 IMAGES OF THE COLLECTIVE: SHAPES, TYPES, AND BODIES IN INTERWAR GERMANY

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I. Introduction

In 1938, the writer Eugen Gürster stopped at a Southern German train station and looked at a group of young people in uniforms on the platform. “It seemed to me,” he wrote under a pseudonym in the Swiss exile journal Mass und Wert, “that the average of these clear faces resulted in an ideal worker’s face, the face of a type that wants to be active and useful in a great and manifest work.” In Nazi Germany, he thought he could recognize “the physiognomy of a human race that expects a mission and is prepared to execute a rational order with a maximum of rationality.” The liberal regime critic Gürster “felt” that “a race is growing ... that has no use for freedom.”

The following article analyzes in what terms German intellectuals discussed the relation between the individual and the collective in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany. One ubiquitous catchword, in this context, was the “type,” a notion that conveyed a multitude of political and cultural meanings. In Weimar and the Kaiserreich, intellectuals had already advanced arguments similar to Gürster’s about “typical” facial expressions and physiognomies, which allegedly corresponded to the wider historical development of German society. Numerous psychologists, journalists, biologists and even photographers debated whether there was anything like a “typical face” shaped by the experience of modernity and what could be read from such a physiognomy.

Intellectuals of all political backgrounds began to discuss whether facial features were formed by the evolution of modern society. Human faces, many authors were convinced, revealed the character and the “destiny” of an entire societal collective. As this article will argue, the normative conclusions about these developments in physiognomy were not necessarily aligned with political fault lines. Just as Gürster looked with disdain on the Nazified masses in the 1930s, conservatives and anti-democrats had earlier criticized the Weimar Republic as a standardized and soulless “mass society.” For many authors, democratic faces seemed to have degenerated into hollow masks. In the 1920s and 30s, nationalists such as Ernst Jünger triumphantly

announced alongside Nazi propagandists a new “type” of man with chiseled, clear and steely facial features, which they thought they recognized in the frontline soldier of the First World War.3

As the obsession with “human types” and ever-repeating images of collective unity would become key characteristics of Nazi propaganda and racial ideology, historians have traditionally focused on the anti-liberal and totalitarian ideas inherent in these concepts. By contrast, this article does not focus on the function of “the collective” in Nazi ideology, but rather seeks to retrace how democrats and opponents of the Nazi movement employed the very same images. Specifically, this article seeks to reveal hidden contact points and intellectual similarities between the Nazi movement and other political groups, including the left and the democratic center. This shared complex of ideas on “types,” “collectives,” and “masses” allowed for a certain degree of political communication between different ideological groups, including the Nazis and some of their opponents. In this context, I argue that intellectual parallels between different political currents strongly facilitated the spread of Nazism by blurring its exterminatory radicalism.

This article interprets National Socialism as a symptom of much larger cultural trends and patterns in the Weimar Republic. Thereby, it engages with the works of historians who have revealed the connections between Nazi ideology and (pseudo-)scientific concepts of the early twentieth century, including eugenics and Social Darwinism.4 In the last decade, however, historians such as Regina Wecker and Michael Burleigh have also begun to research the ways in which eugenic doctrines and ideas on “racial hygiene” were anchored in other political groups or in German society at large, including academia and the civil service.5 Similarly, Richard Wetzell’s book on German criminology revealed the connections between Nazism and modern scientific trends but also highlighted the political ambiguities of German science, which could lead in very diverse political directions. By problematizing the ideological openness of scientific fields, these historians have thereby made a conscious “effort not to let the Nazi experience overshadow” the intellectual history of science.6 Accordingly,
historians of racism and euthanasia in Germany have now begun to move “beyond the racial state.”

This effort was necessary in order to show that Nazism was no “external force” that usurped German science but rather a political pathway that had organically grown out of modernity’s cultural traditions. This article seeks to deepen and further complicate this discourse by placing radical National Socialist ideology and exterminatory theories of racial biology in the context of a wider Weimar-era discourse on “the collective.” In doing so, this study moves from Weimar photography to psychological and psychiatric debates. Finally, it will lead to discussions on eugenics, racial hygiene and anti-Semitism after Hitler’s “seizure of power” in 1933. Rather than analyzing the events of the Holocaust or the institutional history of racist violence in Nazi Germany, this article aims to expose the intellectual predispositions of a society that was capable of committing genocidal crimes.

This article reveals largely consensual ideas and widely shared images of human types, shapes, and forms in German society. These ideas, I argue, were never monopolized by the Nazi movement. Instead, they point to the embeddedness of Nazism in Weimar culture. In particular, I seek to show how democrats and liberals developed their own images of the collective and how they tried to fill these images with democratic meanings. Finally, I show in what ways the National Socialist movement could draw on a society-wide discourse on collectivity and individuality, but also that the Nazis were never able to lead these discussions in any coherent ideological direction. In cases such as Gürster’s, I demonstrate that similar patterns of thought and ideas on human typologies could be employed both in support of and in opposition to the Nazi regime.

In Weimar, different political groups revolved around common images, but more importantly, they shared common fears of losing their individual identity or their *Gestalt* in a shapeless, standardized, and amorphous “mass society.” At the same time, by contrast, intellectuals were longing for “community” and collective identity in order to overcome what they perceived as an atomized, sick, and over-individualized modernity.

In order to examine these contradictory images of “the collective” across the political spectrum and in a variety of cultural and scientific fields, this study relies on widely read periodicals. These include the liberal *Neue Rundschau*, the conservative *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*,

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7 Devin Pendas, Mark Roseman, Richard Wetzell, eds., *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2017). In particular, see the contributions by Pascal Grosse (95–115), Richard Wetzell (147–175), and Herwig Czech (213–240).
and the left-wing *Sozialistische Monatshefte* that was closely associated with the Social-Democratic Party. Articles from these journals will be compared to publications and statements from Nazi ideologues and writers. Taken together, these sources include the "big names" of interwar psychology, but also lesser-known intellectuals, such as Eugen Gürster, and completely unknown amateur journalists including small town doctors and civil servants. Thus, the article not only creates a representative picture of the educated middle-classes but also retraces how political opinions were formed and how ordinary citizens engaged with the writings of their intellectual and political idols. By examining the connections between Nazis and "non-Nazis" in Weimar media, this analysis contributes to our understanding of how democrats perceived the caesura of 1933 and why so many of them would eventually tolerate or even support the exterminatory policies of the Nazi regime.

II. The era of typologies

In 1932, the National Socialist Erna Lendvai-Dircksen published a photo book featuring portraits of ordinary German citizens. In her collection, *The Face of the German People*, Lendvai-Dircksen glorified the natural and authentic character of the "national comrade" (see Figures 1 and 2). While her photographs idolized the hardened faces of German peasants, Lendvai-Dircksen indulged in widespread clichés about the alienated and denaturized inhabitants of large German cities, who presumably did not vote for the Nazi party. The peasants, she argued, had “true form” which “unconsciously and innocently grows from life itself.” By contrast, Lendvai-Dircksen described the cities as the “doom of modern mankind.” The city dweller had no true physiognomy, but rather a standardized and uniform body: his face was only a “mask.” “The urban man,” the book explained, “had abandoned the nurturing soil of natural lifestyle.” Accordingly, the urban type did not gain a “soul,” but was himself shaped by the “ephemeral and superficial.”
While Lendvai-Dircksen’s photography collection had an openly ideological message, historians have noted that the underlying idea of “typical faces” was equally endorsed by left-wing intellectuals such as the Swiss photographer Helmar Lerski, who published photo-books about “everyday heads” in the same period. Similarly, the photographer August Sander had published *Face of Our Time (Antlitz der Zeit)*, a collection of portraits of various citizens such as workers or lawyers, by which he sought to represent the “typical” physiognomy of the Weimar era (see Figures 3 and 4).

The historian of photography Wolfgang Brückle has noted that both the committed Nazi Lendvai-Dircksen and the left-liberal photographer August Sander described modernity as a process that transformed individuals into types. In their books, both engaged in a similar endeavor of decoding the relation between the individual and the collective via photography. Although they differed in their political intentions, their methodologies were strangely congruent. Significantly, Lendvai-Dircksen and Sander both came to the conclusion that modernity de-individualized society by transforming modern citizens into coherent and clearly recognizable “types.”

Other intellectuals, however, interpreted individual physiognomies in opposite terms. The Marxist journalist Siegfried Kracauer, for example, lamented the loss of purpose and *Gestalt* in a shallow capitalist mass culture. For Kracauer, modernity did not transform individuals into types but rather destroyed the typical features that premodern citizens had allegedly shared. “The soul,” he argued, “has lost its orientation and is therefore dissolving.” Life in modern society, Kracauer was convinced, was “life without any community [das Gemeinschaftslose].” Thus, modernity was not criticized for de-individualizing or standardizing

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12 See Brückle, “Face-Off in Weimar Culture.”


society, but rather for atomizing and destroying coherent collective groups. Here, individual shapes, physiognomies, and faces were reduced to a formless mass.

A perspective like Kracauer’s could, however, also be shared by anti-Marxist conservatives. Perhaps most notably, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Kassner bemoaned the loss of “types” in the face of modernization. Before the First World War, argued Kassner, it was still possible to discern character in the faces of German individuals and to see “that the doctor, the scholar, the teacher, the tailor, the painter, the artist, the count, the baron, the bookkeeper each had a face conforming to his status in society: a scholar’s face, a teacher’s, a public servant’s, a tailor’s, a painter’s or a count’s face and so on.” After the downfall of this world and the democratic revolution of 1918, these criteria of orientation seemed to be lost. Thus, the conservative Kassner looked into the “new and horrible face” of the Weimar Republic which allegedly lacked typical features.15

While the democrat Sander and the Nazi Lendvai-Dricksen regarded “typical” and standardized contemporary faces as signs of modernity, the conservative Kassner and the left-wing Kracauer promoted the opposite view. Here, modernity was held accountable not for creating but rather for destroying the societal “types.” The most profound symptom of modern cultural decline, Kassner argued, was society’s incapacity to reproduce the old types: “to rob a people of the possibility to form types means transforming the people into a mass; it means castration.”16 Here modern republicanism was held accountable for the disintegration of German society. “Democracy is lacking in outer form, visible symbols, particular values, and measure,” Kassner believed.17

15 Rudolf Kassner, Physiognomik (Munich, 1932), 29; quoted from Wolfgang Martynkewicz, Salon Deutschland: Geist und Macht 1900-1945 (Berlin, 2009), 367.

16 Rudolf Kassner, Die Grundlagen der Physiognomik (Leipzig, 1922), 54; quoted from Martynkewicz, Salon, 370.

17 Rudolf Kassner, Der Dilettantismus (Berlin, 1910), 15; quoted from Martynkewicz, Salon, 164.
The same phenomena that Kassner attributed to modern individualism, democracy, and liberalism, the Marxist Kracauer attributed to capitalism. Yet, both authors were convinced that the twentieth century had not brought progress but decline. Mankind seemed to have lost its distinguishing features. Ultimately, however, thinkers such as Kassner or Kracauer were unsure whether to criticize modern societies for their pluralism or their uniformity. In their view, individualism and standardization became part of one and the same social development, which threatened German Kultur. Collectivist standardization and individualist atomization ultimately appeared as two sides of the same dialectical process, which undermined German culture and resulted in “amorphousness.”

Wolfgang Brückle has argued that photographic trends and the interwar discourse on physiognomic types represent “a longing for fixed patterns at a time of unrest.” According to Brückle, the various trends to (re-)establish collective identities against social erosion must be understood as “products of the cultural uncertainty that haunted Germany during the fatal economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s and the social problems it precipitated.”18 I would argue, however, that Weimar discourses were also characterized by a more contradictory dimension: although intellectuals longed for collective community, they feared standardization — and the notion of the “type” could represent either of the two.

Weimar visions of individuality and collectivity were so multi-faceted that the positions in this debate did not necessarily correspond to political ideologies. Many photographers and social theorists of this period did not regard their own role as political but as scientific.19 And in this regard, a left-wing photographer like Sander was in agreement.
with a right-wing theorist like Kassner. Although they differed in their assessments of interwar democracy, they were both convinced that their observations were based on scientific methods, which revealed different morphologies in human society.

The psychiatrist and expressionist novelist Alfred Döblin legitimized the scientific rigor of such projects. In his foreword to Sander’s photo-book he wrote: “one sees a kind of art history or rather a sociology of the last thirty years.”20 The book, according to Döblin, showed that German citizens were not only defined by their individual heritage and the “shaped form of their race” but also by modern society.21 Society, for Döblin, was a “collective force” and promoted a “leveling anonymity.”22 Still, Döblin acknowledged that the book depicted individuals. “As we are human, we are dealing with individuals — among other people!” “With negroes however,” Döblin dared to remark, “this issue is far more complicated.”23 Overall, he was convinced that Sander’s work was “wonderful teaching material” about society. This remark encapsulated what Döblin and other writers called the “New Objectivity” (Neue Sachlichkeit).

Sachlichkeit, for Döblin and Sander, was a matter of distance and psychological diagnosis from the bird’s eye view. “From the distance,” he explained, “the individual ceases to exist and only the universal is real.”24 Sachlichkeit, however, also remained a buzzword that provided legitimacy to the most diverse political agendas.25 In his essay Little History of Photography, Walter Benjamin acknowledged that establishing human typologies was neither right- nor left-wing. According to Benjamin, “the ability to read facial types” was “a matter of vital importance” for anyone who sought to understand how modernity transformed human relations. “Whether one is of the Left or the Right,” Benjamin argued, “one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one’s provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way.” Explicitly, he described Sander’s work as an “Übungsatlas,” a training manual.26 Grouping and being grouped into “types,” in other words, was not understood as an ideological endeavor. Instead, Benjamin believed that intellectuals of all political backgrounds had to accept this development as a necessary outcome of modernity. “The great physiognomists,” Benjamin explained in another essay, “turn into interpreters of fate.”27

But if notions of “types” and interpretations of human physiognomies could convey different political meanings, what are we left with from an interpretive perspective? One intuitive approach would be to define

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21 Ibid., 9.
22 Ibid., 10.
23 Ibid., 11-12.
24 Ibid., 11.
25 On Sachlichkeit, see also Ulrich Herbert, “‘Genera
tion der Sachlichkeit’. Die völkische Studentenbewe
gung der frühen 20er Jahre in Deutschland,” in Zivilisation und Barbarie. Die widersprüch
lchen Potentiale der Moderne, ed. Frank Bajohr, et al. (Hamburg, 1991), 115-144.
the society-wide obsession with “types” as a purely semantic trend, which was devoid of actual normative content. However, the collective obsession of grouping individuals into “types,” I would argue, does in itself represent a pattern of how intellectuals conceived of their own individuality. Character, individuality and uniqueness were either defined in or against a type but always in relation to a vague notion of collectivity. Although the interpretations of contemporary social developments varied hugely, interwar debates kept returning to the question of the “type”: while some warned against individualist degeneration, others feared collectivist standardization. And yet, they all denounced the horrific vision of “amorphousness.”

III. The science of the soul

Debates on photography and social theory in Weimar were intricably linked to parallel academic discourses in psychology, anthropology, and medicine. Journalists, photographers and interwar academics all engaged in similar discussions on collectivity and individuality. In academia, however, social and cultural debates were increasingly intertwined with biological questions and radical ideas of “racial hygiene.”

“It can be said without any exaggeration,” wrote the racial theorist Hans Günther (infamously nicknamed Rassengünther) in the Süddeutsche Monatshefte in 1934, “that the science of the human soul is the real battleground of cultural and ideological antagonisms today and that many fundamental ontological questions boil down to questions of psychology.” In contrast to the worldviews of Western positivism and “materialism,” Günther referred to the notions of humanist and idealist German philosophy. He saw himself in the tradition of Goethe, Hegel, and the romantic philosophers of the nineteenth century. What made his racist theories acceptable in the Bildungsbürgertum was not their right-wing political content but the vague revolt against the “paternalism of the natural sciences,” which allegedly reduced the individual to a purely mechanical entity.

“Humanistic psychology,” Günther argued, “must be placed in a much closer connection to biological physiognomic research. The theory of the human “physique” must be thoroughly mixed with that of “character” and “spiritual character” in particular. Only then will humanistic psychology correspond to the tendency of unity between body, soul and Geist ...” From this perspective, racism appeared as the logical consequence of a long tradition of German idealism.
opposed to Western materialism. The self-proclaimed “humanist” Günther could thus present his all-encompassing, universal cosmology of racial theory as a legitimate reaction against the de-individuation of the human soul in Western science. The irony that a conception of the human mind in terms of its “racial biology” was actually the apex of materialist thought was presumably lost on most contemporary readers.

The widespread use of the term “soul” (Seele), I would argue, does in itself pose a historical problem. While some used this word out of habit or rather carelessly as a synonym for “psyche,” others used it in a religious sense or in reminiscence of German Romanticism. At the same time, “soul” could also be seen as a perfectly respectable scientific term used by Günther just as much as by psychologists in the tradition of Sigmund Freud. In the same edition of the Süddeutsche Monatshefte in which Günther presented his racist vision of “humanistic psychology” other journalists referred to the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung and his theory of psychological archetypes. Just like Günther, Jung used the term “soul” as a scientific category. In Jung’s psychology, “thinking, feeling, intuiting [erschauen], and sensing” were described as “elementary functional capacities of the human soul.”

What Peter Gay has famously described as a “hunger for wholeness” in German psychology was reflected in semantic trends that increasingly made scientific use of concepts and words such as “form” (Gestalt), “immediate experience” (Erlebnis), “organic thought” or “meaning” (Sinn). It has recently been argued that the German revolt against Western scientific rationality rested on broader themes related to a “reassertion of German cultural traditions in the face of defeat in the First World War.” Although the scientific psychological terminology of the Weimar era may recall nationalist language, I would argue by contrast that examples such as Jung’s show that scientific and political developments cannot necessarily be explained by reference to each other. Instead, German-speaking intellectuals of very different political backgrounds shared a commitment to cultural ideas that transcended the borders between science and politics in multiple ways.

Thus racial theories could draw their legitimacy precisely from their embeddedness in a wider trend of interwar psychology, which largely defined itself as a reaction against a Western tradition of positivism that lacked in “soul.” The fact that Hans Günther made reference to

33 Ibid.
Wilhelm Dilthey, the doyen of German Geisteswissenschaft, was more than a shallow technique of self-legitimization. It should also be noted that Günther’s colleague Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß, the inventor of a “science of racial soul” (Rassenseelenlehre), had been a student of the philosopher Edmund Husserl, who in turn had not only been of Jewish origin but also one of Dilthey’s greatest admirers. The “humanist tradition,” in this sense, was open to a range of applications and interpretations. It could be invoked for racist and nationalist purposes but was equally in vogue among critical, left-wing, and democratic psychologists like Jung or philosophers like Husserl.

In evaluating the discursive connections between different doctrines that asserted a superiority of the “soul” and its intuitive capacities over abstract rationality, Mitchell Ash has pointed out that there is a danger of dismissing German Geisteswissenschaft as a form of ideology that teleologically evolved into right-wing radicalism. In many cases, however, it only became clear in hindsight, which strands of this tradition came to serve a political function and which remained academically useful. What appears today as a “reversion to German Romanticism” was often seen as legitimate science.

Another example illustrating this problem is the Berlin School of Gestalt psychology, which included names such as Max Wertheimer (see Figure 5), Kurt Lewin, or Kurt Koffka. These psychologists used the concept of Gestalt (meaning form or shape) to counter the Western trend of “analysis” (which derives from the Greek word for “dissolution”). Despite this anti-rational language, the Berlin School was innovative and extraordinarily productive in its experimental research, which yielded laboratory results that gained international recognition. For instance, Wertheimer and his colleagues pioneered numerous experiments on visual recognition and the perception of symmetries, forms, and colors. At the same time, however, the Berlin School also had the ambition to rethink the psychological and perceptive essence (Wesen) of man in a holistic way that did not distinguish between “emotive” and “rational” qualities.

Figure 5. Max Wertheimer with an apparatus testing the perception of motion (a Schumann tachiscope), 1913. Stadtarchiv Frankfurt am Main. Reproduced by permission.

This leads to the question of how scientific paradigms of the Weimar era were perceived by the general public and how they were translated and incorporated into the political ideologies of the wider Bildungsbürgertum. In the left-wing Sozialistische Monatshefte, the socialist school reformer Georg Chaym published enthusiastic comments on the works of Max Wertheimer and the Berlin School. Just as socialism fought for a more united society, Chaym argued in 1923, Gestalt theories “dealt with the problem summarizing particular contents and individual objects into one single and somehow structured unity.” From this perspective, Gestalt psychology appeared as a scientific expression of socialist political thought.

However, the political affiliations and interpretations of Weimar science were not always clear. In the same year, Chaym also wrote about racial hygiene: “socialism certainly does not take a negative position towards racial hygiene, insofar as it contains theoretical and practical measures for the improvement of the race and avoiding its debasement.” Chaym went on to conclude that “racial hygiene belongs unconditionally to the goals of socialism.” Such quotes not only illustrate how widespread eugenic ideas were among left-wing intellectuals, they also show how easily such middlebrow thinkers could draw connections between academic disciplines such as Gestalt psychology and racial hygiene.

While the left-wing Chaym had a Jewish background, it would not take long for other Gestalt psychologists to imbue their theories with right-wing anti-Semitism. Most notably, several colleagues of Wertheimer founded the Leipzig School of Gestalt psychology, which sought to complement its psychological findings with racial theories in order explain the “essence of the soul.” For example, the psychologist Friedrich Sander (who was unrelated to the photographer August Sander) distinguished between the “good Gestalt” of the “German Aryans” and the “foreign Gestalt” of Jews, homosexuals, and communists. Sander classified his own scientific methodology as genetische Ganzheitspsychologie (genetic holistic psychology). “Whoever seeks to purify our racial soul,” Sander explained in 1937, has to exterminate everything that is foreign to its Gestalt. In particular, [we] have to neutralize all the corrupting and foreign racial elements. This will to achieve a pure and German Gestalt justifies the extermination of the Jews, who grow like parasites, and the sterilization of those members of our own people, who carry an inferior genetic heritage.”

38 Translation after Loren Graham, “Attitudes towards Eugenics,” 344.
Also see Michael Schwartz, Sozialistische Eugenik: Eugenische Sozialtechnologien in Debatten und Politik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie, 1890–1933 (Bonn, 1995).
Friedrich Sander drew a direct line from the *Gestalt* psychology of the 1920s to eugenics and racial biology. However, the methodological pathways of Weimar psychology could lead into very different, even antagonistic political directions. While racial theorists such as Friedrich Sander or Hans Günther eventually turned towards National Socialism, the political conclusions that could be derived from interwar psychology were far more ambivalent.

In parallel to Friedrich Sander’s “genetic psychology,” his contemporary colleague Carl Gustav Jung, who still enjoys a high scientific reputation today, also thought in terms of collective national “souls” and used categories such as “Germanic spirit” or “Jewish psychology.” In contrast to Sander, however, Jung wanted these categories to be understood in a politically neutral, objective, and scientific sense. Here, ethnic types of human psychology were understood as expressions of difference that did not necessarily correspond to any sense of racial hierarchy.

Nevertheless the trend towards collective and racial psychology shaped the relation between science and National Socialism. From Jung’s psychoanalytical perspective, Hitler himself appeared as a representation of the unconscious of the German nation. In May 1939, the British psychologist Howard Philips published an interview with Jung in the London-based journal *Psychologist* about his “diagnosis” of modern dictators. Here, it was argued that Hitler was, like an ancient shaman, “possessed” by voices, which originated from the collective subconscious of the German nation. In similar interviews with Western media, Jung also argued that Hitler “is the people.” The dictator was presented as a “seer” or a “medicine man,” who was in an intimate psychological relation with his tribe: Hitler was “anima-possessed.”

This psychoanalytical interpretation of German history, however, was just as much a critique as a reflection of the themes that National Socialists had employed themselves. In 1934, the racial psychologist Friedrich Sander had described Hitler as “chosen” to fulfill the “longing of a divided racial body [Volkskörper] to achieve unity [Ganzheit].” Hitler allegedly represented the “holy will to purify the essence of the German nation.” While Sander had used such ideas to glorify Hitler as his national leader, the critic Jung employed similar psychological concepts to establish a clinical diagnosis of Hitler’s deranged mindset. Despite their political differences, however, both psychologists were convinced that Hitler was a “medium” of the collective German nation.

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43 Dowe, *Wandering Archetype*, 199.
These similarities meant that publications such as Jung’s could be simultaneously interpreted as a critique and justification of National Socialism. Hitler, according to Jung, had gained his power, like an ancient shaman, through the belief of his followers in his magic abilities. For Jung, this magic was real insofar as it was just a primitive label for the subconscious. Hitler mediated between the Germans and their subconscious; he was “the loudspeaker that enhances the silent whisper of the German soul until it can be heard by the unconscious ear of the Germans.” The only problem, from this perspective, was that the medium Hitler was no psychoanalyst, who could interpret this whisper and guide it into a healthier direction and towards psychological healing. However, the essence of the German subconscious was “not in itself destructive, but ambivalent.” “Whether this subconscious becomes a curse or a blessing,” wrote Jung as late as 1946, “depends on the character of the mind that captures it.”

IV. Psychotechnics, eugenics, and the problem of ideology

The evolution of Weimar psychology confronts historians with the problem that academic theories were open to different political directions. Scientific paradigms and methodologies revolving around identical concepts of collectivity could be used to justify very different political outcomes. One way to approach this problem is to conceive of interwar science not in terms of its political consequences but as a shared field of ideas. The similarities between “democratic” and “National Socialist” science, in other words, did not arise from political affinities but from a common framework that operated on a much deeper level than politics. In order to understand these similarities, we have to analyze common cultural questions, concerns, and fears.

Intellectuals of the Weimar period followed two contradictory but deeply connected intellectual trajectories. While they largely agreed about the need to save the individual from the “iron cage” of modern society and to revive holistic thought against “atomistic” and “elementistic” approaches, the same scholars also played an active role in the rationalization of social institutions. While they endorsed romantic terms such as “soul” or “Gestalt,” interwar psychologists were simultaneously concerned with problems of economic organization and rationalization.

In particular, new developments of “psychotechnics” sought to improve the “human factor” in modern industries, the military, and the police force by means of IQ-tests and “leader selection” programs.

46 See Balmer, Archetypentheorie, 138.
Kurt Lewin, for example, one of Max Wertheimer’s closest colleagues in the Berlin School of Gestalt psychology, published extensively on methods of economic and industrial optimization as well as on professional selection and training methods. Although Lewin rejected the “positivistic” methodology of the hard sciences and used terms such as “soul” and “Gestalt,” he nonetheless took part in the very rational endeavor of rationalizing German society.

Lewin later described his own field as “action research.” Thereby, psychotechnics also gained a political dimension. While Lewin himself worked on problems of rationalization, he also criticized the latest developments in his field from a social perspective. In particular, the term “Taylorism” had distinctly negative connotations. Such industrial principles, the Marxist Lewin argued, reduced the individual worker to a cog in a collective machinery. Against these capitalist developments, Lewin published *The Socialization of the Taylor System*. “The fact that workers’ councils and psychologists ought to work together,” argued Lewin, “guarantees that the interests of the workers … are protected.” His analysis of Western capitalist Taylorism was published in communist journals and Lewin also was in close contact with the early members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research.

In the 1920s, other psychologists such as Walther Moede worked on similar problems of mass, communication, and work psychology. After developing aptitude tests for the German army in the First World War, Moede taught at the *Technische Hochschule* in Berlin-Charlottenburg and founded the first institute for economic psychology. From the early Weimar Republic until the end of the Second World War, Moede was the editor of the journal *Industrielle Psychotechnik*, one of Germany’s dominant platforms for social psychologists. While a number of contributors to this field, such as

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52 See Kurt Lewin, *Resolving social conflicts: selected papers on group dynamics* (New York, 1948). This edition includes a preface from Max Horkheimer.


Kurt Lewin, had flirted with Marxism, the journal *Industrielle Psychotechnik* took a different political direction in the 1930s. The edition of 1933, for example, featured titles such as “The Science of Types and Genetic Inheritance” or “National Socialism and Psychotechnics.” While Lewin was forced into emigration, Moede kept his chair in Berlin until 1945.

Sociologists such as Silke van Dyk have interpreted the behavior of scientists like Moede in terms of a “strategy of self-Gleichschaltung” among German psychologists. Yet the precise relationship between ideology and “scientific” methodology remains to be analyzed. The fact that academics who abstained from joining the Nazi movement closely cooperated with National Socialists in their field also tells us something about the scientific standards at the time, which conventionally included the use of categories that would be qualified as ideological today.

The examples of the “psychotechnicians” Lewin and Moede highlight the problem that similar methodologies led in different political directions. It has often been assumed that National Socialism either suppressed independent research or politicized academic disciplines, which were supposed to provide superficial intellectual justifications for political and racial hierarchies. Accordingly, the picture has emerged that some academic fields were either artificially created or completely removed from the universities after 1933. So far, research has largely focused on processes of ideological “adjustment” or “accommodation” without probing the extent to which Weimar methodologies could be continued in the framework of the Nazi regime. However, what historians have called “self-Gleichschaltung” or the “normality of accommodation” only describes part of the story, which also allowed for genuine continuation of scientific work without necessarily imposing an overt process of ideological adjustment. Ultimately, we are confronted with the pattern that academics who stayed in Germany were able to use the same methodological concepts and techniques after 1933 as some of their colleagues who were forced into exile.

In recent years, historians have repeatedly highlighted the fact that eugenic initiatives and publications did not always have a right-wing background but often originated from professional associations or individual initiatives. This may also help to explain why famous eugenic publications of the 1920s were reviewed positively across Weimar’s media landscape. In 1927, for example, the high school
doctor Georg Wolff, who worked in Prenzlau at the time, reviewed Alfred Grotjahn’s book *Hygiene of Human Reproduction* in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*.59 “Every intelligent person immediately sees,” wrote the Social-Democrat Wolff, “that the health of a nation requires welfare and care not only for the living ... but also for future generations. Therefore, eugenic science must complement the demands of social hygiene in the interest of the individual and society.”60

The physician Grotjahn held a chair for social hygiene at Berlin University and a parliamentary seat for the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) in the Reichstag. He called for the sterilization of alcoholics, epileptics, and disabled persons and for the “planned annihilation” of those carrying genetic illnesses.61 His reader Wolff sought to combine these “scientific” conclusions with left-wing demands for social welfare, public housing, and family support. In the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, Wolff proposed to establish new laws to protect parents from financial risks (*Elternschaftsversicherungsgesetz*) in order to “enhance the appetite for reproduction of normal ‘valuable’ couples by means of an appreciable material support.”62

Wolff saw socialist eugenics as the technical precondition for an equal society that improved human existence.63 The eradication of “inferior persons” appeared as the flipside of an egalitarian socialist worldview, which sought to raise the economic conditions of society as a whole.64 “This is not only about preserving the quantitative basis of the population,” explained Wolff: “preserving or, if possible, improving genetic dispositions is equally important to guarantee the quality of the offspring.”65 Socialist policies should include “the right selection of those racial elements which are fit for reproduction.”66

Again, it should be noted that the socialist Wolff never converted to Nazism. In fact, he lost his position as a doctor in 1933 on racial grounds and was forced into emigration to the United States, where he found employment at Johns Hopkins University. While his sister and his brother were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, he did genetic and statistical research for the United States Children’s Bureau in Washington, DC. Before his death in 1952, he left a book titled, *Eugenics at the Crossroads* [*Eugenik am Scheidewege*].67

In order to understand biographies such as Georg Wolff’s, we have to acknowledge that he had not come to eugenics via politics and never had any “affinities” with Nazism. If anything, what is most striking in Wolff’s reviews of contemporary publications on “social hygiene”
is his complete lack of awareness of the links between eugenics and right-wing radicalism. It is indicative of his worldview that during the 1920s he quoted left-wing as well as National Socialist authors together in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* as long as their theories were roughly in line with his own opinions on “social hygiene.” In 1927, for instance, Wolff had praised measures of forced sterilization, which were taken at the time in the United States, or the private initiative of the *Medizinalrat* and Nazi-sympathizer Gustav Boeters, who had been illegally sterilizing patients in Zwickau since 1921 — without ever being convicted for his actions.68

In order to understand how National Socialist ideology gained acceptance in German society, we need to contextualize it within a web of interconnected discourses on eugenics, racial hygiene, mass psychology, and collective identities. This goes beyond saying that Germany had already been a structurally racist society before the advent of Nazism. While this may be true, the methodological challenge is to decipher in what ways contemporary Germans thought about collectivity and individuality in a more general and less openly political sense.

I interpret Nazism and its particular version of racial biology as one possible political outcome of a specifically German but not per se right-wing obsession with collective typologies. To be sure, Nazi policies were facilitated by the fact that German intellectuals were already used to defining the individual and its worth via the collective. The fact that democrats such as Georg Wolff had been discussing eugenic and racist concepts in Weimar media throughout the 1920s means that the exterminatory ideas of the Nazi party could penetrate the mainstream of the German *Bildungsbürgertum.* This observation is not meant to relativize Nazi ideology within the German political spectrum; on the contrary, it is meant to explain why Nazi ideas could spread with comparative ease in German society. While Wolff was forced into exile, it is safe to assume that the great majority of his colleagues who had advocated eugenic ideas in the 1920s eventually turned towards the Nazi party. Wolff’s colleague Gustav Boeters, for instance, joined the NSDAP in 1930 and his ideas on sterilization continued to influence Nazi policies throughout the 1930s and 40s.69

**Conclusion**

This article has moved, in broad strokes, from Weimar photography and psychology to discussions on eugenics and racial hygiene. While acknowledging the fundamental differences between these fields — in

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both methodological and moral terms — it has sought to reveal common intellectual patterns that characterized various areas of Weimar culture and science. In particular, I analyzed society-wide obsessions with human “types,” both biological and psychological. More importantly, however, I have aimed to show to what extent very different political groups relied on similar ideas of collectivity and individuality.

This analysis builds on recent developments in interwar historiography. Historians such as Peter E. Gordon and John McCormick have recently begun to interpret the Weimar Republic, which has traditionally been described as “pluralistic” and “diverse,” in terms of a more unified, coherent, and consensual “Weimar culture.”70 In this context, scholars such as Colin Loader, Mitchell Ash, and Dana Villa have written about trends in Weimar sociology, psychology, and social theory that transcended political divisions. This article extends and complicates these newer approaches by pointing towards deeper cultural ideas underlying all of these academic disciplines.

As Germans sought to redefine the relation between the individual and the collective in the face of modernity, defeat, economic crisis, and democracy, they developed new patterns of social thought. Some of these patterns became academically fruitful methodologies of mass psychology or innovative techniques of photography. Others, by contrast, evolved into obsessions about human “types,” racial hygiene, and biological selection. Yet, these patterns all shared common intellectual roots: they all went back to a new consensus that the modern individual ought to be defined — for better or worse — via the collective.

This article offers an innovative approach to interpreting the relation between National Socialism and Weimar science. Instead of further exploring the long-understood connections between interwar “racial hygiene” and Nazi ideology, it has placed radical right-wing ideas within a wider context of Weimar debates on collectivity. Regardless of their political background, interwar intellectuals had learned to define the individual via the collective. It is this society-wide focus on collective typologies that connected scientific, artistic, and political debates in a shared corpus of ideas. Nazism, in this sense, should be understood as one possible pathway resulting from Weimar’s “images of the collective.” It was embedded in an open field of concepts, which no political group could ever monopolize.

The intention of this article is not to relativize Nazi ideas on euthanasia, racial selection, and extermination but to understand the

structural cultural conditions that enabled Nazi ideas to gain widespread acceptance and credibility in German society. The ways in which citizens of the Weimar Republic discussed their individuality and their collectivity influenced their reactions to Nazism. This was a society that longed for coherent forms and collective identities but also feared losing its *Gestalt,* becoming “atomized” and “amorphous.” At the same time, intellectuals were obsessed with tropes of "mass culture," which allegedly "standardized" mankind and destroyed all forms of individuality. In this environment, National Socialist propaganda calling for the establishment of a new German “community” in order to overcome both “Western” individualism and “Eastern” collectivism had a strong appeal, which is hard to comprehend for historians in retrospect.

In contrast to classical narratives of German historiography, which focus on the violent political conflicts leading up to World War II and the Holocaust, this article has sought to reveal a hidden intellectual convergence underlying Germany’s ideological divisions. It thereby complicates recent efforts among historians to re-interpret the “contingency of the Weimar Republic,” which was never neatly divided into democrats and Nazis in waiting. As historians are now thinking beyond the dichotomy of “glitter and doom” in Weimar culture, the point of this article has been to show how multidirectional and open intellectual patterns could be in their political applications and appropriations. It is difficult to establish a clear causal nexus between Weimar intellectual life and the rise of Nazi ideology. Conceptions and images of the collective did not necessarily precipitate a National Socialist turn in German society. On the contrary, they impeded a clear ideological, conceptual, and aesthetic localization of Nazism in the intellectual landscape. It is this process of intellectual embedding and integration, rather than obvious and violent propaganda, that would allow Nazi ideas to subliminally take over German intellectual life.

Eugen Gürster, the exiled regime critic with whom this article began, defined this problem retrospectively. In 1948, ten years after having published his first observations on Nazi mass culture, he reflected on the Holocaust and the Second World War. “First, the concept of man as a ‘replaceable being’ had to be intellectually developed,” he argued in the liberal journal *Die Neue Rundschau,* “before modern mass wars with their millionfold annihilation and their technologies of destruction could be led or even be planned.” From this perspective, racism, genocide, and mass warfare were not only an outcome

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71 See Jochen Hung, Godella Weiss-Sussex, Geof Wilkes, eds., *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic* (Munich, 2012.).
of Nazi ideology but also a symptom of a much larger and more continuous “intellectual crisis of the present.”

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