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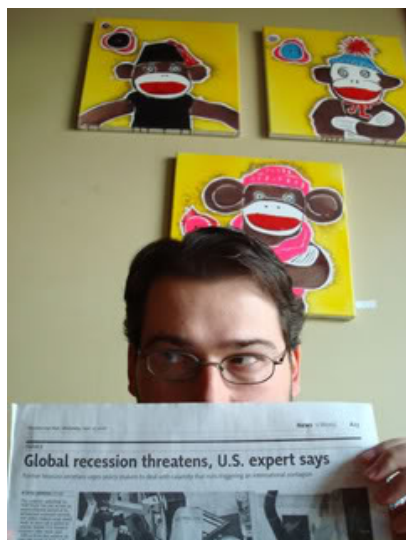
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[Eric Michael Johnson](#) has a Bachelors degree in Anthropology and a Masters in Evolutionary Anthropology. He pursued his PhD in Evolutionary Anthropology at Duke University before joining the University of British Columbia to complete a doctorate in the History and Philosophy of Science.

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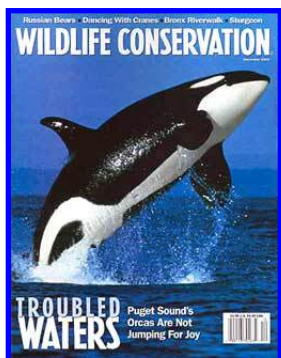
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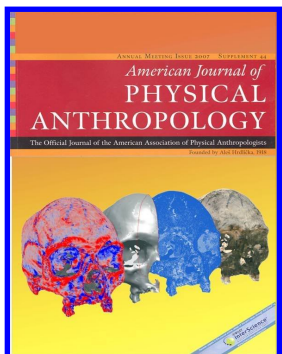
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[Darwin's Connection to Nazi Eugenics Exposed](#)

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Posted on: July 14, 2009 10:00 PM, by [Eric Michael Johnson](#)



On this day 76 years ago (July 14, 1933) a sterilization law was passed in Nazi Germany, known as *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*

(Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring). Any German was a target if they were found to be suffering from a range of perceived hereditary ailments, such as congenital mental deficiency, schizophrenia, manic-depressive insanity, epilepsy, Huntington's chorea, blindness, deafness, any severe hereditary deformity or even severe alcoholism. Official pronouncements insisted that these individuals were a drain on the German people, both biologically and financially (see right). The law passed on this day ultimately led to an estimated 400,000 people being involuntarily sterilized in pursuit of this national goal of "racial hygiene," to eliminate handicapped descendants.

Creationists are fond of laying the blame for Nazi eugenics on Charles Darwin. They insist that his materialist argument that humans evolved from animals and his conception of natural selection inspired the Nazis to implement a widespread policy of artificial selection within the Fatherland. However, these claims are as baseless as was the so-called "science" that the Nazis employed.

For example, William Dembski, intelligent design creationist and co-author of *Moral Darwinism*, [claims](#):

Darwin is the founder of the modern eugenics movement in all its later myriad forms, whether it is expressed through a call to weed out the unfit, breed more of the fit, abort the undesirable and deformed or manipulate our nature genetically through technology.

In nearly identical form Jonathan Wells, devotee of Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon, [writes](#):

Darwinism's connection with eugenics, abortion and racism is a matter of historical record. And the record is not pretty.

Islamic creationist Harun Yahya (whom I recently interviewed from his home in Istanbul) similarly [insists](#):

The eugenics, euthanasia, forced sterilization, concentration camps, racial purity and gas chambers of the mid-20th century emerged as a result of the Darwin-Haeckel-Hitler coalition, representing the worst and most ruthless cruelty in the history of humanity.

Taken together this would be a damning indictment, if there were actually any truth to their claims. The main connections that all three authors make between Darwinism and eugenics is that Francis Galton, an early proponent of eugenics, was Darwin's cousin and that Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist who championed evolution and maintained a long correspondence with the English naturalist, was a primary source for Nazi eugenic policies.

The strength of their arguments quickly fall apart, however, once they are given a few moments thought. The Galton connection is quite obviously baseless, for surely no one can be held responsible for something their cousin promotes (especially since Galton didn't even invent the term eugenics until a year after Darwin's death). Furthermore, not that it matters, but Galton was merely Darwin's half-cousin

since they shared the same grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, but had different grandmothers. The second claim, about Haeckel's foundation for Nazi race biology, is simply wrong. However, for this they can only be faulted for shoddy research, since the connection they were exploiting came from a highly regarded scientific source: Stephen Jay Gould.

In Gould's 1977 book *Ontology and Phylogeny* the esteemed Harvard paleontologist wrote:

[Haeckel's] evolutionary racism; his call to the German people for racial purity and unflinching devotion to a "just" state; his belief that harsh, inexorable laws of evolution ruled human civilization and nature alike, conferring upon favored races the right to dominate others . . . all contributed to the rise of Nazism.

While, in his book, Gould sought to separate Darwin from his German contemporary, his creationist quote-miners were looking to do the opposite. Unfortunately for both, the connection they were drawing doesn't actually exist.

According to University of Chicago historian Robert J. Richards, in a [recent anthology](#):

This charge, which attempts to link Haeckel's convictions with the Nazi's particular brand of racism, suffers from the inconvenience of having absolutely no foundation.

Gould was drawing from the research of Daniel Gasman whose 1971 book *Scientific Origins of National Socialism* placed Haeckel at the center of the philosophical foundation of Nazi ideology. Richards has excoriated this research (see, for example, his paper [Ernst Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology](#) in the journal *Biological Theory*) and demonstrated that, not only was Haeckel not a proponent of a pre-Nazi racist biology, but the Nazi's rejected his work totally.

The reality is that, while one German academic named Heinz Brücher did argue that Haeckel's Darwinism meshed with Hitler's racial attitudes, this view was immediately quashed by the guardians of party doctrine. Günther Hecht, official representative for the National Socialist Party's Department of Race-Politics (*Rassenpolitischen Amt der NSDAP*), insisted in the Reich's official scientific journal:

The party and its representatives must not only reject a part of the Haeckelian conception--other parts of it have occasionally been advanced--but, more generally, every internal party dispute that involves the particulars of research and the teachings of Haeckel must cease.

The reason for this rejection may have been the fact that Haeckel stood out among his contemporaries for his expression of *Judenfreundschaft* (friendliness toward Jews) or because of his criticisms of the military during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. A more important reason is probably the fact that Nazi racial views had no connection with specific evolutionary concepts like transmutation of species or the animal origins of human beings. As Richards concludes:

The perceived materialism of Darwinian biology and Haeckelian monism deterred those who cultivated the mystical ideal of a transcendence of will. Pseudoscientific justifications for racism would be ubiquitous in the early twentieth century, and Hitler's own mad anti-Semitism hardly needed support from evolutionary theorists of the previous century.

The Nazi policies enacted three-quarters of a century ago today were certainly bad enough, we don't need to spread the blame onto those who had no connection with them. Given the long history of creationist scholarship based on principles rather than propaganda, I'm certain we will no longer see attempts to smear Darwin's legacy with the taint of Nazi ideology once these facts become more generally well-known. But, of course, I'm being sarcastic.

Reference:

Richards, R. (2007). Ernst Haeckel's Alleged Anti-Semitism and Contributions to Nazi Biology *Biological Theory*, 2 (1), 97-103 DOI: [10.1162/biot.2007.2.1.97](https://doi.org/10.1162/biot.2007.2.1.97)

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1

Besides, we all know that the artificial selection that became eugenics was all based on the Bible, specifically Genesis 30:31-43. Hitler just practiced it on humans instead of goats, culling the weak and keeping the strong just like Jacob. And really, if Adolf had used striped poplar branches instead of gas chambers, it would have been a lot less ugly.

Less sarcastically, eugenics is little different from what farmers and goatherds had been doing for thousands of years before Haeckel *or* any of the famous Darwins were born. The idea that Hitler *must* have gotten his ideas from one of them is ludicrous even without any of the good scholarship above.

Posted by: [Dave W.](#) | [July 14, 2009 11:03 PM](#)

2

Those without a journal subscription can read the article on the author's faculty website [here](#).

Posted by: [Blake Stacey](#) | [July 14, 2009 11:32 PM](#)

3

In fact, Darwin discusses eugenics as a possible misinterpretation of his work (I don't immediately recall in which book, but something post-*Origin*), and very specifically rejects it as inhumane.

Posted by: [Yoder](#) | [July 15, 2009 1:53 AM](#)

4

(I don't immediately recall in which book, but something post-*Origin*)

Descent of Man. Of course, he was talking about negative eugenics there, and specifically about not offering medical aid to the congenitally feeble. No vaccinations, that sort of thing.

Galton mostly favored positive eugenics, IIRC--encouraging the "better classes" to breed with each other--and supported sterilization only of "undesirables." I don't recall Darwin being particularly horrified by that prospect, but he did observe that it would be impossible for anyone to be a fair judge of who should breed and who shouldn't--who wouldn't favor their own relatives?

Posted by: Anton Mates | [July 15, 2009 2:55 AM](#)

5

The weakness of Eric Johnson's article resides in the fact that he uncritically accepts what Richards states, i.e. that Haeckel was not an anti-Semite and that Haeckel was totally rejected by the Nazi regime. Both of these assertions are totally incorrect and inventions on the part of Richards. Richards' arguments are refuted in a series of papers by Daniel Gasman posted on ferris.edu/isar/gasman controversy and in an article that recently appeared in eskeptik.com, June 10, 2009. Johnson is correct to argue that Darwin had little if anything to do with Nazism. Haeckel, however, is not identical with Darwin as Richards believes, but rather can be shown to have many links with Nazism.

Daniel Gasman, July 15, 2009

Posted by: daniel gasman | [July 15, 2009 2:57 AM](#)

6

Many of the creationists insist that they accept the reality of evolution within a "kind", what they call "micro"evolution.

Eugenics is solely concerned with changes within "mankind". It has nothing to do with "macro"evolution.

Rejecting macro-evolution does not produce any distance from eugenics.

Posted by: TomS | [July 15, 2009 5:55 AM](#)

7

Very good article! By the way, Darwin specifically mentioned and then rejected Galton's views in Chapter 21 of *Descent of Man*. I did a post on that a while ago over at my place: [Racism, Eugenics, and Darwin](#).

Posted by: [The Curmudgeon](#) | [July 15, 2009 9:25 AM](#)

8

Great article!

Posted by: Mike | [July 16, 2009 1:08 AM](#)

9

@Daniel Gasman: Thank you for your comment. Interested readers can find numerous responses to Richards [here](#).

I have read through this voluminous material but haven't seen anything that substantially refutes Richards' position. I do think that Darwin and Haeckel's views on natural selection had important differences and it would be inappropriate to view them as identical. The two men also shared some racist, anti-Semitic and sexist views that were common for the nineteenth century, however they were nowhere near the extremes for their time (and were probably more tolerant than the majority of their contemporaries). I don't seek to excuse such attitudes, but I think it is a misrepresentation to place either of them in the same category as Nazi ideologues.

Gasman also fails to provide any evidence that would refute Richards' argument that high-ranking officials in the Nazi Party wanted no part of Haeckel's work as part of their platform. The fact that some Nazi academics admired his work is a far cry from Gasman's claim that Haeckel "was instrumental in formulating the birth of Nazi and Fascist ideology and that he was committed to a virulent form of anti-

Semitism." However, I will continue to research the issue and will follow up on this in the future if warranted.

Posted by: Moebius | [July 16, 2009 1:12 AM](#)

10

Richards has also offered a summary of his position at eSkeptic which can be found [here](#). Richards' book, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought*, was published last year by University of Chicago Press.

Posted by: Moebius | [July 16, 2009 1:14 AM](#)

11

@Blake: Thanks for the open subscription link to [Richards' original paper](#). I've updated the link in the body of my post.

Posted by: Moebius | [July 16, 2009 1:28 AM](#)

12

It is commonly argued that there is a causal connection between scientific materialism and immorality. But I think it's pretty clear that moral behavior follows much more from cultural and ideological dispositions. Ironically, the party that most closely encompasses this attitude is also the party of those who would espouse cultural and economic beliefs that are ultimately a form of social Darwinism. That would be the republican party.

This belief, at its core, places the blame for much of human suffering not in social constructs or unavoidable genetic constraints (mental illness, etc.) but at personal failure. It believes that the strong survive and succeed because of some innate fitness, while the weak suffer and perish because of an inherent unfitness.

The logical outgrowth of this is social policy that does not accept any moral responsibility for their distress, or even a more equitable view of why the successful are so to begin with. In other words, it is frankly, social Darwinism.

Posted by: [Eli](#) | [July 20, 2009 8:03 AM](#)

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