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SOURCES OF THE NAZI RACIAL IDEOLOGY

Herlinde Pauer-Studer

This is an extract from Pauer-Studer, H. (2020). *Justifying injustice. Legal theory in Nazi Germany*. (Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 117–124). The author analyses the adaptation of German law to the political goals of National Socialism.

Keywords: National Socialism, Nazism, Third Reich, racial policy.

In the late nineteenth century, highly ideological reinterpretations of biological and anthropological data produced crude theories about races, their composition, and the physical and mental traits of those humans who belonged to them. The racial theories that animated Nazi ideology were a concoction of these pseudo-scientific claims, preconceptions, social stereotypes, and prejudices.

Racial anthropologists claimed that *race* was a value-free category of empirical description and classification. De facto, however, the notion of race became a category of normative assessment, specifically when linked to National Socialist standards of superiority and inferiority. *Race and racial affiliation* evolved into benchmarks for social acceptance, exclusion, and, ultimately, denigration. These benchmarks established that certain groups of human beings, foremost Jews, were fundamentally different from Germans and thus had to be segregated from the mainstream German population.

In her impressive study of the Nazis' administrative implementation of their racial fanaticism, Cornelia Essner (2002, p. 21) reveals two main directions in «the maze of racial thinking». The first, which she calls «contagionistic antisemitism», focused on maintaining «racial purity» by keeping German blood free from alien and corrosive influences. The second prong of racial antisemitism was found in a genetic racism that drew on racial anthropology and biological research on inheritance (Essner, 2002, pp. 32–49).

«The racial theories that animated Nazi ideology were a concoction of pseudo-scientific claims, preconceptions, social stereotypes, and prejudices»

Contagionistic antisemitism was motivated by the fear that fusing German and Jewish blood would lead to the degeneration of future German generations. Any sexual contact between an «Aryan»¹ woman and a Jewish man would make it impossible for the Aryan woman to give birth to a fully Aryan child, even with another father, who was Aryan.

According to Essner, a main inspiration for contagionistic antisemitism was Arthur Dinter's *The sins against the blood* (1918) – a primitive anti-Jewish melodrama that had tremendous public impact (Dinter, 1920). The story was about an Aryan German and his Jewish wife who died of her own shock at her only being able to give birth to «monstrous» children; the Aryan father eventually found parental peace and happiness when reconnecting with his illegitimate son whom he had fathered with an Aryan girl. The book was hugely popular, in 1921 it appeared already in its 16th ed.² Up to 1934, 260,000 copies were sold (Hartung, 2001; Kren & Morris, 1991).

Although Dinter's vulgar fantasies did not meet with the Nazi leadership's approval and he was expelled from the Nazi Party in 1928, the contamination thesis (that sexual intercourse between Jews and Aryans would

¹ *Aryan* was an invented term for racially pure Germanness. See an extract from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Rabinbach and Gilman (2019).

² For an online version of the 1921 ed. of Dinter's text see https://archive.org/details/Dinter-Artur-Die-Suende-wider-das-Blut_936/page/n1

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result in impure Aryan-German blood) continued to exercise great influence. A prominent proponent of this form of antisemitism was Julius Streicher, the fanatic National Socialist editor of the notorious tabloid *Der Stürmer* (Lösener, 2001).

The contagionistic ideology sought to inhibit sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. In the first years of Nazi rule, race defilement (*Rassenschande*) was subject to public defamation (Gross, 2013). With the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, which banned marriages and extramarital sexual intercourse between Jews and Aryan Germans, race defilement became a legal offence which, beginning in 1936, could even be punished with imprisonment.

The second version of antisemitism, genetic racism, originated in the natural sciences in the late nineteenth century, when biological research began focusing on race. For instance, scientists investigated whether Mendel's laws on heredity aligned with the descent and promulgation of racial features. Seeing race as a specific set of hereditary traits prompted further studies of whether and how genetic endowments were passed on, and what effects this would have for the progeny's racial strength or weakness. A hotly debated issue was the deleterious effect of the mixture of races on hereditary dispositions.

In the wake of Darwinism, the survival and decay of human races became a pressing issue. In the 1921 edition of an influential treatise on human hereditary doctrine and racial hygiene, for instance,

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem Photo and Film Archives



Cover of the anti-Semitic novel *Die Sünde wider das Blut*, by Artur Dinter. The illustration shows a vulture, representing a Jewish man, over an Aryan man.



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Nazi ideology understood that certain groups of human beings were fundamentally different from Germans and had to be segregated. On the left, a 1940 photograph of the two-and-a-half-metre-high concrete wall surrounding the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, Poland. On the right, the entrance to the «Gypsy camp» inside the Lodz ghetto, also in Poland, circa 1942.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Library of Congress

Nazi propaganda against relations between Aryan women and Jewish men. Under the title «Racial desecration», the slide shows photographs of mixed couples with the caption: «Women and girls, the Jews are your ruin!» The ideology of contagion sought to prevent sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews in order to avoid the «contamination» of German blood. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 prohibited both marriages and extramarital sex between Jews and Aryan Germans.

«The notion of race became a category of normative assessment, specifically when linked to National Socialist standards of superiority and inferiority»

the authors Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer, and Fritz Lenz discussed the possible threat to the «Nordic race» by racial blending (Baur et al., 1921). Although the authors refrained from promoting doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority within the German population, they objected to racial «infiltration» from eastern Europeans.

Research on hereditary racial features in the years before and immediately after the First World War was not yet directed specifically against Jews. That changed in the nineteen-twenties (Essner, 2002, 355–366). «Racial scientists» (*Rasseforscher*) continued to claim that they were only interested in empirical studies of racial features, traits, and various anthropological differences. Yet racial research and hygiene, which had professed to investigate the preservation of the sane biological substance of

populations, increasingly merged with *völkisch* ideology and antisemitism.

The career of Hans F. K. Günther provides a striking example of a *Rasseforscher* cultivating his image as an empirical scientist. Having developed a strong interest in anthropology after studying German literature (he completed his doctorate in 1915), Günther was more of a public writer than an academic thinker. His widely read study on German racial characteristics appeared in 1922, followed two years later by a book on the racial traits of Europeans. In 1930, Günther published a racial study of the Jewish people (Günther, 1922; 1924; 1930).

These publications had a tremendous impact on Nazi racial thinking. In particular, Günther's theses that Jews' physical and mental features distinguished them from European races, and thus any mixing of Nordics and Jews should be avoided, became central topoi of Nazi doctrine.

«Race is a concept of natural science applied to human beings», Günther claimed, thus making it a «concept of the descriptive study of human beings» (Günther, 1922, p. 7). The notion of *race* would constitute a mere classificatory concept, similar to such categories as *family*, *genus*, and *species* (Günther, 1922, p. 8). Günther's definition of *race* as «a human group, marked off from every other human group through its proper combination of bodily and mental characteristics, which in turn produces only its like», found its way into the Nazi racial law commentaries (Günther, 1927, p. 3; 1929, p. 8).

Günther emphasized the distinction between *race* and *Volk*. While a race was marked by specific biological, anthropological, and mental traits, a *Volk*, he argued, was additionally constituted by its cultural traditions, attitudes, values, and even language. The term *Volk* was thus a historical-moral concept, referring to «human beings of the same language and ethical attitudes» (*Gesittung*) (Günther, 1922, p. 7).

According to Günther, the German people did not correspond to a single race. Rather, it consisted of various races – the Nordic, Mediterranean, Dinaric, Alpine, and East Baltic.³ Although Günther clearly preferred the Nordic race, his categorical system had to incorporate racial strands associated with southern Germans. He thought the Nordic race to be superior to

³ See Günther (1929, pp. 7–13). Günther sometimes presents a slightly different list of European races, that is, the Nordic race, the Western (*westisch*) race, the dinaric race, the Eastern (*ostisch*) race, and the East Baltic race. Basically the same list (the *ostisch* race is additionally specified as alpine race) is mentioned in Günther (1935, p. 178).



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Muzeum Sztokół w Łodzi

the other races, particularly the East Baltics.⁴ Günther's adoration of Nordic racial traits (tall and slim stature, narrow faces, fair hair, and blue eyes) revealed his racial prejudices and flagrantly contradicted his presumptive self-depiction as an empirical scientist.

Günther saw the strengthening of Nordic racial features (what he called *Aufnordung*) as the only way to avert further decay of the German *Volk* through migration and the mixture of Germans with non-Germans. «A consequential, pure, and value-creating unfolding of German life», he wrote, «is only possible out of the blood and spirit of the Nordic race» (Günther, 1922, p. 349). His work *Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes* ('Racial science of the German people') included thoughts on how to enhance Nordic breeding.⁵

«Research on hereditary racial features in the years before and immediately after the First World War was not yet directed specifically against Jews»

In his 1920 text *Ritter, Tod und Teufel* ('Knight, Death, and the Devil'), Günther had already expressed the urgency of leading the German people back to the Nordic worldview (Günther, 1935, p. 191). In stressing the importance of committing to a Nordic existence, he postulated a racial moral law similar to Kant's categorical imperative: «Act so, that you can always think the direction of your will as a foundational directive of Nordic-racial legislation» (Günther, 1922, p. 365; 1935, p. 191). Günther offered the following explanation for the directive's philosophical background: Other than Kant, Fichte had taken the step toward a *Volk*-bound legislation. However, Fichte still had no insight into «the nexuses of blood» (*Blutzusammenhänge*). This was only available, according to Günther, when nineteenth-century thinkers abandoned cosmopolitanism's «ideal of humanity» and «universal legislation», a step supported by racial science. The study of races would ultimately lead from natural science into the sphere of ethical values (Günther, 1922, p. 366).

The pernicious character of Günther's work became yet more apparent in his racial study of the Jewish people. Just as Germans were supposedly composed



Deutsches Bundesarchiv

Research into inherited racial traits was initially not specifically directed at Jewish people, but this changed in the 1920s. Hans F. K. Günther is an example of a racial scientist whose publications had a major impact on Nazi racial thinking.

«Günther's theses that Jews' physical and mental features distinguished them from European races had a tremendous impact on Nazi racial thinking»

⁴ Günther's preference for the Nordic race might have had personal reasons: he was married to a Norwegian woman and lived in Scandinavia from 1923 until 1929.

⁵ One of Günther's suggestions is that nordic children from poor, child-rich families should be adopted by economically better off nordic people with a firm nordic mental attitude. See Günther (1922, p. 357).



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Marion Davy

The «race scientist» Hans F. K. Günther emphasised the distinction between race and Volk. While a race is marked by biological traits, the Volk, according to Günther, is also constituted by its cultural traditions, attitudes, values and even language. In the picture, propaganda with the caption «The Jewish spirit undermines the healthy energy of the German people».

of different races, Günther maintained that Jews were a mix of racial elements, foremost Near Eastern and Oriental races. He divided these two groups into Israelites and Hebrews. The former had lived in Palestine, while the Hebrews had lived in Egypt, Africa, and northern parts of the Near East, from where they migrated to Palestina (Canaa) and mixed with Jews there. Günther further argued that the Jewish people was shaped by Western, Hamite, Nordic, and Negro races (Günther, 1930,⁶ pp. 63–115).

Apart from his reflections on Jewish racial history, Günther devoted a chapter of *Rassenkunde des jüdischen Volkes* ('Racial science of the Jewish people') to an extensive discussion of contemporary Jews' physical and behavioral characteristics. His description was chock-full of negative stereotypes and racial prejudices, despite his vow to avoid judging the Jewish people, let alone ascribing them inferiority. Günther claimed his book merely described the Jews' otherness (*Andersartigkeit*) – that is, their mental-spiritual difference. Yet by confounding the descriptive

and evaluative, he attributed the advent of the so-called «Jewish question» to this otherness – a problem whose solution required in his view the strict separation of Jews and non-Jews (Günther, 1922, p. 433).

The normative subtext of Günther's book belies his insistence on racial science (*Rassenkunde*) as just a branch of descriptive natural science. Nevertheless, he successfully upheld his nimbus as a mere value-neutral anthropologist and racial expert both during and after the Nazi era. Despite being one of the major inspirations for the regime's racial fanaticism, Hans Günther managed to avoid postwar legal proceedings.⁷ ☉

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⁶ In this book, Günther distinguished between the following European races: the Nordic, Phalian, Eastern, Western, Dinaric, and East Baltic one. See also Steinweis (2008, pp. 28–33).

⁷ Günther was in an internment camp after the war, but eventually he was classified as a mere Nazi follower (*Mitläufer*).