
Why did the Nazis sterilize the Blind?

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Abstract

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In the list of diseases justifying forced sterilization according to the 1933 Nazi sterilization law, after the schizophrenics and epileptics but before the severely deformed and alcoholics, hereditary blindness and hereditary deafness were mentioned. The inclusion of both of these categories was not trivial, even in the context of the racial-hygienic worldview. In fact, prior to the Nazi law, no other sterilization law in the world defined specifically these two categories. How did the blind and deaf end up in that list? On the basis of a close examination of the developments in the research of hereditary disorders in German psychiatry from 1900 to 1933, I will argue that the answer lies not so much in the cultural and social background of eugenic anxieties but in the practices of knowledge creation and legitimization applied by German psychiatrists during the 1920s. After the attempts to fit mental disorders into the Mendelian box failed, psychiatrists changed course and found alternative statistical techniques to nail down the hereditary nature of certain illnesses. During this process, Mendelian thought changed its role in psychiatric literature, turning primarily into a rhetoric device used to legitimize non-Mendelian research results. Then, when compiling the sterilization law it were the same psychiatrists who used the category of Mendelian blindness and deafness as part of their attempts to lend the law itself scientific respectability. Examination of internal scientific developments thus sheds a new light on a crucial moment in the history of Nazi eugenic policies.

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