

Eugenik und Sozialismus. Biowissenschaftliche Diskurse in den sozialistischen Bewegungen Deutschlands und Großbritanniens um 1900

By Birgit Lulay. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021. Pp. 402. Cloth €75.00. ISBN: 978-3515130424.

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The history of the influence of ideas about eugenics in German social democracy has been explored previously by Michael Schwartz and Reinhard Mocek, along with related work on Darwinism and biological thought in social democracy by Richard Weikart and Richard Saage. This new book by Birgit Lulay clearly draws on this body of work, although she seeks to add to Schwartz's treatment of socialist eugenic thought before 1914, and takes issue with Mocek's attempt to draw a distinction between a more humane socialist tradition of eugenics that emphasized environmental factors and a less humane emphasis on genetic determinism and "negative eugenics." The book's original contribution is largely its systematic comparison of eugenic thought in pre-1914 German social democracy and socialist thinkers in Great Britain. With the exception of historians such as David Stack and writers focusing on the best-known of the British Fabians (such as the all-too-quotable George Bernard Shaw), there has perhaps been less systematic work done on the British case than on the German.

Lulay provides brief background on the two labor movements, focusing particularly on the principal theoretical publications in each case: *Die Neue Zeit* and *Die Sozialistischen Monatshefte* in Germany, and the publications of the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party, and the Fabian Society in Britain. As Lulay acknowledges, the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* was not a party-owned journal, but the private enterprise of Joseph Bloch, who used the journal to promote revisionist ideas and exchanges between socialist and non-socialist thinkers. She also identifies specific advocates of eugenic thought in each country – in Germany, Karl Kautsky, Oda Olberg, Henriette Fürth, and Edmund Fischer; and in Britain, Ramsay MacDonald, Sidney Herbert, David Eder, Eden Paul, and Karl Pearson.

Having established her comparative framework, Lulay provides us with substantial thematic chapters, outlining socialist thinking about the question of population, its quantity and quality, in late-nineteenth-century debates; the goal of creating a "new man" (gender-neutral "*neuer Mensch*" in German) in a future new society; the influence of scientific ideas relating to evolution and heredity ca. 1900; and a summary of eugenic ideas among socialists. A strength of Lulay's work is that she incorporates concise explanations of contemporary trends in scientific thought; for example, she shows how the vogue for August Weismann's germ-plasma theory and the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's genetic research strengthened the hand of advocates of heredity over environment, as Lamarck's theories about the heritability of acquired characteristics were called into question.

Ultimately, Lulay finds that socialist eugenic thought in Germany and Britain displayed more common ground than differences, although only in Britain did eugenic ideas find legislative expression before 1914, with the Feeble-Minded Control Act of 1913, which passed with the support of Labour members of parliament. A certain radicalization of eugenic thought set in after the First World War, and some German social democrats were interested in supporting eugenic measures in the Weimar Republic, although the only concrete product of this at the national level was a mandatory information sheet warning of the risks of hereditary defects, which was issued to couples about to be married. Lulay also points out

that there was a greater organizational divide between socialists and the mainstream, bourgeois eugenics movement in Germany than in Britain, but she considers this a relatively minor issue. It would nonetheless be worth exploring the reasons for this in more depth.

Lulay constructs a seamless web of socialist eugenic discourse, inexorably leading to the threat of negative eugenics and a denial of bodily autonomy to the weak and socially deviant. At times, one might wish for more nuance and more willingness to consider distinctions. For example, Lulay discusses Kautsky's critical engagement with the ideas of the eugenicist Wilhelm Schallmayer but does not quote his sharp characterization of Schallmayer's ideas as based on the standpoint of "patriarchal absolutism, that takes peoples to be little children and governments to be their teachers and guardians" (Kautsky, *Vermehrung und Entwicklung in Natur und Gesellschaft* [1910], 264). Lulay quotes Kautsky as comparing the people of a future socialist society to "the heroes of the Greek heroic age, like the Germanic warriors of the *Völkerwanderung*" (175). However, Kautsky (*Vermehrung*, 267) immediately relativized this comparison, likening the old Germans to the Montenegrins of the (then) present, and contrasting the barbaric customs of the Germanic tribes and their enthusiasm for war and looting with a new era in which science and enlightenment would become the common concern of everyone. What in Lulay reads like an identification with race-theorists' idealization of the ancient Germanic peoples reads very differently in the original. Lulay also discusses the links between socialism and the Bund für Mutterschutz but does not mention that the Bund split between the radical sex-reform wing and a group more concerned with eugenics, rural romanticism, and Social Darwinism.

There is also the issue of how representative Lulay's socialist eugenicists were of the labor movement as a whole. There is no doubt that Kautsky was a key party theorist, although to focus on his Darwinian interests to the exclusion of his more dynamic revolutionary social and political thought between the Erfurt Program of 1891 and his 1909 work *Weg zur Macht* risks distorting our understanding of Kautsky. The German socialist whom Lulay cites even more than Kautsky, Oda Olberg, was the most consistent advocate of eugenic ideas within German social democracy. While Olberg was a regular contributor to *Die Neue Zeit*, she was based in Italy and played no active role in the German party organization. ("Social anthropological" ideas were far more prevalent in the Italian socialist movement than in Germany. It would be worth examining why this was the case, although that would go beyond the scope of the Anglo-German comparison in this book.) Of Lulay's other protagonists, Henriette Fürth was a regular contributor to *Die Sozialistischen Monatshefte* but was perhaps more active in non-socialist organizations than in the Social Democratic Party before 1914. Lulay tends to quote the most radical formulations of Olberg (and Sidney Herbert in the British case) as representative of socialist eugenic discourse as a whole.

As Lulay acknowledges, the arguments of these writers, aired more in the parties' theoretical journals than in the more widely read daily newspapers, were largely an elite discourse. For most rank-and-file socialists, the social, "environmental" factors of poor housing, the cost of food, and "proletarian diseases" like tuberculosis were more urgent concerns than theoretical hypotheses regarding population questions in a future socialist society. As Richard Saage has argued, the discussions about "racial hygiene" and eugenics "never achieved any hegemony worth mentioning in political practice" in the labor movement (*Zwischen Darwin und Marx* [2012], 141). Birgit Lulay's comparative perspective is promising, but the book could have delivered more insight into differences both between and within the case studies.

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