Biology and Destiny

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When Biology Became Destiny is a superbly edited collection of eleven extraordinary historical studies that display impeccable scholarship as well as a high level of theoretical coherence and insightful analysis, with a useful introduction and concluding with two interesting personal narratives. Edited by three German-American women’s historians, this collection grew out of a German women’s history study group composed of German and American women. Four of the essays originally appeared in German and have been translated for this volume.

The editors set out to produce a work of scholarship which would self-consciously contribute to the current debate within the feminist movement regarding how to respond to the New Right’s assault on women’s reproductive rights, economic gains of women today, and their relation to the liberal welfare state in general. The essays point to the dangers implicit in a feminism that stresses the biological differences between men and women or facilely accepts the notion that the women’s movement is, somehow, “naturally” progressive. The women’s movement can be a tool of progress or of reaction and it can all too easily be co-opted by a conservative Moral Majority-type coalition. One of the important messages of this book is that women are not morally superior to men. German women were in no way worse than German men, neither did they “display a shred of superior humanity and morality of which they so often boasted.”

The book is divided into two parts. Part I analyzes the successes and failures of the women’s movement in Weimar Germany, examining the various constituent elements of that movement, (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, secular bourgeois and communist), elucidating the various stances of these groups on women’s political and economic rights, sterilization, abortion and other sexual issues, as well as the interaction of the various elements. Part II examines the impact of Nazi racism and sexism — which these authors see as complex interactive phenomena — on the women’s movement, eugenic and population policies, women’s labor, euthanasia and genocide.

It has been years since I have read a book that captured my interest as this collection has. My attention was first brought to the book because of the essay by Giesla Bock on Nazi sterilization policy. This essay was first published in English in Signs in 1983. Since then, it has become a minor classic in the study of the history of eugenics. It not only examined a subject which has been sorely neglected, but also introduced novel observations and suggestions for further research. Giesla Bock is one of the few historians who openly refers to eugenics as a “form of racism” and makes it quite clear that she sees a connection between the history of Nazi eugenics and contemporary sociobiology.

Giesla Bock’s ability to bring together so much valuable material and important insights in a tightly written essay is extraordinary. Her history of German eugenic sterilization reviews all the important legislation and is broadly comparative in approach. It is her view (and mine) that eugenic sterilization legislation cannot be understood in isolation. She stresses the need for “specific comparative approaches,” looking at the international eugenics movement in the first half of this century and comparing it with the “new sociological ‘biocrats’.”

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Anita Grossman's essay on the struggle to legalize abortions showed how progressives made fatal errors in their analysis and their action. While mainstream bourgeois feminists remained "studiously aloof" from the abortion controversy, fearing to take a stand on so complex and divisive an issue, communist and progressive women justified the right to abortion in terms of eugenics.

Certainly, the eugenic component was an important factor in the abortion, birth control, and Sex Reform movements. Many people who defined themselves as progressives or socialists thought that the decision about an abortion was much too important to be left to the personal whims and perceived needs of an individual woman, and should be decided by experts professionals who could weigh the individual situation against the demands of the general welfare. (Page 76)

Amy Hackett's essay on Helen Stocker reiterates the theme of the affinity of progressive feminists for eugenics. Unfortunately, we still do not properly understand the relationship of eugenics to feminism, sexual radicalism and the progressive movement. Eugenics was seen as an integral part of social reform. Sex radicals, liberals and feminists were enamored of the movement, right up to the war. Eugenics was thus an integral part of both the fascist and the progressive programs. Furthermore, while eugenics in fact was a liberal reform, only a fascist state could hope to carry out a thorough-going eugenics program. An understanding of the relationship between eugenics and feminism must begin with an understanding of the relationship between liberalism and fascism.

Eugenics was not a Nazi invention. Many of those who participated in the Nazi eugenics program — which included forced sterilization and euthanasia — justified their actions then, (and later at Nuremberg), by pointing out that progressive thinkers of the time advocated such programs both in and out of Germany. The Nazi government "enabled" German health care professionals to carry out eugenics programs; they did not command them to do so. American eugenic advocates referred to the Nazi programs as an "exciting experiment" in eugenics. They pointed out that Nazi eugenic legislation was based on American models and was separate from Nazi racial policies. Many historians of eugenics continue to stress that distinction without comprehending its significance.

Elizabeth Meyer-Renschhausen's article on "The Bremen Morality Scandal" is a gripping essay about a young woman who died as a result of treatment for venereal disease after being forcibly committed to a "prostitute's ward" in Bremen in the mid-1920s. The case rocked the nation when a book written by the victim and her mother was published by the Catholic press.

Karin Hausen's essay on "Mother's Day in the Weimar Republic" took me by surprise. Mother's Day was introduced into Weimar Germany in 1922 by a coalition of business associations, (florists, confectioners and clothing manufacturers, etc.), and a conservative coalition of anti-abortion, pro-family and anti-pornography groups. Hausen argues that Mother's Day "helped pave the way" for the Nazi regime. This essay would have been better if it had some comparative reference to the Mother's Day movement in other countries. Because she does not mention that Mother's Day began in the United States in 1908, the essay conveys the mistaken impression that Mother's Day was a European invention. And the important question that remains is whether Hausen's story is unique to Germany.

Renate Bridenthal's essay on German housewives associations examines how an organization fostered by the women's movement was in essence a conservative effort by bourgeois Protestant women to counter the domestic servants' unions. It is not surprising that such an organization should exist, but it is surprising that it should be part of the BDF, the German equivalent of NOW. Ultimately, the anti-feminist wing won control of these groups and through them helped to Nazify the whole women's movement.

Marion Kaplan's essay on feminism and anti-Semitism tells the all-too-dismal (and familiar) story of how feminist solidarity "vanished into thin air" under the pressures of growing anti-
Semitism. I was surprised to learn that the president and founder of the Jewish women’s organization was “a dedicated feminist and devout Jew,” and that Orthodox Jewish women were very active in the feminist movement. Furthermore, unlike their Protestant and Catholic counterparts, they participated actively in the general feminist movement.

Jewish feminists were caught between defending their community against anti-Semitic attacks on the one hand, and attacking the Jewish community for its misogynist attitudes on the other. When, after World War I, the German government granted German women the right to vote, Jewish women still had to fight a battle within the Jewish community for this right. It was not until the end of the 1920s, after a bitter struggle, that Jewish women gained the right to vote in most Jewish community elections.

Claudia Koonz’s essay examines the concept of women’s “separate spheres.” Most German women, even those who identified with the women’s movement, accepted biological arguments about the difference between men and women, and spoke of their “separate spheres.” Nazi women successfully used such arguments to Nazify women’s groups. “Thus the women’s movement, hailed in its day as ‘the fortress of German feminism’ ... opted for cooperation with the Nazi regime” (page 225). Middle class women’s organizations viewed the Nazi victory as merely a new variation on an old political reality. Ultimately, these Nazified women’s organizations typified the “banality of evil.” Carrying out traditional women’s support roles during the war, they cooperated in genocide and terror, creating “an image that all was well.” (Page 228).

Annemarie Troger’s article on the relationship of Nazi ideology to women’s labor shows how biological arguments were used in various and conflicting ways to justify the needs of the State. Thus, women were first pushed out of the labor market, since their place was in the home. Later, when their labor was needed for assembly line work, the Nazis argued that women were “ideally suited” to such work. “Because so little think-

Sybil Milton’s essay on “Women and the Holocaust” is an excellent overview of material available on the subject. She points out that “women have been largely invisible in the current historiography on the subject.” (Page 279.) The story of women, particularly working class women, both Jews and non-Jews, has been largely neglected. Even in the camps there were differences between the experiences of men and women which need further exploration.

The two final narratives, the stories of Ruth Nebel and Kathrenina Jacob are inspiring first-person accounts of survival and resistance.

These essays can be seen as a tough-minded attempt to understand the relationship between women and the Holocaust. They clearly demonstrate the relevance of such an understanding to current struggles against the New Right and the new eugenics. They will be of interest to students of the Holocaust, feminism, racism and eugenics. They will prove to be a lasting contribution to our understanding of the complex interaction between racism and sexism.

Greetings
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