

Dagmar Herzog

Racism, Fascism, Eugenics: The Political Work of Consequential Fictions

Dagmar Herzog and I have known each other for several decades. We became acquainted through three very special academic contexts: an unusual annual gathering referred to as “The Northeast Workshop on German Women’s History and Literature,” that brought women academics in history together with women academics in literature/cultural studies to discuss over two days a particular theme, sometimes a specific book, related to Germany; a biannual conference on “Lessons and Legacies of the Holocaust,” also an interdisciplinary group; and at the annual conferences of the German Studies Association, the largest professional association bringing together academics in many disciplines to discuss a wide range of topics related to Germany and other German-speaking countries, regions, groups, or individuals, which I also mentioned earlier in this book. I got to observe Herzog not only as an extremely well-read and articulate person, but also as someone who is deeply insightful in responding to other people’s work. Not all academics are good at this, and Herzog and some of the other German women historians I got to know in these settings really inspired me to try to be smart, respectful, and constructive when giving feedback.

This is what Dagmar Herzog shares with us about her life’s journey so far:

No one who knew me as a teenager or early twenty-something could have guessed that I would become a historian. In fact, when I began attending college at Duke University in the late 1970s, I thought the field was so far away from the things I hoped to learn that I initially pleaded with the school’s administrators – successfully – that I be allowed to count a religion course as sufficient for fulfilling every student’s requirement to take a history class. By my senior year, I realized how wrong I had been and took – and loved – two history courses, one on civil rights and the other on comparative slave societies. Still, I didn’t think there would be more history in my future. My double major at Duke was in French Literature and Political Science. And I had completed half of my Political Science credits by taking courses on criminal justice at the American University in Washington, D.C., while pursuing a practicum as an Investigator for the Public Defender Service – a job that might best be described as detective work on behalf of underresourced, systemically disempowered clients.

Raised in the U.S. South by German immigrant parents who were deeply involved in the African American civil rights movement through churches and antipoverty programs, I also spent recurrent stretches of my childhood and adolescence back

among extended family in Germany, including a summer working in a legendary German charity institution for people with varieties of cognitive impairment at which two of my great-aunts were employed. Care work made sense to me, and after graduation from Duke, I returned to Washington for a gap year with the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. Working at a day shelter for homeless women in the nation's capital at the height of deinstitutionalization brought me into close contact not just with the most abject poverty but also schizophrenia and other forms of psychosis.

Thinking I wanted to be a journalist, reporting on Europe for Americans, I realized I needed much more of the history I had so far evaded and applied to and entered Brown University for graduate training. Initially, it was overwhelming, but also thrilling. And by the time I got the chance in my second year to be a teaching assistant leading discussion seminars for European intellectual history from Rousseau to Foucault, I was hooked. I was lucky to enter the discipline just as novel approaches to thinking about power, inequality, justice, and desire were being explored. And, by the time I was finishing my dissertation in the early 1990s (on Jewish rights, women's rights, and the dilemmas of liberalism in the nineteenth century), two new nascent subfields of history were just taking off: history of sexuality and history of the Holocaust. These, then, were also the foci of the classes I taught in my first posting after graduation, at Michigan State University.

This interest in topics that are extraordinarily morally and emotionally intense, contested, and complex, which raise myriad questions for which there are no easy answers but which allow me to learn new things from my students, year after year, about how they make sense of the world, has never left me. I feel fortunate that for now close to twenty years, the Graduate Center at the City University of New York – the largest urban public university in the country and a remarkable upward-mobility-machine for the immigrant working class – has been my home. Teaching is itself a kind of care work, and it remains, every day, a source of joy. I teach courses on the histories of gender and sexuality, fascism and genocide, disability and care, psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and interdisciplinary theory and historical method.

My books include: *Intimacy and Exclusion* (1996); *Sex after Fascism* (2005); *Sexuality in Europe* (2011); *Cold War Freud* (2017); *Unlearning Eugenics* (2018); and the forthcoming *The Question of Unworthy Life* (2024). My most recent coedited collection, with Chelsea Schields, is *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism* (2021). Although I am always trying to understand things that I couldn't comprehend before, there are evident recurring preoccupations. Among these are my

search, in every instance, not just for documenting and explaining the far too many examples history provides of interhuman cruelty and complicity in evil, but also for recovering the idiosyncratic imperfect heroes and heroines in every location and era who found the sharpest counterarguments to injustices and inequalities of various kinds, or who simply modeled alternative ways of being. Looking for them, and always again finding them, often in utterly unexpected places, has taught me, over and over, that the past is an infinitely precious resource.

And here is an example of Dagmar's clear thinking and writing.

What is racism?

Racism is prejudice, antagonism, repression, or lethal harm directed at members of a group allegedly sharing inherited biological characteristics and deemed inferior and therefore not worthy of equal rights. Or put another way: Racism is a system of thought and feeling that has been evolved over centuries; it provides a framework for making sense of the world. It is rooted in a fiction, but it is a fiction with a vast array of material consequences.

Racism comes in two main forms. There is an exterminatory and exclusionary form (for example, settler colonial violence against Indigenous peoples in North America, Nazism's treatment of Jews, and also of Roma and Sinti), and there is a hierarchical and exploitative form (for instance, slavery across the Americas, Jim Crow in the U.S. South, apartheid in South Africa).

Structural racism is a crucial manifestation especially of the hierarchical and exploitative form. Examples of how it has manifested in the United States include: The long history of disenfranchisement at the voting booth (from terroristic violence to gerrymandering, voter suppression and now also voter substitution), dispossession of property through redlining and mortgage denial and "urban renewal" (and then disinvestment), and differential real estate valuing, the cultivation of systematic indebtedness, disproportionate incarceration rates, slashed budgets for public schooling, the placement of zones of environmental hazard. In other words, racism leaves its marks not only on hearts but also on – among other things – politics, labor, housing, health, and education.

What is fascism?

Fascism manifests as either an insurgent movement or as a dictatorial regime, but in either form it crystallizes around hostility to the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. And by fraternity, I mean also: human capacities for empathy and solidarity. Fascism is always deeply hostile to empathy and solidarity; it organizes itself against those precious ideals. Fascism uses the law *against* the rule of law. It makes the judiciary useful to itself. It captures the legal system more generally so that legislatures and police and judges all enforce the movement's or the regime's desired divisions between who is "in" and who is "out," who is "up" and who is "down."

Fascism regularly relies on violence, or the threat of violence, and persecution, or the threat of persecution, removing political opponents from official positions, or imprisoning its enemies, or forcing them into exile. It can and will resort to assassination or execution of its adversaries and of targeted minorities alike. Nonetheless, it is never solely repressive, but deliberately channels also rebellious impulses – and then directs these into scapegoating the vulnerable and defenseless.

Fascism sees war as an opportunity, not a problem. It will wage war against outside enemies, engaging in a scorched-earth policy, brutal counterinsurgency, and lethal treatment of prisoners of war. In this way, fascism can represent the extreme radicalization of a nation's drive for colonial conquest and exploitation.

Yet fascism also involves knowledge control. This means both propaganda and censorship, and often, in addition, a demand for public displays of enthusiasm for the movement's or regime's leaders. And it frequently means inducements to denunciation – of neighbors, coworkers, even family members. Fascism is about turning citizens against each other.

Crucially, fascism is both nostalgic and aspirational. It appeals to an imagined lost greatness, and it promises a cleansing violence leading to renewal. It involves a nursing of grievances and resentments, and it stokes the fantasy of the group that wants to be dominant as pure and superior. Indoctrination is not so much into a set of ideas as into the conviction of in-group superiority.

There is, moreover, always a sexual politics to fascism. Fascism seeks to control reproduction and to intrude into privacy. It aggressively persecutes sexual or gender minorities, destroying families and chosen bonds in a way that (again) atomizes individuals. Take for instance the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws of 1935 which were all about determining who could have sex with whom and who could marry whom, and about calling into question the legal status of children of so-called "mixed" Jewish-gentile couples. More generally: All fascisms of the 1920s–1940s

(that is, in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal) can be recognized by the fact that they were antiabortion and antihomosexual.

Not least: Fascism works to exploit the instability of truth. What counts as truth is always unstable and contested, but fascisms really revel in that dynamic. There is a kind of ecstatic rejection of reason, a gleeful indulgence in making outrageous claims, a habit of provocation and inversion of reality.

Imperfections in the would-be dominant group

Eugenics has played a starring role in the histories of both racism and fascism, but its emotional efficacy and its practical consequences remain far less well understood.

On the one hand, antidisability animus is without question another manifestation of *racial politics*. Its sharp contempt is almost always directed at perceived imperfections within the group that believes itself to be the legitimately dominant one. On the other hand, and not least because the vast majority of people deemed intellectually disabled or psychiatrically ill have historically come from the poorest strata of society, eugenics is at the same time a *class politics*. It is certainly a form of poverty management.

Eugenics was, like Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda, the “fake news” of its era. But it has been harder for historians to discern its falsity, if only because contempt for weakness and a feeling of superiority toward people with intellectual impairment can seem simply like a universally shared commonsense. And no doubt it is precisely the ambiguous status of people with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities – their uneasy positioning between a valued “us” and an abjected “them” – that helps to explain the force of disdain and ferocity to which they are so often subjected.

Eugenics was a transnationally influential movement in the 1910s–1930s, but the German case, in its very extremity and intensity, clarifies some key features of the broader phenomenon. In the Third Reich there was an especially intricate relationship, a peculiar synergy and complementarity, between “racial hatred” of the supposedly non-German and “racial fear” about the quality of Germans themselves – a fear that was given yet stronger impetus because of the humiliation of national defeat in World War I. What thus requires our attention – particularly for the years we can now recognize as a kind of incubation phase for fascism – is the convulsive fury directed not just at those increasingly categorized as outsiders (the idea that Jews were not German was, after all, another absurd fiction that took time and countless lies to create), but also against those *within* the Volk who were alleged to be defective. Already by the 1910s, arguments were being advanced that 1–2% of the German populace was not worthy of being allowed to reproduce (“permanently unsuitable for the

production of offspring,” as one physician opined in 1914). But, as noted, the wound to national pride inflicted by defeat in World War I lent heightened urgency to these speculations. By the 1920s–1930s, there were ever more phantasmagorical assessments circulating, of 10, 20, even 30% of the German population as being unworthy of reproduction. This was the context in which the Nazi state implemented a massive apparatus for curtailing the fertility of its own population.

Like other fascisms, Nazism worked through laws. The first “racial” Nazi law was passed in April 1933, driving “non-Aryans” – and anti-Nazis – out of government service. That affected officials and bureaucrats at every level, but also notaries, judges, teachers, professors. Individuals more willing or even eager to collaborate filled their places.

However, the second “racial” Nazi law was the coercive sterilization law, the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring (*Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*), announced in July 1933. Notably, it was passed already two years before the Nuremberg Laws. This incrementalism was vital. The Nazis were worried about international optics; they attacked the weakest people first. And they knew that many U.S. states had sterilization laws, so they could present themselves as being in good company. International observers failed to notice that the Nazi law was distinctive in targeting the citizenry as a whole. Ultimately 400,000 individuals – women and men in approximately equal numbers – within the German Reich were coercively sterilized. It was not the 20 million sterilized of which some avid advocates had dreamed. But it was one out of every hundred human beings of reproductive age. No prior society had undertaken such a project. The number of sterilizations in the much larger geographic expanse of the United States was far lower.

- Three points about this history of Nazi eugenics are especially significant:
- The assertions of “heritability” were totally threadbare. Physicians knew full well that the causes of “feeble-mindedness” or “psychopathic inferiority” were in most cases unknown. (Indeed, in the majority of cases, inadequate nutrition in conditions of poverty, fevers of toddlerhood untreatable in the era before antibiotics, or epilepsy before the rise of effective antiseizure medications were the primary determinants.) But the regime’s experts went with assertions of heritability anyway and made pseudo-religious arguments about the need to have “faith” that this would strengthen the quality of the Volk. They recognized that it would take generations to make a difference, if ever, but that did not stop them from propounding their spurious claims. The official guidelines for doctors and judges issued by the regime’s chosen experts expressly took up the problem that the hereditary transmissibility of intellectual deficits in a particular individual were generally impossible to prove. And yet and possibly precisely because of that, they instructed that

any scrap of potentially plausible evidence that a disability was “likely” to have had a hereditary component, was sufficient evidence to make a sterilization advisable, even mandatory.

- The classically fascist denunciation inducement was essential to the law’s effects. In short, despite the flawed science underpinning the law, the vigor with which the notion that “feeble-mindedness” was hereditarily transmissible was promoted to the wider public as well as to every pertinent professional field, along with the eagerness with which experts across multiple societal sectors took up the framework provided by eugenics, turned what had been a concocted fabrication into something all too real. Reporting of candidates for sterilization was made compulsory. Remedial education teachers, social workers, religious charity institution directors, and doctors stepped up and complied. Fully one million people were proposed by their fellow citizens as potential candidates for sterilization.
- What the enthusiasm for eugenics shows is that the would-be dominant group was not and never is naturally dominant. The fantasy of being strong, healthy, beautiful, and smart was just that, a fantasy, a fantasy that was then implemented through brutality. As historian Gisela Bock aptly put it: “The promised ‘race,’ the ‘master-Volk,’ was not a given, it was not the real-existing German Volk, rather [the master race] had yet to be produced.”

These remarks seem just as pertinent today, as we observe a new wave of neo-fascist and alt-right appeals to longings for supremacy and concomitant cruelty to the vulnerable sweep through otherwise democratic societies across the Western world.

By the fall of 1939, as the war against the outside began with the assault on Poland, the Nazis turned also to coordinating mass murder of people they deemed the most severely disabled. The ensuing “euthanasia” murders – in carbon monoxide-fueled gas chambers and mass shootings, through medication overdose, poisoning, and deliberate starvation – would overlap only partially with the coercive sterilization project as, on the whole, these two mass crimes against persons with disabilities targeted different subgroups. Nonetheless, as ever more historians have noted since the 1990s, particularly the early phase of gas chamber killings would come to function as a sort of “rehearsal” or “trial run” for a significant portion of the Holocaust of European Jewry as well. The big genocide and the little genocide were complexly interconnected.

Consequential fictions

The rise of eugenics had been multifunctional for its proponents. Vicious vilification of the disabled dressed up as the latest evidence-based serious scholarship served beautifully as distraction from the extensive collateral damage in a nation undergoing rapid industrialization. Eugenics diverted attention from the environmental destitution, unremediated socioeconomic inequities, and then-untreatable childhood ailments – from severe nutritional deficiencies to meningitis and encephalitis – that were the actual sources of the vast majority of mental disabilities. Its proponents and executioners blamed the victims instead, promoting the flawed premise that intellectual deficiency was biologically hereditary, when in fact it only looked that way because conditions of poverty had been replicating across generations. The wider public was fooled in part because all the fancy talk simultaneously provided flattering, cost-free ego boosts for those lucky enough to be deemed non-deficient. And then too there was – as one of the few astute contemporaneous critics noted – the “catnip” or “lure” that was repeatedly offered to those willing to join in the demeaning of the vulnerable as biologically defective: Doing so provided a rationalization for restricting social service spending. In sum, a eugenic framework offered readily available scapegoats and crudely simplified explanations to redirect popular anger at the unfairness of the world, while experts promoted the make-believe that eliminating welfare-care for “imbeciles” would mean that funds would be redirected to “worthier” families.

Fictions and fantasies are no less powerful for being rooted in falsehoods. Why is it so difficult to loosen their seductive holds? Thirty years ago, while delivering a triptych of talks at Harvard, the brilliant Jamaican-born British sociologist Stuart Hall offered a powerful answer to this puzzle. The comments may well have been made spontaneously in the Q&A, to elucidate a point, and did not make it into the final record of the lectures eventually published posthumously under the title *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*. But they are of lasting value. Hall had posed the rhetorical question: “If race is a social construct, why does racism persist?” Reply: “Because race is a social construct.” In other words, if the would-be dominant group, in whatever geographical-political situation, truly were superior to the groups it was continually trying to treat as lesser, there would be no need for discussion. No need for elaborate conceptual frameworks. And no need for laws or violence, in order to make the hierarchies and exclusions, the subjugations and cruelties, seem justified.

Hall’s insight could be taken as helpfully clarifying albeit hugely depressing. Yet we could also interpret the fragility of false certainties as giving us some optimism that positive change *is*, in fact, conceivable. This is so even when that positive change has been a very long time in coming, and has taken massive activist

efforts to achieve – along with, notably, years of dedicated research by historians to uncover the past with greater accuracy so as to be able to counter the self-legitimizing excuses, the twisting of facts, and the ongoing denigration of victims made by perpetrators and beneficiaries and those beholden to them.

Among the more striking documents that I have uncovered in my recent research is a “declaration of historical responsibility” promulgated by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Humangenetik (German Society for Human Genetics) in 2008. The occasion was the 75th anniversary of the Nazis’ 1933 sterilization law. The statement expressed the “heavy guilt” that lay on geneticists for “misusing their authority as scientific experts” in both formulating and implementing the law, and on the basis of “false premises” having participated in the “mutilation” of hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens. They even apologized for having continued to uphold eugenics notions after the Third Reich’s demise. Among the statement’s most poignant remarks is the observation that, “The behavior of the human geneticists [in the 1930s] is all the more incomprehensible as the biological absurdity of eugenics was obvious even with the level of knowledge of genetics at the time.” In their concluding remarks, the geneticists dedicated themselves to “emphatic dissociation from any form of eugenic endeavors”; “respect for all people in their natural genetic diversity”; and the “rejection of any form of discrimination on the basis of ethnic characteristics or genetic disease or disability.” Two years later, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychiatrie und Psychotherapie, Psychosomatik und Nervenheilkunde (German Association for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Psychosomatics and Neurology) at long last followed suit. Its president, Frank Schneider, stood before 3000 of his peers and expressed “shame and sorrow” for the fact that it had “taken us so long” to acknowledge not just the involuntary emigration of Jewish and leftist colleagues, but also the substantial participation of psychiatrists in every aspect of the torment and killing of people with disabilities. He asked for forgiveness from “the victims of forced emigration, forced sterilization, human experiments, and murder.”

Even though I know the countless hours and relentless determination it took on the part of historians to prompt and to prepare the groundwork for these formal declarations of apology, the fact that they ultimately did happen gives me great hope. Pernicious fictions can be undone.

