the divorce, he called to ask her if she wanted to get married again. They lived and taught in separate cities, but my impression was that the divorce was not the result of a dissolution of their lifelong relationship, it was, rather, the recognition that their relationship was not a marriage. See also, Roberta Smith, “Lydia Csato Gasman, Picasso Scholar, Dies at 84,” *New York Times* (6 February 2010 http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/06/arts/06gasman.html?_r=0).

³

<https://twitter.com/michaelshermer/status/327641373631201281>.

Shermer was one of the few who published Gasman's critique of Richards. Available online at:

<http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/09-06-10/#feature>.

⁴ See John Jay Profile at http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/profiles/pdfs/Gasman_Daniel%20.pdf.

⁵ Yoon, Carol Kaesuk, "Stephen Jay Gould, 60, Is Dead; Enlivened Evolutionary Theory," *New York Times* May 21, 2002.

See also, Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, 209; *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977, 77; Scott Gilbert, John M. Opitz, and Rudolf Raff, 'Resynthesizing Evolutionary and Developmental Biology,' *Developmental Biology*, 173:357-372; and Scott Gilbert, 'Teaching Evolution Through Development,' Talk Delivered at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Society for Developmental Biology, Madison, Wisconsin, July 21, 2001. Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 360. J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1915*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. For the long running controversy over Gasman's interpretation of Haeckel and his many detractors see, "The Gasman Controversy," <http://www.ferris.edu/isar/academic-controversies/gasman.htm>.

⁶ Gould to Gasman, 1997, reported in his online c.v. available at: http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/profiles/pdfs/Gasman_Daniel%20.pdf

⁷ I sent a note to John Jackson, a colleague, author of a textbook on racism and science which cites Gasman's work and incorporates his interpretation of Haeckel. Unfortunately, John learned of Danny's death from me and was as baffled as I was as to the absence of any obituaries. John P. Jackson, Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 2006) see especially pp 86-87. Email correspondence: Mehler to Jackson, June 1, 2014; Jackson to Mehler, June 3, 2014 and Mehler to Jackson, June 3, 2014.

⁸ Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁹ Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel*

and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) p. 449 note 33; see also 452; 449 for the other quotes cited. For Haeckel antisemitism see, <http://www.ferris.edu/isar/rejoiner3.pdf>.

¹⁰ I would point out that Heidegger had many Jewish friends, a Jewish lover, a Jewish mentor, by Richards absurd logic, this proves that Heidegger wasn't an antisemite.

¹¹ Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, 449.

¹² See, "Gasman-Richards Controversy" at <http://www.ferris.edu/isar/academic-controversies/gasman.htm> and "From Haeckel to Hitler: The Anatomy of a Controversy," *Skeptic* (nd) <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/09-06-10/#feature>.