

“Wir lehnen ab, was fremd ist”. Eugen Fischer and the Language of German Anthropology (1909-1945)

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century German anthropology was long inspired by the humanistic values of Rudolf Virchow (although its practices were not entirely ethical by today's standards). Even before 1914, however, there was a clear shift in the language and practice of the discipline. In 1909, Eugen Fischer went to Namibia to study human heredity. He concluded that any mixing with local “inferior” races was invariably detrimental to the whites. In a 1927 monograph, Fischer generalized these findings in collaboration with German eugenicists who sought to establish “racial hygiene”. Hitler read the book and appreciated it. As head of the Institute of Anthropology, Fischer praised the new regime in 1933 and was appointed rector of the University of Berlin. Since then, he has repeatedly lent “scientific” support to the racist theories and practices of his time. To avoid biological degeneration, he argued, Germans should rigorously reject the “foreign”. Among other aliens (e.g., the mentally retarded, etc.), Jews should be segregated and expelled for the sake of racial purity. No wonder Fischer collaborated with the Nazi eugenics programs and the drafting of the Nuremberg Laws.

1. GERMAN ANTHROPOLOGY BEFORE FISCHER

In the course of the twentieth century, scientific anthropology evolved from physical anthropology, mostly understood as racial theory, to the cultural anthropology of today. Depending on the history of each country, this process has taken

place in different ways and at different times. In fact, national traditions have played a much greater role in the development of anthropology than in other fields of scientific knowledge¹. As far as Germany is concerned, one of the most important impulses in the process of its institutionalization came from Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902)². A physician with wide-ranging interests in anthropology and paleontology, Virchow was also politically engaged: he founded the Progressive Party, a liberal democratic formation that opposed anti-Semitic movements. In 1862, three years after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Virchow started the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte* (Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory). German anthropology was then undoubtedly marked by some of the ambiguities characteristic of the European tradition: systematic measurement of limbs and skulls of different racial groups was the norm. However, partly as a legacy of the national scientific and philosophical tradition – ideally embodied by the Humboldt brothers – German anthropology in Virchow's era retained a humanitarian spirit that was lacking elsewhere, for example in France³.

A few decades after Virchow, German anthropology took on radically different characteristics. In this paper I refer to one of the most prominent German anthropologists of the 1930s and 1940s: Eugen Fischer (1874-1967)⁴. Trained as a physician with a special interest in human genetics, Fischer was appointed full professor at Freiburg in 1918. In 1927 he became director of the newly founded *Kaiser-Wilhelms-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik*, based in Dahlem, a suburb in the south-west of the capital⁵. In 1933 Fischer was appointed Rector of the University of Berlin and, in the same year, he stood next to Minister

¹ F. BARTH, A. GINGRICH, R. PARKIN, S. SILVERMAN, *One Discipline, Four Ways. British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

² Cf. C. GOSCHLER, *Rudolf Virchow: Mediziner - Anthropologe - Politiker*, Köln, Böhlau, 2009; P.J. WEINDLING, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism 1870-1945*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 53-57.

³ B. MASSIN, "From Virchow to Fischer. Physical Anthropology and „Modern Race Theories“ in Wilhelmine Germany", in: G.W. STOCKING (ed.), *Volkegeist as Method and Ethics. Essays on Boasian Ethnology and the German Anthropological Tradition*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp. 79-154.

⁴ Cf. N.C. LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt. Leben und Werk Eugen Fischers*, Frankfurt a.M., Lang, 1997, and B. GESSLER, *Eugen Fischer (1874-1967). Leben und Werk des Freiburger Anatomen, Anthropologen und Rassenhygienikers bis 1927*, Frankfurt a.M., Lang, 1999.

⁵ Cf. P.J. WEINDLING, *Health, Race and German Politics*, pp. 436-439; C. SACHSE, B. MASSIN, *Biowissenschaftliche Forschung an Kaiser-Wilhelm-Instituten und die Verbrechen des NS-Regimes. Informationen über den gegenwärtigen Wissensstand*, Berlin, Forschungsprogramm "Geschichte der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft im Nationalsozialismus", 2000; D. KAUFMANN (Hrsg.), *Geschichte der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft im Nationalsozialismus. Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven der Forschung*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2000.

Goebbels at the burning of books in Berlin on 10 May⁶. Fischer helped to draft the *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses* (Law on the Prevention of Hereditary Diseases in Offspring) of 14 July 1933, which ultimately led to the compulsory sterilization of people suffering from various diseases⁷. He also supervised the courts responsible for the trials, occasionally protesting against absolutions. Under Fischer's direction, the Anthropological Institute was involved in dozens of racial identification trials and, from 1934, began to give courses for SS-doctors. In 1937 Fischer provided the medical expertise required for the (unlawful) sterilization of German colored children, in particular the so-called *Rheinlandbastarden*, offspring of black French occupation troops in the Rhein region after 1918, and native German mothers⁸. In 1941, together with Hans Günther, Fischer was the guest of honor at the conference *Die Gesamtlosung der Judenfrage* (The global solution of the Jewish problem) organized by Alfred Rosenberg in Frankfurt. He had also enthusiastically⁹ accepted Rosenberg's invitation to Krakow (not far from Auschwitz) for a planned international anti-Jewish conference which was eventually canceled due to the unfavorable war situation. In occupied Paris in 1942, Fischer delivered a propaganda speech, in which he concluded that "the moral tendencies and all the activities of the Bolschewist Jews bear witness to such a monstrous mentality that we can only speak of inferiority and of beings of another species [*êtres d'une autre espèce que la nôtre*]"¹⁰.

When Fischer retired, the leadership of the Dahlem Institute was taken over by his pupil Otmar von Verschuer, who was, among other things, Josef Mengele's mentor¹¹. In the denazification process, Fischer was recognized as a "follower"

⁶ H. HEIBER, *Universität unterm Hakenkreuz*, Teil 2. *Die Kapitulation der hohen Schulen: das Jahr 1933 und seine Themen*, vol. 2, München, Saur, 1994, p. 89.

⁷ Already in 1910, in *Sozialanthropologie und ihre Bedeutung für den Staat*, Fischer stigmatized the reproduction of "mentally retarded", "epileptics", "born criminals" and other categories as an "absurdity" resulting from "excessive humanitarianism". Cf. L. CRIPS, *Les avatars d'une utopie scientiste en Allemagne: Eugen Fischer (1874-1967) et l'hygiène raciale*, in: "Le Mouvement social", 163, 1993, pp. 7-23 (p. 12).

⁸ Cf. R. PROCTOR, *Racial Hygiene. Medicine under the Nazis*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 112-113.

⁹ B. MÜLLER-HILL, *Murderous Science. Elimination by scientific selection of Jews, Gypsies, and others, Germany 1933-1945*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 13.

¹⁰ E. FISCHER, *Le problème de la race et la législation raciale en Allemagne*, Paris, Cahiers de l'Institut Allemand, 1942, pp. 84-109. Cf. L. CRIPS, *Les avatars d'une utopie scientiste en Allemagne: Eugen Fischer (1874-1967) et l'hygiène raciale*, p. 21.

¹¹ Mengele collaborated with the Dahlem Institute before and after he moved to Auschwitz in 1943. Among other atrocities, he killed several twins in order to send their eyes to von Verschuer. Cf. B. MÜLLER-HILL, op. cit., pp. 77-79; B. MASSIN, "Mengele, die Zwillingsforschung und die »Auschwitz-Dahlem Connection«", in: C. SACHSE (Hrsg.), *Die Verbindung nach Auschwitz. Biowissenschaften und Menschenversuche an Kaiser-Wilhelm-Instituten*, Wallstein, Göttingen, 2003, pp. 201-254; P. WEINGART, J. KROLL, K. BAYERTZ, *Rasse, Blut und Gene. Geschichte der Eugenik und Rassenhygiene in Deutschland*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1992, p. 421.

[*Mitläufer*] and had to pay a fine. From the US, Franz Weidenreich protested that “if anyone, he is the man who should be put on the list of war criminals”¹². As early as 1954, Fischer was reinstated as Ordinary Emeritus of the University of Freiburg and was able to help many of his former students, such as von Verschauer, who was given a post in Münster.

Fischer was indeed a “political chameleon par excellence”¹³, able to successfully navigate the Wilhelmine era, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime and the post-war Federal Republic of Germany, without being held accountable for anything. In view of such a long and successful career, one might ask who Eugen Fischer was and, more importantly, how he conceived of anthropology. I will argue that Fischer never changed his largely pseudo-scientific language, from his early research to his most compromising assessments – and deeds – in the Nazi era. From his debut, Fischer shaped the language of German anthropology in such a way that it could later incorporate the most trivial parables of racism, segregationism, and anti-Semitism.

2. FISCHER’S EARLY RESEARCH IN AFRICA (1909)

In 1908, Fischer undertook anthropological fieldwork in Rehoboth, a town in what is now Namibia, then known as German South West Africa. His study included the population then called the *Rehobother Bastards* (Basters)¹⁴, offspring of Namibian indigenous mothers and Boer fathers. Fischer had long planned to apply classical genetics to humans; but while Mendel could easily cross sugar peas plants to study the transmission of traits, human genetics was obviously more complicated. Hence his interest in the large group (about 2000 individuals) of Basters, which seemed an excellent opportunity to study human genetics.

The results of his research, Fischer believed, confirmed classical heredity. The effects of climate and environment were not passed on to offspring, and each race possessed a fixed set of physical and mental characteristics. In the case of mixed races, transmission followed Mendelian laws. Fischer had thus developed his theory of the supposed immutability of racial characteristics. On this basis, he did

¹² F. WEIDENREICH, *On Eugen Fischer*, in: “Science”, N.S., 104, No. 2704, Oct. 25, 1946, p. 399.

¹³ S.F. WEISS, *The Nazi Symbiosis. Human Genetics and Politics in the Third Reich*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 70.

¹⁴ E. FISCHER, *Die Rehobother Bastards und das Bastardierungsproblem beim Menschen. Anthropologische und ethnologische Studien am Rehobother Bastardvolk in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Jena, Fischer, 1913. Cfr. LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, p. 54. At the time, a genocide was being perpetrated against the local population: cf. J. ZIMMERER, J. ZELLER (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin, Christoph Links Verlag, 2003.

not miss the opportunity to speak out against any mixing of the “white race” with others considered inferior:

If the bastards [of Rehoboth] were in any way on a par with the whites, there would inevitably be a flow of Hottentot blood into the white race. In the long run, this could not be avoided. Now we do not know much about the effects of racial mixing. But one thing we know with absolute certainty: every European people without exception [...] who has accepted the blood of inferior races - and that Negroes, Hottentots and many others are inferior is something only fanatics can deny - has paid for the acceptance of inferior elements at the price of spiritual and cultural decline. That some individual half-breeds may be people of worth - America has several such cases to show - does not contradict this thesis [...]. For those of us who are familiar with Mendel's laws, such cases are entirely predictable. But we must also expect just as many individuals to be utterly worthless, and the majority to be of less value. This applies not only to the people of the Bastards [of Rehoboth], but to every half-breed produced by Europeans together with Negroes, Hottentots, etc. [...]: an improvement of our race by such cross-breeding is impossible; while a degeneration is certainly to be expected, at least - in the best case - in the form of an outbreak of disharmonious dispositions¹⁵.

Because they have a certain amount of white blood, the Basters rank higher than the natives: they can therefore serve the German colonists better than the natives. Nevertheless, Fischer argues, they must be carefully segregated from the whites, on pain of degeneration. The book was relatively well received at the time, both at home and abroad¹⁶. This is unsurprising; Fischer's openly racist and segregationist language was in keeping with widespread prejudices, which he embellished with a patina of pseudo-scientific respectability. In this way, from 1909 onwards, he was prepared to move German anthropology further and further away from the humanitarianism of Virchow's time.

Fischer generalized the results obtained in Africa in the 1920s, in *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, an ambitious and fortunate work co-authored with Erwin Baur and Fritz Lenz¹⁷. No less than the title, the (unsigned) introduction reveals the purpose of the work: to put genetics at the service of “racial hygiene”¹⁸. Fischer's interest for racial hygiene was not new:

¹⁵ E. FISCHER, *Die Rehobother Bastards und das Bastardierungsproblem beim Menschen*, pp. 302-303.

¹⁶ See e.g. an unsigned review in “Nature”, 92, n. 2293, 9 October 1913, pp. 162-163. However, LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, pp. 65-75 has shown that Fischer methodology was flawed and that he failed to provide convincing evidence for his main claims. And yet, with this Fischer introduced a biological notion of ‘race’ into anthropology (*ibid.*, p. 152).

¹⁷ E. BAUR, E. FISCHER, F. LENZ, *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, München, Lehmann, 1921 (1924², 1927³). Each author was responsible for a part of the book: Baur wrote on classical genetics, Fischer on human heredity, Lenz on “racial hygiene”.

¹⁸ Cf. LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, p. 95. On “Rassenhygiene” and its German proponents A. Ploetz, F. Lenz, E. Rüdin, etc., cf. PROCTOR, *Racial Hygiene*; WEINDLING, *Health, Race and German Politics, passim*;

since 1909, he headed the Freiburg branch of the *Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene* (Society of racial hygiene) founded in 1905 by Alfred Ploetz and Ernst Rüdin¹⁹.

The focus of the introduction is on a process “taking place in Germany”: a hybridization or “bastardization” [*Bastardierung*] of the population through the mixing of different races. The authors insist that this process always involves “a decline, a degeneration” similar to that experienced by the ancient Romans in the late imperial period. It was no coincidence that in Germany there was “a widespread feeling that these threatening processes are manifesting themselves in our people and that we, like all developed peoples, are in decline”²⁰. Based on the solid foundations of science, however, there is a solution:

Just as medical science is not possible without a sound knowledge of anatomy, physiology and pathology, so a broad scientific basis is necessary for the study of human sociology, for any purposeful population policy and for any effort at racial hygiene (eugenics)²¹.

The book was intended to provide this scientific basis. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that the intention remained on paper. The Baur-Fischer-Lenz was reprinted several times and translated into English and Swedish. There were numerous reviews, many of them outside of Germany²². The popular prejudice of a decadence resulting from “racial mixing”, was thus confirmed and supported by recognized scientists. Adolf Hitler possessed the third edition of Baur-Fischer-Lenz (1927), the second edition of which he had already read during his time at Landsberg²³.

Fischer begins his chapter²⁴ by arguing that the application of human genetics to racial hygiene requires a change of perspective: the purely “anatomical” approach (typical of Virchow and von Luschan), i.e. the measurement of limbs, skulls and other parts of the human body, is not sufficient. A “biological” ap-

P. WEINGART, J. KROLL, K. BAYERTZ, *Rasse, Blut und Gene, passim*. For eugenics in England and the US, see D.J. KEVLES, *In the Name of Eugenics. Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1985.

¹⁹ R. PROCTOR, *Racial Hygiene*, p. 17.

²⁰ E. BAUR, E. FISCHER, F. LENZ, *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, cit., p. 1.

²¹ Ivi, p. 2.

²² Cf. H. FANGERAU, I. MÜLLER, *Das Standardwerk der Rassenhygiene von Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer und Fritz Lenz im Urteil der Psychiatrie und Neurologie 1921–1940*, in: *Nervenarzt* 73, 2002, pp. 1039–1046. The authors count 342 reviews of the book (in the various editions), in Germany and abroad (p. 1042). See also LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, pp. 146–151.

²³ See the editorial notes in A. HITLER, *Mein Kampf. Eine kritische Edition*, hrgs. von C. Hartmann, T. Vordemayer, O. Plöckinger, R. Töppel, München-Berlin, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 2016, pp. 741, 762.

²⁴ E. BAUR, E. FISCHER, F. LENZ, *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, ch. 2: *Die Rassenunterschiede der Menschen*, pp. 81–154.

proach was also needed: racial characteristics should be considered “according to their origin and their significance for individuals and groups”²⁵. Otherwise, Fischer’s own contribution to the volume was in line with his earlier studies²⁶. He drew a sharp distinction between non-hereditary variations, due to environmental factors, and supposedly authentic ‘racial’ characteristics, which he believed to be of ancestral origin: “The strongest differences between human beings today, that is, what we consider to be the deepest racial differences, had their origin in the very first moment of the origin of man”²⁷. In short, the origin of man coincides with the origin of the races [*Artbildung its zugleich Rassenbildung*]. Races are co-original and *per se* unchangeable: “There is an aging of peoples, but there is no aging of races”: human races neither grow old nor die out²⁸.

Equally ancient, according to Fischer, is “racial interbreeding”. What is inherited is usually a single “disposition” [*Anlage*]: for instance, an (unspecified) “exact study of interbreeding with Jews has shown that [...] only a single dominant trait prevails”, such as the black hair or the convex nose²⁹. Historical events such as wars, invasions and the domination of one people over another usually lead to racial mixing: the physical and mental characteristics inherited according to Mendel’s laws are then subjected to the process of selection. Occasionally, hybridization can be successful: this happened “for example, in the construction of the Indo-Germanic peoples, the ancient Greeks, the Latins, etc.”: in all these cases, there was a sudden spiritual progress due to the good match of mental traits. In other cases, the mixing has a negative effect: for instance, mulattos are “less resistant” than the original races to “every kind of disease and damage”³⁰.

In line with the ideas expressed by Fritz Lenz in the same volume, and more popularly by Houston Stewart Chamberlain³¹, Fischer insists that the divergence between the races is not only physical, but also - and most importantly - mental. From this point of view, of course, the Europeans have the upper hand. For instance, the Native Americans sat “generation after generation” on the copper

²⁵ Ivi, p. 82.

²⁶ B. KUNDRUS, *Von Windhoek nach Nürnberg?: Koloniale “Mischeh enverbote” und die nationalsozialistische Rassengesetzgebung*, in: ID. (Hrsg.), *Phantasiereiche. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, Frankfurt a.M., Campus, 2003, pp. 110-131, highlights the differences between German colonial policy, with all its ambiguities, and racial legislation after 1933. But the continuity in Fischer’s basic ideas is undeniable.

²⁷ E. BAUR, E. FISCHER, F. LENZ, *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, p. 123.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 132.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 126. The study of the relation between the “disposition” and the actual development of a certain feature was called by Fischer “Phaenogenetik”. Cf. LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, p. 373.

³⁰ E. BAUR, E. FISCHER, F. LENZ, *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, p. 128.

³¹ Cf. P. WEINGART, J. KROLL, K. BAYERTZ, *Rasse, Blut und Gene*, pp. 102-103; LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, p. 133.

beneath their territory, but never had the mental capacity [*Intelligenz*] to exploit it³². Clearly, a “mental disharmony” can arise “because of the mental disposition of two races that do not complement each other well”: Europeans were warned. In fact, the inheritance of mental traits is much more delicate because they must be harmoniously assimilated to form a whole, whereas physical traits (e.g. eye color and nose shape) can coexist without interfering with each other.

Finally, in preparation for his next radical steps, Fischer undermines the distinction between peoples and races, because “the concept of race has the most decisive meaning for the concept of people [*Volk*]”. In his view, the bearers of a certain culture and language are “obviously” individuals belonging “to a certain race, or to a certain mixture of races”³³.

3. SUPPORTING HITLER (1933)

To understand the relationship between Fischer’s scientific theories and the regime, let us now consider the *Kundgebung der deutschen Wissenschaft* (rally of German science) in support of Hitler held in the Alberthalle in Leipzig on 11 November 1933. This demonstration took place the day before a double election: the plebiscite, in which Germans were asked to express their support for Hitler’s policies, and the election of representatives to the Reichstag, in which only NSDAP candidates were allowed to stand. In fact, the Social Democratic Party had been banned in June (the Communist Party much earlier), the Centre Parties had dissolved, and the law of 14 July prohibited the formation of any new party. In short, any residual form of democratic life in Germany came to an end with the election on 12 November.

The Leipzig demonstration on the eve of the vote was one of the highlights of the Nazi plebiscite campaign. At the same time, however, it was a propaganda event whose real purpose lay abroad. The occasion was Germany’s withdrawal from the League of Nations, decreed by Hitler on 14 October. The demonstration was a message from the German scientific elite to their foreign colleagues of their support for Hitler’s decision as a harbinger of peace and harmony between nations. The proceedings were published in a booklet that combines the original German texts with translations in four languages: English, French, Italian and Spanish³⁴. In addition to the texts of the Leipzig speakers, the booklet also

³² E. BAUR, E. FISCHER, F. LENZ, *Grundriss der menschlichen Erblichkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene*, p. 131.

³³ Ivi, p. 128.

³⁴ *Bekanntnis der Professoren an den deutschen Universitäten und Hochschulen zu Adolf Hitler und dem nationalsozialistischen Staat*, Dresden, Nationalsozialistischer Lehrererbund Deutschland/Sachsen, s.d. (1934).

contains the *Ruf an die gebildeten der Welt* (translated in the booklet “Appeal to the intelligentsia of the world”) and a list of its signatories. The following day, the Sunday of the vote, 12 November 1933, the *Illustrierte Zeitung* published a photograph of the stage³⁵. The photograph shows some of the speakers seated around a table under a cloud of swastikas, ready to take the podium in front of the hundreds of participants who had crowded into the Alberthalle. Remarkably, the group included two university Rectors appointed by Hitler: Eugen Fisher and Martin Heidegger. It must be emphasized that they were not acting in a personal political capacity or out of institutional obligation. Rather, they were supposed to put their share of “German science” at the service of Hitler’s politics. Their statements confirm this role. No less than Heidegger, who delivered a dense philosophical speech, Fischer was there to represent his discipline: German anthropology.

Fischer’s attitude in early 1933 had been that of a “turncoat”³⁶: in Leipzig he was ready to deliver his speech in pure nationalist (*völkisch*) style. Fischer begins by praising the allegedly bloodless German “moral revolution” led by the “mighty architect” Adolf Hitler. He then extols the construction of a new politics: “A people’s state has been established, the new national socialistic state made of blood and soil”, and goes on: “A nation – under the influence of the genial personality of the leader – becomes mindful of its own, old dried up fountains, its national resources, its blood, its race and its soul”³⁷. Since “a *Great man* has placed his hand on the spoke of the wheel of world history” and “has reversed the rudder”, there is now a “people’s government, in the form as has existed hundreds of years ago [...] with men who know again that they are of the *same blood*”. The conclusion has the tone of a purely political speech. Fischer urges: “no one must be absent when tomorrow the whole nation gives the leader the oath of faith; like in a veritable legislative assembly which our forefathers used to hold in the open, a distinct ‘yes’ must be heard to Hitler’s question, whether he is really speaking for the whole German nation”³⁸.

Fischer is careful to make it clear that the unity of the nation, based on common blood, *excludes* those who don’t belong to that community. Interestingly, the English translation is far less explicit than the German original on this point. When Fischer says “we reject what is alien” [*wir lehnen ab, was fremd*

³⁵ *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, n. 181, 12. November 1933. On the Leipzig event cf. V. FARIAS, *Heidegger and Nazism*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989, p. 156 ff.

³⁶ WEINDLING, *Health, Race and German Politics*, p. 508.

³⁷ “Prof. Dr. Fischer, Berlin”, in *Bekennnis der Professoren an den deutschen Universitäten und Hochschulen zu Adolf Hitler*, cit., p. 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p 32.

ist] the translator renders “we refuse to have foreign things”. More specifically, Fischer rejects

elements which do not belong to our kind; although they have been of aid sometimes in certain achievements, the greater part of their effects were of a disintegrating nature to mental values, poison to numerous wells of national thinking and destruction to land-linked prosperity and numerous families of old estate. They are shouting when, during the building and erection of this people’s house, shavings fall from the plane; but they are quite when the blood runs in other revolutions and hunger eradicates whole villages. All we want is security and to be masters of our own house. And to build up the nation as a people which is of *one* blood [...]

The Leipzig audience could hardly fail to notice the allusion to the Jews at this point. Echoing his words of 1920, Fischer blurs the distinction between race and people: the people is ultimately a racial community. In Fischer’s chilling words of rejection, this is the prelude to a cleansing of alien subjects, of any heterogeneous blood.

I have chosen the Leipzig Demonstration to illustrate Fischer’s attitude at the time, but his allocution as Rector of the University of Berlin was already written in a similar tone³⁹. Fischer says that as long as the concept of race is considered from a purely “descriptive” point of view, i.e. anthropology is reduced to “measuring skulls”, any chance of improving the state is lost. Yet everything has changed with the recent progress of the discipline: “the meaning of heredity and race for the state appears in a completely new light”⁴⁰. We now know why a solid state community should “reject the elements alien to the people”. But governments are still reluctant to implement what science has to offer: “only the National Socialist state accepted a eugenic and a racial hygiene program and began to put it into practice”⁴¹. Fischer finds it perfectly understandable that “Nazi policies attacked the Jews first and foremost [...], because they were the only numerically significant racially alien element in our country and among our people”. No one could deny that there were “physical and mental differences” between Aryans and Jews. Now, Jews are not necessarily inferior and a mixture of an Aryan people and the Jews might even be considered somehow worthwhile *per se*: what Fischer is implying here, is that - all things considered - the Jews were better than the “Negroes”⁴². However, such a mixture “could never happen

³⁹ E. FISCHER, *Der Begriff des völkischen Staates, biologisch betrachtet* (29. Juli 1933), Berlin, Preußische Druckerei- und Verlags-Aktiengesellschaft, 1933.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 9.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴² Cf. MÜLLER-HILL, *Murderous Science*, p. 39, quoting from a 1939 speech by Fischer: “The Jew is [...] an alien and, therefore, when he wants to insinuate himself, he must be warded off. This is self-defence.

the one on German people's soil: it would not be something German, but rather something completely different - for example, Middle Eastern"⁴³. As a consequence, such a thing must be "rejected" according to the "nationalistic [*völkisch*] state concept of a German state and people". Fischer deserves the same approval for the Nazi eugenic policy "on large scale", which aimed to "multiply the hereditary healthy and reduce the hereditary sick"⁴⁴. Having argued that German Jews weren't *inferior*, but 'different', in 1933 and 1934 Fischer was criticized and attacked for not being sufficiently anti-Semitic⁴⁵. How could Fischer affirm that the Jews were not necessarily inferior and nevertheless argue for their segregation? And more generally, what was his attitude towards the Jews?

Let us take a look at the book *Das antike Weltjudentum* (World-Judaism in ancient times), written together with the Viennese professor of Studies in Ancient Judaism Gerhard Kittel for the series on the "Jewish question" sponsored by Rosenberg⁴⁶. The authors take as their starting point "the problem of world Jewry [*Weltjudentum*] and its effects on non-Jewish humanity", which they regard as the most sinister threat posed by the Jews. The Jews have been in Europe for a long time, but they are now taking on the character of a worldly, trans-national power. This is due to their traditional "double tendency" towards assimilation and simultaneous proselytism, with one aim in mind: to gain "power over the world"⁴⁷. The aim of Fischer and Kittel is to show how and why this attitude results from an essential, original and permanent character of the Jews. Fischer's contribution to the volume mostly consists of an analysis of ancient portraits from the point

In saying this, *I do not characterize every Jew as inferior, as Negroes are [...]* but I reject Jewry with every means in my power, and without reserve, in order to preserve the hereditary endowment of my people". Emphasis added.

⁴³ Fischer believes that the Jews are, from a racial point of view, a "mixture of Oriental and Near-Eastern races": cf. E. FISCHER, G. KITTEL, *Das antike Weltjudentum. Tatsachen, Texte, Bilder*, Hamburg, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1943, p. 111 (this part of the book was written by Fischer). Basically, that's why he considers Jews *different* from the Europeans. See also LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, p. 244: according to Fischer the Jews were not inferior (*minderwertig*) but rather extraneous (*anderwertig*).

⁴⁴ E. FISCHER, *Der Begriff des völkischen Staates*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ MÜLLER-HILL, *Murderous Science*, pp. 84-85. As a consequence of this polemic, Fischer wrote a Memorandum for the Ministry of Interiors in which he explained that he had been an anti-Semite since his youth but he was also "a scientist, and, therefore, could not change his statements at will" (p. 85).

⁴⁶ E. FISCHER, G. KITTEL, *Das antike Weltjudentum* (Forschungen zur Judenfrage, vol. 7). The book took up (ivi, p. 5) a research programme that Kittel had outlined in a paper for the Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands (Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany) directed by Walter Frank, and published in Rosenberg's series: G. KITTEL, *Die ältesten Jüdischen Bilder. Eine Aufgabe für die wissenschaftliche Gemeinschaftsarbeit*, in: *Sitzungsberichte der Dritten Münchener Arbeitstagung des Reichsinstituts für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands vom 4. bis 6. Juli 1939*, Hamburg, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1940, pp. 237-249 (Forschungen zur Judenfrage, vol. 4). Fischer had attended Frank's annual conference at the Reich Institute in Munich in 1938.

⁴⁷ E. FISCHER, G. KITTEL, *Das antike Weltjudentum*, p. 10.

of view of racial traits, psychologically interpreted. In some female portraits, for example, Fischer individuates the typical “Jewish hussy” on the basis of her “facial expression”; in others, he identifies the “rich Jewish ladies” that one could have met on the Kurfürstendamm until ten years earlier. His conclusion is that there is a remarkable persistence of these traits from antiquity to the present day⁴⁸.

Racial science thus confirmed that Jewry had not changed its character over time. In Fischer’s eyes, the racially mixed nature of the Jews explains the above-mentioned duplicity, the origin of which can be traced back to the “Oriental” and “Middle Eastern” component races. The Jewish psychological profile holds both elements together in a most dangerous mixture: “Even in the early history of the Jewish people, the emotion, hatred and cruelty, often developing into bloodlust, of the shepherd of the Oriental race is seen together with the skill, adaptability, cunning and desire to dominate of the city-builder of the Middle Eastern race”⁴⁹. Jews are all the more dangerous *because they are not simply inferior*, but cunning, violent, and systematically longing for world domination, since ancient times. The view that Fischer was a racist *but not* an anti-Semite is then completely unjustified, although this may be consistent with Fischer’s self-representation⁵⁰. In some ways, his sophisticated form of scientific and genetically based anti-Semitism was no less despicable than the more commonplace prejudices of less cultured Germans of the time. And it could be even more useful to the regime - as his relationship with Rosenberg testifies.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Fischer explicitly approved of the Nuremberg Laws and probably helped to draft them. In 1936, he publicly thanked Hitler “for giving geneticists the opportunity, by means of the Nuremberg laws, of making the results of their researches useful to the general public”⁵¹. This commitment was confirmed by Fischer’s successor, von Verschuer, who retrospectively referred to the work done at Dahlem in these terms: “we had to face up to the urgent need to provide the scientific basis for racial hygiene legislation, oriented towards practice”⁵².

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 162. Cf. MÜLLER-HILL, *Murderous Science*, p. 86.

⁴⁹ E. FISCHER, *Rassenentstehung und älteste Rassengeschichte der Hebräer*, in: *Sitzungsberichte der Dritten Münchner Arbeitstagung des Reichsinstituts für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands vom 5. bis 7. Juli 1938*, Hamburg, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1940, pp. 121-136 (Forschungen zur Judenfrage, vol. 3).

⁵⁰ This overindulgent interpretation is defended by LÖSCH, *Rasse als Konstrukt*, p. 295.

⁵¹ MÜLLER-HILL, *Murderous Science*, p. 36; see also E. KLEE, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich*, Frankfurt a.M., Fischer, 2003, p. 152.

⁵² WEISS, *The Nazi Symbiosis*, p. 98.

4. *MEA CULPA?* (1945)

That an individual scientist wholeheartedly embraced Nazism is a matter of interest primarily to his biographers. That an entire discipline gave scientific support to racial politics is, in my view, a matter that raises more disturbing questions. In the short span of two scientific generations, from Virchow to Fischer, German anthropology underwent a profound mutation. The discipline began its “biological” turn: it opened up to racial genetics and racial hygiene under the hypothesis of the immutability of “primitive” races, which deserved to be defended or, if necessary, restored. The ancestral races were endowed with different mental capacities: any mixing could only be detrimental to the “superior” races. Accordingly, the goal of anthropology became the entrenchment or restoration of racial barriers, both in South West Africa and in Germany. Language and practice followed suit: the marriage of anthropology and racial hygiene, celebrated by Baur-Fischer-Lenz, did the rest as early as the 1920s. In the long run, any inhibiting brake potentially dictated by empathy, morality, religion - or scrupulous science - couldn't help but prove recessive to the results and imperatives of the dominant anthropology, full of pseudo-scientific, extra-scientific, ambiguous and false presuppositions.

It was not Nazism that corrupted Fischer's anthropology. The truth is that long before 1933, and even before the First World War, Fischer had independently embarked on the road that would later lead him to support unethical practices, discrimination and persecutory racial legislation. Of course, like so many others, Fischer would have had to make several corrections of purpose along the way, before and after 1933⁵³. The hypothesis of mere opportunism must be dispelled in his case, in both the “far-sighted” and the “selfish” versions. Fischer was neither the tormented scientist who had to fund research somehow making unwilling concessions for the sake of science, nor the pragmatic academic who acted in the name of personal interests, such as career. Both claims fail to grasp the most important aspect, which has little to do with impartial love of science or personal weakness. Rather, I agree with the interpretation of Sheila Faith Weiss, who spoke of a “symbiosis”, i.e. a meeting and interlocking, sometimes with resistance and obstacles on both sides, of independently developed scientific doctrines and the demands of the regime⁵⁴.

This is why the protagonist's attempt to evade responsibility sounds ambiguous. “I sincerely recognize”, Fischer wrote for a planned autobiography, “my

⁵³ See H.-W. SCHMUHL, *Grenzüberschreitungen: Das Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik, 1927–1945*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2005, p. 314.

⁵⁴ WEISS, *The Nazi Symbiosis, passim*.

great faults: blindness, gullibility, carelessness, complete ignorance of all evil - but only these. And I am ready to pay for them”⁵⁵. Yet these words, written in 1945 by an emeritus professor in the privacy of his quiet home, remained locked in a drawer for more than 20 years, until Fischer’s death in 1967. In the end, Fischer was unwilling to take responsibility or pay for it, even to the comparatively small extent that his own self-indulgent admissions might have entailed. He elusively entitled his autobiographical pages *Memories of an Anatomist*.

⁵⁵ F. HORST, K.E. MAIER, “Eugen Fischer”, in: B. OTTNAD, F. L. SEPAINTNER (Hrsg.), *Baden-Württembergische Biographien*, vol. 3, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2002, pp. 78-85. Müller-Hill describes Fischer’s autobiography “a remarkably colorless book with every trace of reality filtered off. Not a word appear in it about his fatally wounded son, about the Third Reich, or about the dead Jews”. MÜLLER-HILL, op. cit., p. 119.