

Social Mendelism

Who was the scientific progenitor of eugenic thought? Amir Teicher challenges the preoccupation with Darwin's eugenic legacy by uncovering the extent to which Gregor Mendel's theory of heredity became crucial in the formation – and radicalization – of eugenic ideas. Through a compelling analysis of the entrenchment of genetic thinking in the social and political policies in Germany between 1900 and 1948, Teicher exposes how Mendelian heredity became saturated with cultural meaning, fed racial anxieties, reshaped the ideal of the purification of the German national body and ultimately defined eugenic programs. Drawing on scientific manuscripts and memoirs, bureaucratic correspondence, court records, school notebooks and Hitler's table talk as well as popular plays and films, *Social Mendelism* presents a new paradigm for understanding links between genetics and racism, and between biological and social thought.

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Social Mendelism

*Genetics and the Politics of Race in Germany,
1900–1948*

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-49949-1 — Social Mendelism
Amir Teicher
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108499491
DOI: 10.1017/9781108583190

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First published 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-49949-1 Hardback

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For my grandparents

The hereditary mass of an individual is a mosaic from numerous hereditary units, each having a 50% chance to be combined [during sexual reproduction] with the hereditary units of the other partner. Each one of these genes (hereditary units) maintains its integrity in the course of generations. If one inter-crosses two different races, none of these individual hereditary units can ever fully disappear, but each hereditary trait will appear among the offspring following ratios that can be computed according to Mendel's hereditary laws. So, for example, the probability that a certain hereditary disposition from a particular grandparent would appear by a grandchild is one fourth.

Certain hereditary factors, when they come together with certain others, penetrate through, that is, they leave their mark on the hybrid (dominant). The hereditary factor that is thereby repressed (recessive) is however not lost, but will become noticeable again in further crossings, if the joining of hereditary factors would result in a combination that contains only the recessive dispositions.

With respect to the application of the first Mendelian law, each hereditary unit needs to be considered on its own (it mendels independently).

– The opening sentences of a memorandum titled “What demands must the hereditary biologist raise regarding the solution of the Jewish question?” prepared by the German Interior Ministry expert on national health, Arthur Gütt, for a discussion regarding the legal definition of Jews and Jewish *Mischlinge*, ten days after the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws, 1935)

“I wanted to out-mendel myself (Ich wollte mich herausmendeln)!”

– Nuclear physicist Fritz Houtermans, explaining to his wife why he decided to identify himself as Jewish, despite having only one Jewish grandparent, 1935

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Acknowledgments

This book grew out of a doctoral dissertation, written at Tel Aviv University under the caring supervision of two distinguished scholars, Shulamit Volkov and Eva Jablonka. Volkov provided me uncompromising guidance and support since my days as an undergraduate student; much of what I know – and love – about historical research comes from her. Jablonka, my second “Doktormutter,” saved me from many pitfalls and warmly encouraged me throughout the entire project. I owe her a great deal.

Snait Gissis has been my academic guardian angel from very early on. Her unconditional backing and unbelievable modesty are a rare diamond in our world.

During the first four years of my doctoral studies, my research was supported by a President of the University and Rector’s Scholarship for Excellent PhD Students (2008–2012). Three research visits to Germany were funded by the Minerva Foundation (short-term research grants). In Germany, I was hosted twice by Veronika Lipphardt’s group in the Max-Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG) as a pre-doctoral fellow. In my fifth year as a doctoral student, I had the privilege of becoming a fellow at the Edmund J. Safra Center for Ethics and benefited from both its financial support as well as its stimulating intellectual environment. At Tel Aviv University, the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies, the Minerva Institute for German History, and the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism all supported my work, financially and otherwise. At the final stages, a grant from the Israeli Science Foundation (ISF grant 145/18) proved crucial for bringing this project to the finish line.

Many scholars have commented on parts of this work at one point or another, and their critique and advice were of immense importance. Among them I should mention Gadi Algazi, Batya Amir, Mitchell G. Ash, Jose Bruner, Eric Engstrom, Raphael Falk, Michael Hagner, Shai Lavi, Veronika Lipphardt, Pauline Mazumdar, Billie Melman, Amos Morris-Reich, Staffan Müller-Wille, Boaz Neumann, Diana B. Paul,

xii Acknowledgments

Theodore M. Porter, Oded Rabinovitch, Iris Rachmimov, David Sabeau, Galili Schachar, Falko Schmieder, Stefanie Schüller-Springorum, Sagie Shaeffer, Michal Shapira, Simon Teuscher, Scott Ury, Paul Weindling, Yossi Yovel and Michael Zakim. Among the archivists who helped me in my work I would like to thank in particular Britta Leise (MPIP), Annett Krefft and Bettina Reimers (DIPF/BBF), Johann Zilien (HHStAW), Klaus-Dieter Rack (HStAD), the staff of the MPIWG library and the staff of the Wiener Library (TAU).

Finally, my English may have been only partially comprehensible were it not for the proofreading and corrections of Sarah Mandel; and I would probably not have been able to complete this project without the immense help of my two diligent research assistants, Lea Herzig and Clara Hestermann. Thank you.

Abbreviations

ARGB	Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie
BFL	Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer & Fritz Lenz, <i>Menschliche Erblchkeitslehre und Rassenhygiene</i> (3rd ed.), Munich: J. F. Lehmanns, 1927.
FB	Familiengeschichtliche Blätter
<i>Oxford Handbook</i>	Alison Bashford & Philippa Levine (eds.), <i>The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics</i> , New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
ZgNP	Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie
ZMA	Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie
<i>Archival Material</i>	
BArch	Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, Berlin, Germany
BayHStA	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv
DIPF/BBF/Archiv	Deutsches Institut für internationale pädagogische Forschung, Bibliothek für bildungsgeschichtliche Forschung
HStAD	Hessisches Staatsarchiv, Darmstadt
HHStAW	Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Wiesbaden
IfZ Munich	Institut für Zeitgeschichte, München
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
MPG Archive	Max-Planck-Gesellschaft Archiv
MPIP	Historisches Archiv des Max-Planck-Instituts für Psychiatrie, Munich, Germany
Staatsarchiv Munich OLG	Staatsarchiv München Oberlandesgericht
YVA	Yad-Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel

