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Plöckinger, Othmar
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RACE AS THE BASIS OF VÖLKISCH HISTORIOGRAPHY

The (pseudo)scientific origins of Nazi ideology

Othmar Plöckinger

This article addresses changes in scientific thought in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Germany and Austria, which favoured the development of a historiography based on concepts of race. The rise of the natural sciences and particularly, of biology and the theory of evolution, led to a multifaceted realignment of social and historical interpretative patterns, at the centre of which guiding concepts such as *race* and *nation* were reinforced. Linguistics made a significant contribution to the hierarchisation of races and peoples, which continued to prevail, even when marginalised in the developing scientific disciplines of ethnology, anthropology and prehistory. These developments ultimately fed into a *völkisch* historiography that became increasingly independent of academic life and laid the foundation for a new National Socialist historiography.

Keywords: historiography, race, natural sciences, biology, *völkisch*.

Due to its diversity, the *völkisch* movement, which had been gaining ground since the end of the 19th century, had only a limited range of key topics that were equally important to most authors, albeit with different degrees of emphasis. These included race as well as historiography, the fusion of which became inevitable (Puschner, 2005, p. 229). This is why, on 22 October 1912, the sociologist and economist Franz Oppenheimer gave a remarkable lecture on «Die rassentheoretische Geschichtsphilosophie» ('Racial theory and the philosophy of history') at the Second German Sociological Conference in Berlin. He stated: «racial theory is a historical-philosophical doctrine which claims to be able to explain the main tenets of the entire course of world history, from the racial characteristics of social groups» (Oppenheimer, 1913, p. 98). Oppenheimer based his analysis on Joseph Arthur de Gobineau,

whom he considered the «scholarly creator»¹ of racial historiography. In addition, it dealt with Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose influential work *Die Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts* ('The foundations of the 19th century') had been published only a few years earlier, and asserted:

«The *völkisch* movement had only a limited range of key topics. These included race as well as historiography, the fusion of which became inevitable»

[T]he racial-theoretical philosophy of history is not a science, but a pseudo-science, is the typical legitimistic group ideology of the ruling upper class; it has no firm foundations; and particularly the «feeling of race in one's own bosom» is revealed to be the effect of that main socio-psychological law according to which the individual as a member of the group always values, thinks

and acts in the manner that is required by the inherent interests of the group. (Oppenheimer, 1913, p. 135)

¹ *wissenschaftlichen Schöpfer*.

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In the ensuing debate, however, there was by no means a consistent rejection of racial theory. Werner Sombart credited racial theory as having eliminated the «autocracy of the materialistic conception of history» whereas Max Weber did at least express methodological doubts about the study of racial characteristics. Even Franz Oppenheimer acknowledged in his closing remarks: «It did not occur to me, to deny all the significance of *race*. I merely stated that race does not explain entirely everything, as the racial theorists seem to believe» (Weber et al., 1913, pp. 186–191). Oppenheimer’s descriptions in particular were of two-fold significance, as he was not only a sociologist, but also had close ties to Zionism, in which the assumption of a «Jewish race» was also met with approval (Vogt, 2016, pp. 128, 132).

This was the first and last time that academia would deal in such depth with racial historiography, which was regarded as a pseudoscience. This distancing also occurred in the opposite direction, because the *völkisch* racial historiography that had been developing since the end of the 19th century barely took notice of academic historiography – with the exception of Heinrich von Treitschke and to a lesser extent Karl Lamprecht (see Kautsky, 1914, pp. 1 ff.; Leers, 1934, p. 3; Raphael, 2010, pp. 73–75).

■ THE RISE OF THE NATURAL SCIENCES

Racial historiography also drew on developments that had begun in the 18th century and which, over the course of the 19th century, had reoriented the sciences. This was especially the case with regard to the importance of the natural sciences. Towards the middle of the 19th century, geology (together with palaeontology) developed into one of the most popular scientific disciplines. It went beyond all previous conceptions of time and development, thus preparing the ground for the theory of evolution. Soon thereafter, biology and chemistry also became increasingly important and popular (Geulen, 2006, pp. 74 ff.; Schimkat, 2002, pp. 192–199; Schwarz, 1999, pp. 50–55, 117; Wiwjorra, 2006, pp. 175–181, 190–195).

The rise of the natural sciences not only laid the foundation for the increasing mechanisation of the economy and society, but in addition, and especially in Germany, it led to the abandonment of speculative natural philosophy and a decline in the importance of the humanities as a whole (Geulen, 2006, p. 103; Thomann & Kümmel, 1995a, pp. 105 ff.). The resulting gaps were filled by movements and groups who saw themselves partly as an expansion of, and partly as a reaction to,

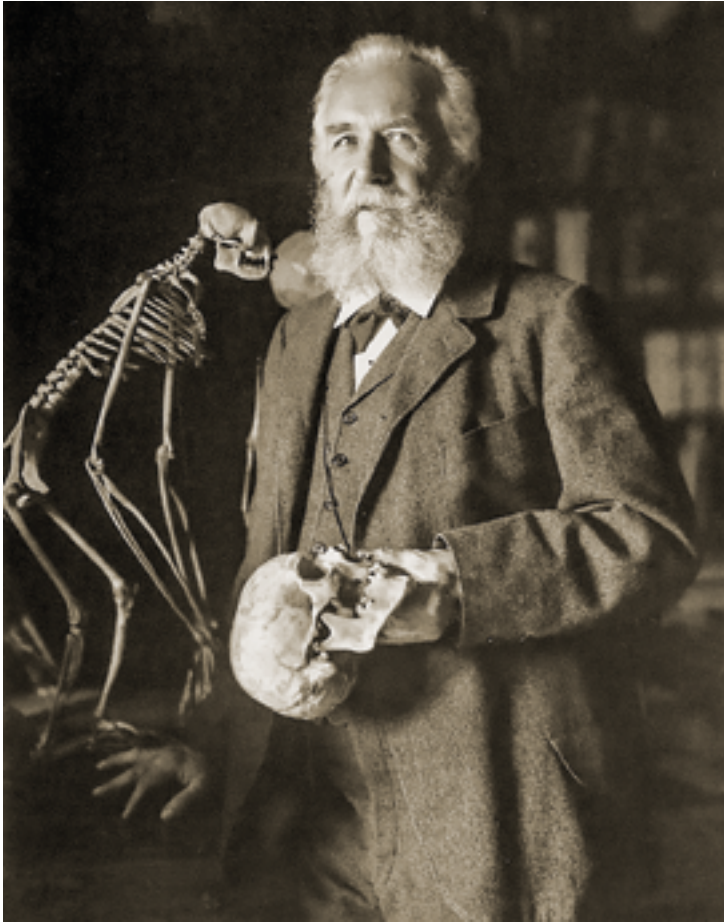


Heinz Hilal Oppenheimer / Wikimedia Commons

In 1912, a conference was held in Berlin to discuss racial historiography in depth. It was the first and last time that academia would deal in such depth with this field, which was regarded as a pseudoscience. However, during the conference, there was by no means a consistent rejection of racial theory. In his closing speech, sociologist Franz Oppenheimer (pictured) acknowledged that he did not reject the full meaning of race, although he claimed that race does not explain everything.

these developments. For instance, the zoologist Ernst Haeckel, the most prominent advocate of the theory of evolution in Germany, founded the *Monistenbund*, which viewed humans as an integral component of nature and thus rejected any religious beliefs (Daum, 2002, pp. 65–83; Puschner, 2014, pp. 103 ff.).

His pupil Willibald Hentschel was one of the radical proponents of ethnic racial breeding. From 1901 to 1918, he published the multi-volume work *Varuna. Das Gesetz des aufsteigenden und sinkenden Lebens in der Völkergeschichte* (‘Varuna. The law of rising and falling life in the history of nations’) and was closely aligned with Gobineau’s thinking and his notion of racial decline. From Hentschel’s standpoint, this decline could, however, be countered by means of consistent racial breeding, echoing the ideas of a potential «regeneration» as Richard Wagner had envisioned through art (Denk, 2011, p. 35).



Photographische Gesellschaft (1906) / Nicola Perscheid

The 18th and 19th century saw the rise of the natural sciences in Germany, which had led to the abandonment of speculative natural philosophy and a decline in the importance of the humanities. In this context, various movements were born, such as the Monistenbund, founded by Ernst Haeckel, which considered the human being as an integral component of nature (and thus rejected any religious belief).

■ COUNTERMOVEMENTS: *LEBENSREFORM* AND ESOTERICISM

In contrast, the *Lebensreform* ('life reform') movement saw itself as an antidote to the predominance of science and technology. It comprised a number of currents that were united in their rejection of a metropolitan culture deemed decadent and in a concept of nature inspired by Romanticism. Some of them had occult, anti-Semitic or racist leanings from the outset, while others came under their influence during the early 20th century. One such example is the *Lebensreformer* Heinrich Pudor, who was initially a fervent advocate of naturism and vegetarianism, before developing into a rabid anti-Semite (Adam, 1999, pp. 189, ff.; Hermand, 2013, pp. 58, ff.; Keretic, 2021, pp. 63–77). The same applied to Julius Langbehn and his book *Rembrandt as educator*, which caused a great stir and wielded considerable influence, especially among youth organisations.

While an emphatic rejection of current science and research was still at the heart of cultural criticism when the book was published in 1890, later editions contained increasingly blatant racist and anti-Semitic elements (Heinßen, 2009, pp. 132–135; Lobenstein-Reichmann, 2012, pp. 304–308). Despite all their differences, Langbehn was, to some degree, aligned with two Austrian nationalist outsiders: the Ariosoph Guido von List wanted to rediscover lost Germanic knowledge by means of «Erberinnerungen» ('inherited memory') (Goodrick-Clarke, 1997, pp. 43 ff.). His pupil Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels also brought together the mystical and the occult with the natural sciences, as demonstrated in his book *Theozoologie oder Die Kunde von den Sodoms-Äfflingen und dem Götter-Elektron* (1905).

■ RACIALISED CONCEPTS IN LINGUISTICS

Drastic shifts also occurred within various neighbouring disciplines that developed in the 19th century. Linguistics, which, with the study of Sanskrit, also made the «Aryans» a subject of study since the beginning of the 19th century (Olender, 2013, pp. 30 ff.), not only increasingly developed a linguistic hierarchy of superior and inferior languages, but also exported these classifications to the emerging fields of ethnology and anthropology. By deriving a relationship between speakers from the relationship between languages, higher-value languages also resulted in higher-value speakers (Gardt, 1999, p. 307; Römer, 1989, pp. 42–48). Connecting a postulated Aryan (or Indo-European) original language with an equally postulated Aryan people was the next step. Friedrich Schlegel and Jacob Grimm had considerable influence on this, although Grimm avoided the term «Aryan». Even Charles Darwin perceived a close connection between human races and languages, albeit without any evaluative implications (Hoßfeld, 2016, p. 122).

By contrast, in 1847, the Schlegel student and indologist Christian Lassen was exceedingly clear when he pitted the superior capabilities of the «Indian Aryans» – or Indo-Europeans – against the cultural, religious and political inferiority of the Semites (Arvidsson, 2006, pp. 92–94). Gobineau also radically supported this idea, devoting an entire chapter of his well-known work *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* ('Essay on the inequality of human races') to the argument that the inequality of languages reflects the relative value of races. He formulated the following general principle: «the hierarchy of languages is in strict correspondence with the hierarchy of races» (Gobineau, 1902, p. 277). Gobineau's writing was deeply rooted in the discourses of the aristocracy in post-revolutionary

France and when published in the mid-19th century, it was met there with criticism and given little attention overall. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, with whom he was on amicable terms, voiced his disapproval (Denk, 2011, pp. 25–27; Hund, 2023, p. 50; Puschner, 2014, pp. 109 ff.; Tessitore, 2005, p. 631).

It was decades later when Gobineau gained significance. The German translation of his work by Ludwig Schemann in 1898 made him the «first advocate of racial theory in world history» (Brather, 2004, pp. 81 ff.; Hertz, 1925, pp. 5–9; Oppenheimer, 1913, p. 101). In light of this, Claude Lévi-Strauss spoke of the «original sin» of anthropology, which was using the already problematic biological concept of race to explain various sociological and psychological accomplishments of cultures (Lévi-Strauss, 1972, pp. 7 ff.). However, this only applies in essence to the developing area of «political anthropology» and the resulting «racial science». Yet, this development was not without contradictions. In 1861, the German-British linguist Max Müller, who had himself contributed to the establishment of the «Aryan» in linguistics, criticised the alliance of the two sciences: «The science of language and the science of ethnology have both suffered most seriously from being mixed up together. The classification of races and languages should be quite independent of each other» (Müller, 1863/2010, p. 327). Such warnings were ignored and ultimately lost their significance, when linguistics, towards the end of the 19th century, was increasingly compelled to retreat, leaving the field to archaeology and prehistory.

This was evident in the fierce debate that had been brewing since the 1880s on the East Indian or «Nordic European» origin of the Aryans. Two Austrians assumed a significant role in this. In 1883, the Viennese orientalist Adolf Wahrmund published his first study *Origines Ariacae. Linguistisch-ethnologische Untersuchungen zur ältesten Geschichte der arischen Völker und Sprachen* ('Origines Ariacae. Linguistic-ethnological studies on the oldest history of the Aryan peoples and languages') and, then, a few years later, *Das Gesetz des Nomadenthums und die heutige Judenherrschaft* ('The law of nomadism and today's Jewish rule', 1887), which became a classic of anti-Semitic literature.

The National Socialists later hailed the Viennese Karl Penka as the founder of the theory of the northern European origin of the Aryans. After heated debates on Penka's theory and his anthropological arguments at the annual conference of the Anthropological Society in Vienna in 1884, Rudolf Virchow also pointed out the glaring contradictions between anthropological and linguistic studies at the first joint annual meeting of the German and Austrian Anthropological



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The Lebensreform movement encompassed several currents that, among other things, had in common a concept of nature inspired by Romanticism. Some of these currents had occult, antisemitic and racist leanings, and had considerable influence on youth organisations. Pictured here, Youth Movement Conference in Germany in 1920.

Society in Vienna in 1889 (Virchow, 1889, p. 66). In addition, the new approaches to research in prehistory, orientated towards the natural sciences, sometimes ended up in nationalistic waters, as the example of the prehistorian Gustaf Kossinna proved. He had also started out as a linguist, but then turned to settlement archaeology and published his best-known work *Die deutsche Vorgeschichte, eine hervorragend nationale Wissenschaft* ('German prehistory, an outstanding national science') in 1912 (Puschner, 2005, pp. 295 ff.).

■ RACE AND HISTORY

Ultimately, the hierarchical concepts of linguistics and the racialised components of the natural sciences converged in *völkisch* thinking. The increasing importance of biology generally – and of anthropology in particular – for the interpretation of history and society was epitomised by the competition launched by industrialist Friedrich Krupp in 1900, with the question: «What can we learn from the principles of the theory of descent in relation to the domestic political development and legislation of states?»² First prize went to the work *Vererbung und Auslese im Lebenslauf der Völker* ('Heredity and selection in the life course

² «Was lernen wir aus den Prinzipien der Deszendenztheorie in Beziehung auf die innerpolitische Entwicklung und Gesetzgebung der Staaten?»



From the mid-19th century, certain biological and medical concepts were increasingly used to refer to Jews, as were comparisons with animals. As early as the 1930s, Nazi discourse incorporated these terms. In the image above, a poster of a Nazi rally reading: «Victory over Bolshevism and plutocracy means the liberation from the Jewish parasites!».

of peoples’) by Walter Schallmayer, who had close ties to the social democrats yet nevertheless was one of the founders of the racial hygiene approach in Germany (Hertz, 1915, p. 19; Thomann & Kümmel, 1995a, pp. 100–107; 1995b, pp. 319 ff.). A similar situation applied to Ludwig Woltmann, who also received a prize. He was associated with social democracy, yet he was also strongly influenced by Gobineau and Chamberlain and in his writings was intensively committed to proving that the Germanic peoples were the most brilliant race in European history (Puschner, 2014, pp. 111–113; Thomann & Kümmel, 1995b, pp. 322 ff.). This development was underscored by the establishment of journals such as the *Politisch-Anthropologische Revue/Monatshefte* by Ludwig Woltmann in 1902, which developed in a *völkisch*-anti-Semitic direction even before the First World War, and the competing *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie* founded by Alfred Ploetz in 1904 (Hufenreuter, pp. 283–290).

In medicine and biology, there were no equally significant developments that influenced the

interpretation of history and society in such a way. Blood had been at the very centre of biological and medical considerations until the early 19th century. Then, with the discovery and research of cells, it temporarily fell into the background from the mid-19th century onwards (Spörri, 2013, p. 35). In the realms of religion and «folk medicine», however, its significance remained largely undiminished, as noted in 1893 by the Protestant theologian Hermann Strack, who was particularly committed to combating the anti-Semitic blood libel myth (Strack, 1900, p. 1). As late as 1914, the *völkisch* anti-Semitic journal *Hammer* published several letters from readers reporting alleged attempts by Jews to obtain Christian blood.

It was on the basis of such long-standing traditions that the renewed rise of «blood research» was able to develop, having begun with the discovery of blood groups and the rediscovery of Mendel’s laws in the early 20th century. During and after the First World War, research on blood groups in particular was racially loaded and was therefore harnessed for *völkisch* interpretations (Spörri, 2013, pp. 61–63, 93–99). Alongside this came the displacement of academic anthropology by racial studies, which became increasingly prominent after the First World War and was associated with authors such as Fritz Lenz and, especially, Hans F. K. Günther.

Völkisch and right-wing circles thus saw their ideas being «scientifically» validated (Brather, 2004, p. 83; Leers, 1934, pp. 10–12). The natural sciences and biology had already become entrenched in the language of radical racist and anti-Semitic authors. Motivated by Paul de Lagarde in particular, biological and medical terms such as *parasites*, *bacilli*, *trichinae* and *pathogens* were increasingly added to the comparisons between animals and Jews from the middle of the 19th century (Bein, 1965; Erb & Bergmann, 1989, pp. 195–216; Paul, 2020, pp. 25 ff.; Sarasin, 2004). In his correspondence in the mid-1880s with Wilhelm Marr, Theodor Fritsch denied the Jews their humanity altogether and labelled them «vermin» (Zumbini, 2003, pp. 329 ff.).

■ VÖLKISCH HISTORIOGRAPHY

The powerful impact of all these factors was able to manifest itself in *völkisch* historiography not least because, as was the case in anthropology, a historiography that was largely detached from academic research became established in the late 19th century, both in German nationalism and in the *völkisch* movement. Two works were particularly influential in this regard. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, a German by choice, published his work *Die Grundlagen des 19.*

Jahrhunderts ('The foundations of the 19th century') in 1899, in which he positioned race at the centre of his historical and philosophical considerations: «Race lifts a man above himself: it endows him with extraordinary – I might almost say supernatural – powers, so entirely does it distinguish him from the individual who springs from the chaotic jumble of peoples» (Chamberlain, 1912, p. 320; cf. Lobenstein-Reichmann, 2009, pp. 145–151). Ten years after the publication of Chamberlain's work, the leader of the *Alldeutschen Verbandes*, Heinrich Claß – under the pseudonym «Einhart» – published his work *Deutsche Geschichte* ('German history', 1909) which was based on the premise that the Germanic peoples, and thus also the Germans, were part of the «Aryan race» and therefore belonged to the peoples «who are among the most superior, most valuable and noblest in terms of spiritual, moral and physical qualities» (Einhart, 1912, p. 2). Claß's writing was established as a leading historical work in *völkisch* circles (Puschner, 2005, p. 290). Around this time, however, several other German nationalistic writers also published texts on «German history» with a similar orientation.

In spite of all the differences, Oswald Spengler's historical morphology in his influential work *The decline of the West* (1918) also belongs to this sphere, as he also saw an «idea» as manifesting itself in the races. Even though he interpreted the term *race* primarily in the sense of *character*, with his core approach of interpreting cultures as organisms, he was still very much in the tradition of biologism (Geppert, 2011, pp. 115–119; Pöhl, 2018, pp. 645 ff.).

All of these works on (German) history were republished in the first years after the First World War as a contribution to the national-conservative renewal narrative and further writings were added. Considering later developments, it is evident that the essential foundations for the connection between historiography and natural science were already in place even in the early stages of the formation of National Socialist ideology, especially in terms of their biological and racial foundations, on which later National Socialist historiography could build. ☉

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; courtesy of G. Howard Teller

Der deutsche Soldat ist der beste der Welt. Seine Bereitschaft zu Angriff und Verteidigung sind rassisch bedingte Eigenschaften...

In the late 19th century, various authors argued for the Aryan race, which claimed superior spiritual, moral, and physical qualities. These works were republished in the years after World War I, and contributed to the national-conservative revivalist narrative. Pictured here is German propaganda from 1933–1944 glorifying the German army for its racial qualities. The text reads: «The German soldier is the best in the world. His disposition for attack and defence are race-related characteristics».

«In his writings, Ludwig Woltmann was intensively committed to proving that the Germanic tribes were the most brilliant race in European history»



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OTHMAR PLÖCKINGER. Historian (Salzburg, Germany). He was a member of the editorial team of the critical edition of *Mein Kampf* published by the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich (2019). He teaches at the Gymnasium für Berufstätige in Salzburg, and has worked as a freelance academic since the late 1990s. ✉ o.ploeckinger@aon.at