



Dagmar Herzog. *Unlearning Eugenics: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Disability in Post-Nazi Europe.*

George L. Mosse Series in Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. Illustrations. 176 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-31920-5.

Reviewed by Kirsten Leng

Published on H-TGS (January, 2020)

Commissioned by Benjamin Bryce (University of Northern British Columbia)

In *Unlearning Eugenics*, Dagmar Herzog interrogates the historical foundations of contemporary conflicts between reproductive rights and disability rights raging across Europe. In recent years, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, Hungary, and Poland have introduced restrictions on abortions purportedly as acts of social justice on behalf of the physically and cognitively disabled. As Herzog notes, the current driving force behind such legislation comes from anti-abortion activists whose primary investments lay elsewhere—namely, in demographic increase, national pride, and religious zealotry. Nevertheless, they have managed to successfully leverage the hard-fought shift in public opinion on disability rights affected by generations of activists to achieve their ends. How was this possible? According to Herzog, we cannot approach an answer unless we grapple with the legacy of the Nazis' mass murder of the disabled and the ways it has shaped Europeans' attempts to unlearn eugenics.

Unlearning Eugenics began life as the 2016 George L. Mosse Lectures Herzog delivered at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; however, its genesis lay in earlier work. As Herzog notes in the introduction, this project stems from debates surrounding abortion in the 1960s and 1970s that she uncovered while researching her sweeping survey

Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History (2011). According to Herzog, these debates were “saturated by references to disability.” Across Western Europe, opponents of the liberalization of abortion laws invoked the Nazis' mass murder of the disabled—above all in France, at a time when religious arguments were losing their purchase. Indeed, in this moment, many Protestant and Catholic theologians were rethinking doctrine to argue on behalf of the morality of abortion. At the same time, however, proponents of abortion mobilized disability to establish a need for expanded abortion rights. While they rarely enunciated explicit eugenic arguments, such advocates often betrayed a “disdainful, unempathetic tone” that framed disability as “a tragedy for families and a burden for societies.” In a curious coincidence of history, Herzog rediscovered these debates as abortion on the grounds of disability had become “a new entry point for regenerating a sense of moral conflictedness about abortion” (p. 9).

For Herzog, this coincidence offered a moment of insight into what she intriguingly calls the “contrapuntal relationship between different moments in time”: namely, the “sometimes planned, but often quite uncontrollable, ricochets and repercussions between those past and present moments” (p. 10). In the particular case under investi-

gation, Herzog maintains that these complex “reverberations” can be found in the ways that the “unreflected insensitivities inherent in the pro-choice rhetoric of the 1960s-1970s had come to haunt the abortion politics of the twenty-first century” (pp. 10, 9). By highlighting the ways the past haunts present reproductive politics, Herzog demonstrates history’s relevance, not only in showing “how we got here” but also in illuminating why certain political possibilities *and* foreclosures exist.

Disability and reproductive rights would become increasingly entangled in the decades that followed the sexual revolution, particularly around the fraught issue of abortion on the grounds of fetal anomaly. Certain events, such as Australian philosopher Peter Singer’s lectures in West Germany in 1989, further inflamed the bioethical debate. Singer’s controversial (understatement) views on the legitimacy of killing severely disabled newborns helped to conflate infanticide and abortion at a pivotal moment: namely, as historians had begun unearthing the extent to which the Nazis’ mass killing of the disabled laid the groundwork for the Holocaust and disability rights activists were gaining traction in positively shifting public opinion. For Herzog, the so-called Singer Affair and its fallout constitute the linchpin that proved vital to anti-abortionists’ appropriation of disability rights rhetoric as part of their effort to restrict abortion laws across Europe.

Arguably, only Herzog could have written this book. *Unlearning Eugenics* synthesizes her numerous areas of expertise, including the history of the Holocaust, the history of religion, and the history of sexuality. This book should be of interest to scholars working in any and all of these fields. As is the case with much of Herzog’s recent work, the book draws on an impressive array of multinational archival sources to offer insightful comparative historical assessments. Texts, art, and photography all help Herzog investigate discourses emanating from a range of historical actors, in-

cluding theologians, parliamentarians, feminists, disability rights activists, and transnationally networked conservative organizers.

While the analysis on offer here is undoubtedly historical, it is also unmistakably political. Herzog urges empathy for potential parents-to-be of disabled children, particularly in conditions where funding is severely lacking to help these children and their caregivers live rich, multifaceted, fulfilling lives. Indeed, state-based material support and infrastructure that would enable a diversity of lives to become livable would arguably mark a key milestone on the path to “unlearning eugenics.” In a feminist vein, Herzog illuminates the complexities of the abortion debate, in Europe and beyond, and the potent symbolism of the pregnant body and fetus. In subtle yet powerful ways, Herzog fleshes out the ways abortion is “never just about itself” but rather about the “jumble of associations” it provokes, including “inchoate but deeply held feelings about femininity and motherhood, about sexual practices and pleasures, and about demography and eugenics” (p. 16). Yet through her analysis Herzog implicitly argues, following German feminist Adrienne Goehler, that the “problem of a cripple-hostile society” will not be resolved on the “backs of individual women” (p. 64).

Unlearning Eugenics concludes on a hopeful note, as it explores past and present experiments in “life-sharing” projects that seek to shift the frame of disability politics from pity and charity toward justice and even themes of desiring and becoming. Unfortunately, in the final chapter the focus on the nexus of disability and reproductive politics slips from view, leaving the reader to wonder about the current state of the debate, and whether reproductive and disability rights activists are similarly experimenting on new ways to shift the discursive frame. Likewise, a question that remains, particularly for historians of the early twentieth century, is whether the process of “unlearning eugenics” only involves coming to

terms with Nazi mass murders. As Herzog notes in the first chapter, pro-contraception arguments from the 1910s-30s illuminate “how completely eugenic assumptions saturated ... common sense” (p. 31). Indeed, as such scholars as Ann Taylor Allen and Edward Ross Dickinson have shown, health was foundational to understandings of desirable reproduction—and sexuality—across Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; conversely, ill-health and disability were conflated with illegitimate sex. These beliefs were held across the political spectrum but were arguably embraced most vigorously by “progressives.” Eugenic thinking about sexuality was widespread and pernicious, informing attitudes decades before the horrors of the Third Reich. The subtle infusion of eugenic thinking into the very fabric of European sexual beliefs and practices across generations will be very difficult to unlearn indeed.

These caveats aside: what Herzog achieves in this slender volume is staggering, both historically exciting and politically invigorating. *Unlearning Eugenics* not only eloquently and compassionately unpacks the complexities of debates surrounding abortion in twenty-first-century Europe but also illuminates the difficulties involved in realizing and defending “intimate rights of all kinds” (p. 14).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-tgs>

Citation: Kirsten Leng. Review of Herzog, Dagmar. *Unlearning Eugenics: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Disability in Post-Nazi Europe*. H-TGS, H-Net Reviews. January, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54933>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.