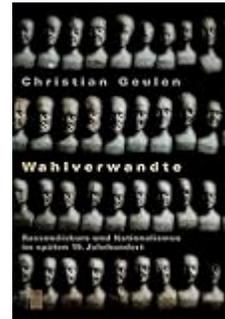




Christian Geulen. *Wahlverwandte: Rassendiskurs und Nationalismus im späten 19. Jahrhundert.* Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, HIS Verlag, 2004. 408 S. EUR 35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-930908-95-0.



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Race, Nation, and Discourse at the End of the Nineteenth Century

The concepts of race and nationalism have long attracted the attention of historians of modern Germany, standing as they do at the center of efforts to explain the rise of National Socialism and the perpetration of the Holocaust. A short list of the historiography surrounding this subject includes some of the most renowned scholars of the last fifty years: George Mosse, Fritz Stern, Peter Becker, Daniel Kevles, and Hannah Arendt, to name but a few. More recently, Uwe Puschner has thoroughly examined the meeting of race and nationalism within *völkisch*-nationalist groups during the late Kaiserreich.^[1] Thus, the bar for any new intervention in this area is set quite high.

Christian Geulen attempts to add to this standing body of knowledge by proposing a reconceptualization of the relationship between national and racial discourse. Rather than following traditional models that suggest that the radicalization of nationalist movements at the end of the nineteenth century was linked to anxiety about modernity and/or industrialization (Mosse, Stern); or that it was a device used to contest Judeo-Christian notions of equality (Leon Poliakov); or that it emerged as a

result of a new, popularized form of politics (Geoff Eley), Geulen argues that this radicalization was the product of a “biopolitische Strukturwandel nationaler Gemeinschaftsbildung” (p. 13). Under the influence of Arthur de Gobineau, Charles Darwin, and an academic community symbolized by Rudolf Virchow, which sought to solve social and political problems through science, the nation began to be reconceived as simultaneously a political community centered on participation (the “Wahl” aspect) and a naturally occurring biological organism governed by natural law (“the “Verwandtschaft” element). Under pressures to generate a “Wissen von der Bevölkerung” (p. 23), the space between “race” and “nation” collapsed, freeing national discourse from the limitations of normative politics and traditional forms of identity. This collapse erased “den Gegensatz zwischen politischer Vergemeinschaftung und vorpolitischen Bindungen” (p. 33). An example of this shrinkage occurred in the realm of sexuality, where Social Darwinist narratives about national survival made reproduction and women’s health into a major point of political intervention/agitation.

As a point of comparison, Geulen also examines

the development of the racial discourse in the United States, which makes for an interesting contrast due to its “Kreolen-Nationalismus,” which was based not on “gemeinsame Herkunft, sondern deren Ablehnung” (pp. 31-32). Unlike Germans, Americans were colonists, Geulen argues, whose concept of nationality was freed from the constraints of particularity from its very inception (which he locates in the emergence of the idea of manifest destiny). Despite this difference, however, Geulen finds that racial discourse had a similar impact on American society, biologically reforming the American concept of nation, but this discourse introduced particularity into a previously homogeneously envisioned body rather than erasing it.

The book is organized into three main sections. The first is essentially introductory in nature, tracing the evolution of the ideas of race and nationalism in the nineteenth century in both Germany and the United States. Its also includes a historiographical look at research on the nature of the relationship between race and nation, in which the author calls for a much-needed movement away from (or perhaps supplemental to) traditional models developed by historians in the 1960s, which looked to catalog individuals responsible for the development of National Socialism and/or to discredit contemporary racial theorists. “Mit anderen Worten,” Geulen writes, “[e]s bedarf einer begriffs- und ideengeschichtlichen Rekapitulation der Herausbildung des modernen Rassenbegriffs, die seine spätere, von der jüngeren Spezialforschung betonte multiple Auslegbarkeit in Betracht zieht” (p. 47). Here, Geulen is particularly eager to apply Michel Foucault’s notion of bio-power, particularly as it relates to the creation of an abstract “national” body subject to biological laws of life or death. This Social Darwinist discourse, he argues, provided the mechanism of radicalization, breaking down “die Grenzen zwischen Natur und Gesellschaft, zwischen ’rassischen’ Vorgaben und kulturellen Leistungen, zwischen Biologie und Politik,” thereby freeing ideas about race or nation from their historical limitations (p. 216).

The second section seeks to capture the racial discourse at the moment of its greatest influence during the Wilhelmine era. Here Geulen takes us past many of the most familiar faces of racial ideology (including Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Ludwig Gumplowitz, Julius Langbehn, Paul de Lagarde, and Ludwig Woltmann and his journal the *Politisch-Anthropologischen Revue*), showing how their work biologized the nation. He also explores the relationship between this nascent discourse and antisemitism (looking primarily at Theodor Fritsch), argu-

ing that the latter’s growth in Germany was primarily a product of the racial discourse’s need for a “Gegenrasse,” a racial enemy that could be found both within and without German society (p. 196). A chapter is also included on the effect of racial discourse on sexuality, which covers work by a wide range of figures and groups, including Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, Otto Weininger, the Bund für Mutterschutz und Sexualreform, and finally, public hygiene as represented by the Dresdner Hygieneausstellung of 1911.

The final section examines the collapse of state borders as meaningful sites of difference under the pressures of the racial discourse and globalization, focusing in particular on racial theory’s role in the development and practice of imperialism. Here Geulen argues that the spread of racial ideology “machte politische Vergemeinschaftung explizit von hergebrachten Bindungen unabhängig” (p. 36), dissolving traditional concepts of a geographically based nation. Most of this section is based on a review of the Berliner Kolonialausstellung of 1896 and the writings of one of the leading colonial agitators of the imperial era, Carl Peters.

Geulen’s book is a well-written, thought-provoking look at a subject long the object of historical attention. He is at his best when discussing structural theory, such as when he applies Foucault’s notion of bio-power to racial discourse. He writes with a clarity that structural models sometimes lack, in a manner both accessible and plausible. He makes several strong observations about the state of the field in the research of race and its relation to nationalism, particularly in his calls to move away from the “prophet-disciple” model first established by Mosse and Stern and the need to begin to rethink the mechanics of race and nation and their effect on each other. By far his most significant contribution, however, is his challenge to the traditional view of the appeal of race, which generally tends to view it as a “vormodern Ethnozentrismus oder eine(r)radikalisierten Wissenschaft und wildgewordenen instrumentellen Vernunft ... als ein Wiederkehr einer eigentlich überwundenen ’Barbarei’ oder als ’Krankheit’ der Moderne” (p. 18). These approaches all tend to denigrate its practitioners, placing them within a progressive teleology that divorces them from potential links to modern, contemporary society. Someone like Woltmann, for example (a racial anthropologist),[2] appears only as a representative of “social groups in crisis,”[3] displaying the “abundant evidence of irrational tendencies in the distortion of scientific evidence; a typical feature of all combinations of racial and New Romantic thought.”[4] There is an implication here

that the turn towards racial theory has more to do with individual psychological or economic shortcomings (usually attributed to industrialization), enabling us to assume the appeal of racial thinking exists only at the margins of a normative western-liberal society. And yet, as recent events in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda demonstrate, the notion of the nation as a bio-political or primarily ethnic community remains quite strong (and one could also argue this phenomenon is present in contemporary American and French debates over immigration). In this sense, then, Geulen's call to reconceptualize the appeal and effect of racial thinking are most welcome.

Geulen's book also has its share of shortcomings, many of which are linked to his emphasis on structural theory rather than individual experiences. The figures he examines appear more as confirmation or evidence of his vision of racial discourse than they do as the primary objects of historical study; little effort is made to provide a sociological backdrop to the participants of this discourse and individual motivations are also largely absent. An example of this is his treatment of the Bund für Mutterschutz und Sexualreform, for which he does little more than introduce them as the "most interesting" example of the connection between "frühe Feminismus mit dem Nationalismus und dem rassentheoretischen Diskurs der Jahrhundertwende," before moving on to a survey of some of their more noteworthy articles (p. 233). Similarly, the author's examination of Woltmann's *Politisch-Anthropologischen Revue* consists of a review of various articles about race; the contributors are mentioned, but no effort is made to explain to the reader who men like Albert Reibmayr or Ludwig Wilser actually were. Finally, the figures Geulen does cover appear almost exclusively from the same political niche on the völkisch Right, with little attention given to socialists or Catholics who might have contributed to racial discourse.

This shortcoming becomes more problematic when one considers Geulen's conception of racial discourse as a whole, which appears in the book as a highly unified entity. But this is an oversimplification that belies the internal complications of dealing with the idea of race—a word that meant very different things to very different people. Chamberlain, for example, held it to be a malleable entity: "[i]t is almost always the nation, as a political structure, that creates the conditions for the formation of race." [5] Yet for others, such as Langbehn, race was a static, unalterable trait, which "overcomes centuries, states, parties, and even language. It is stronger than anything" [6]. A key debate existed be-

tween those who saw it as a sociological element, such as Gumplovitz ("Rasse kann heute gar nie und nirgend bloß ein anthropologischer Begriff im engeren Sinne des Wortes Sein" [p. 160]) and those who viewed it anthropologically, such as Wilser ("Die Verwechslung der beiden grundverschiedenen Begriffe 'Rasse' und 'Volk' und die Bezeichnung der einzelnen Menschenrassen mit geschichtlichen Name hat die grösste Verwirrung angerichtet"). [7] Geulen does not address this distinction, allowing very different projections of racial community—"Aryan," "German," "Germanic," "Nordic," "Anglo-Saxon," and "White" to blend together into a seemingly unified conversation. This conflation gives Geulen a broad range of sources from which to draw material, but opens questions about the depth of the connection between figures as varied as Theodore Roosevelt and Theodor Fritsch or Freud and Peters. These connections are not drawn out, and Geulen's refusal to address his subjects' popularity or influence (p. 37) leads to questions about the actual mechanics of the racial discourse, the transfer and reception of racial information, and so on.

Finally, the weakest point of the book is undoubtedly Geulen's handling of American nationalism before the 1890s, which is uncritically Whiggish in nature. Geulen's depiction of American nationalism as something that possessed an "unbegrenzten Integrationsbereitschaft, die zumindest rechtlich jedem die Möglichkeit der Staatsangehörigkeit, unabhängig von vorgängigen Merkmalen" (p. 118) is naive and ignores the explicit struggles of African Americans (originally counted as only three-fifths of a person in the U.S. Constitution) to gain acceptance as "Americans," as well as less prominent struggles led by Asian, Irish, Jewish, and Italian Americans to find a place in the new American nation. Race and ethnicity were major points of debate in American nationalism long before Darwinism. While this information does not directly contradict Geulen's conclusions about the workings of race on America, it does suggest that a more complicated reading is necessary to provide a true point of comparison to events in Germany.

In the end, Geulen's book is intellectually stimulating, and his theoretical approach is worthy of examination in seminars concerned with issues of race and its relation to nationalism and modernity. Similarly, the book also provides a good introductory glimpse into some of the major figures involved in the popularization of race at the turn of the century, although many of the figures will be familiar to those who have read Mosse, Stern, Puschner, or other contributors to the historiography. It

is unfortunate that the book does not engage its subject material more closely, as it provokes, but does not answer, many important questions about the participants and the real-life effects of the racial discourse at the start of the twentieth century on the practice and conception of the nation and national belonging.

Notes

[1]. Uwe Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich. Sprache - Rasse - Religion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001).

[2]. Woltmann's major work *Die Germanen und die Renaissance in Italien* (1905) argued that all major Renaissance contributors had Germanic ancestry, proven mainly by family name or having had blue eyes.

[3]. Neil Macmaster, *Racism in Europe: 1870-2000* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001), 5.

[4]. George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 103.

[5]. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. John Lees (New York: H. Fertig, 1968), 292.

[6]. Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, 41st ed. (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1890, 1892), 130.

[7]. Ludwig Wilser, *Die Germanen. Beiträge zur Völkerkunde* (Eisenach and Leipzig: Thüringische Verlags-Anstalt, 1904), 30.

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