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Daniel Gasman

Robert J. Richards' Toxic Scholarship on Ernst Haeckel: The University of Chicago Press Celebrates an Avatar of Nazism.

Historians who endorse Daniel Gasman's analysis of Haeckel are 'without scholarly scruple.'¹

Robert J. Richards

Robert Richards' biography of Haeckel claims to have breached one of philosophy's greatest stumbling blocks – the problem of the separation of mind and matter. For Richards, monism and dualism are no longer intrinsically irreconcilable but are, as he tells us, synchronistic in the tragic sense of life common to both Miguel de Unamuno and Ernst Haeckel. As seen in our review of Richards' book, and for those of us who still reside on planet Earth, the apparent identity offered by Richards of monism and dualism undermines credulity, and it is easy to see that Richards' principal hypothesis – that Haeckel had a tragic sense

¹ Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 449.

of life similar to that of Miguel de Unamuno – is hopelessly flawed, and his book’s factual matter so deeply at odds with reality that his analysis of Haeckel is instantaneously fathomed as meaningless. Unfettered from all intellectual constraints, Richards takes the liberty of unleashing ideas with reckless abandon and publicizing comments and purported details about Haeckel obtained apparently from self-indulgent thoughts that seem to course through his mind as the occasion dictates. And the same scandalous license has taken hold of most of the book’s reviewers [at least to date] who are only too willing to gambol about in Richards’ imaginary universe. Loathe to be confronted in his privileged academic sanctuary, Professor Richards’ response to my critical review of his biography has been to unleash a torrent of invective against me and to throw a number of tantrums,² yet declining to respond in any substantive way to my criticism; his silence a sure sign that the objections raised to his book are precisely on the mark. Richards is now boycotting ISAR and has pleaded with the director, Professor Barry Mehler to suppress my review – its ‘length being over the top,’ he complains.

Beyond what has been commented upon in our original review, additional sections of Richards’ book also add up to historical fiction and are variations on the theme of Holocaust denial – themes that have generated a number of ecstatic reviews that raise the question as to why a flawed and defective work would enjoy such an enthusiastic response from a handful of historians of science. If Richards’ book were simply a clumsy attempt to offer up some historical revisions there wouldn’t be much purpose in paying attention to it. What makes the book noteworthy and the intellectual stakes very high is the sensitivity of the subject matter and the damaging implications of Richards’ analysis: Nazism, the history of the Holocaust, racism, eugenics, and anti-Semitism; the substance of the history of science itself as well as the content of evolutionary thought are all

² In emails from Richards to the director of ISAR, Professor Barry Mehler.

detrimentally impacted by the content of the book. In its brief existence it has engendered widespread alarm by convincing a number of scholars that the history of Nazism has to be revised in the light of Richards' 'findings;' and that Ernst Haeckel must now be exonerated of any connection with Nazi ideology and genocide. Nothing could be further from the truth and I reiterate my challenge to Richards to either account for what appears to be highly distorted and fabricated material or failing that, that the University of Chicago Press disavow the erroneous and misleading material in the book, especially those extensive sections that, based on false premises, malevolently seek to discredit what I and many other historians have contributed to an understanding of the subject.

It is discouraging to realize that Richards' book is actually an anti-Semitic tract. It deliberately depicts one of the major anti-Semitic writers of modern times as a well intentioned friend of the Jews, thereby bewildering the history of anti-Semitism and ultimately the history of Nazism and the Holocaust. Richards does not deny the actual Holocaust, but his portrayal of Haeckel subverts what has already been established about its history and the origins of Nazism,³ thereby attempting to sabotage an understanding of the historical past that led up to the Nazi era. Richards' message is subtle, but nonetheless compelling: the enemies of the Jews are really their friends and consequently there is no clearly established history of Nazism that can serve as a guidepost to the past because historians have irresponsibly constructed a false narrative that has misled the public about the benevolent beliefs and intentions of Haeckel. In this way, reality is turned upside down by Richards, encouraging an Orwellian world of doublespeak and doublethink to gain the upper hand. Nineteenth century racism is benign, Haeckelian inspired racial eugenics are harmlessly theoretical, Haeckel's evolutionary science is without blemish, war means peace, mysticism means materialism, monism means dualism, a tragic sense

³ This is not to deny the need to constantly challenge established ideas and interpretations, but only to resist the use of doctored source material as occurs in the case of Richards.

of life rooted in dualism means pantheistic monist salvation, and anti-Semitism means philo-Semitism: and it is the confusion and contrarianism in all this that seems to nurture the imprudent scholarship of Richards. No one, he seems to conclude, can be pinpointed as responsible for Fascist ideology; the Second World War was a misunderstanding based on an unaccountable accident emanating from a world of confused cross purposes, or perhaps the end result of a capitalism that had run amok. Such free floating underground thoughts find favor with a host of reactionary [and revolutionary] individuals and political movements: Holocaust deniers, anti-Semites who mock Jewish memory of persecution, left and right-wing off-center political groups and organizations united in a common antipathy to the Jews, who blame them, as in the past, for all the ills of modern life; extreme German nationalists who wish to deny that National Socialism has for the most part specifically German roots, and lastly intellectuals who mourn the recent passing of East Germany where Haeckel had become an intellectual hero. Via these deceptive maneuvers an understanding of what really led up to the creation of the Third Reich is obscured and Richards and his sympathizers have hollowed out a cavernous realm that muffles any criticism of Haeckel and subverts legitimate historical analyses of Fascism.

It is of some significance that over a period of more than a century no one has argued that Haeckel was a philo-Semite except Richards himself.⁴ Haeckel's contemporaries and followers understood that he was irretrievably opposed to the Jewish presence in Germany and Haeckel's Monism was the inspiration for the avant garde version of *Mein Kampf* – the [*Campagne nationaliste*, 1903] written by the French proto-Nazi writer and disciple and translator into French of Haeckel, Jules Soury. The anti-Semitism of Georges Vacher de Lapouge was rooted in Monism, a program that inspired

⁴ The examples that Richards provides that purport to demonstrate Haeckel's philo-Semitism are not convincing as we have attempted to show in our previous 'Rejoinders.'

the Nazi racist authority at the University of Jena and member of the SS, Hans F.K. Günther who directly influenced Hitler, as well as the writings of a host of other anti-Semitic publicists like Wilhelm Marr, Raoul H. Francé, Georg Lanz von Liebenfels, Max Maurenbrecher and Heinrich Pudor, to name just a few – apart from contemporary devotees of Haeckel like the American anti-Semitic publicist David Duke, and other neo-Nazi groups, or Norman Lowell the leader of an Aryan supremacist organization located on the island of Malta and linked to Italian neo-fascism.

Richards Evaluates Daniel Gasman's Analysis of Haeckel

In our previous article we commented on the chameleon like approach to Haeckel and to historical writing in general adopted by Richards – shifting his point of view whenever he detects a need for dissimulation, a distasteful practice that surfaces in the section of his book devoted to discrediting my analysis of Haeckel. At the outset he mocks the emphasis I place on Haeckel's 'romanticism' at the expense of his 'materialism.' But, as Richards would say, this leaves one rather 'breathless,' given Richards' obsessive analysis of Haeckel that fixated precisely on his romantic roots. Throughout his career and across most of his book Richards has been at pains to glorify the romantic essence of Haeckel's science and philosophy – how he lived and breathed Goethean romanticism and *Naturphilosophie*. Now, in a madcap maneuver Richards shifts his argument 180 degrees. Gasman, Richards objects, offers a flawed analysis because he insists that Haeckel 'wallows in romanticism, not materialism;'⁵ Richards apparently now insisting that Haeckel is in fact a materialist. Just a few pages back, his main point was that Haeckel did in fact 'wallow in romanticism,' trumpeting Haeckel as a glorious exemplar of the creative power of German Idealism. Now the argument is thrown to the winds even at the expense of undermining his own position, hoping, one would suppose, that no one

⁵ Richards, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 448.

will notice the about face, or is Richards even aware of his own reversal of opinion?
[And, in fact, his sympathetic reviewers have given not the slightest hint of catching on to
the shift in perspective].

Richards does not really discuss my work or offer objections that can be substantiated, he tries to obliterate it – dismissing me as a malign influence having hoodwinked countless scholars about Haeckel’s ‘purported’ anti-Semitism and proto-Nazism. ‘Gasman,’ Richards opines, ‘adduced Haeckel’s “racism” as evidence of his crucial role in forming the biological concepts that oriented Nazi doctrine, especially what he took, with negligible evidence, to be Haeckel’s anti-Semitism....’⁶ Does this mean according to Richards that Haeckel was not a racist and an anti-Semite? But this would go against everything that Haeckel had written about the nature of human beings and society and also would undermine the acknowledgment of Richards that racism was endemic to nineteenth century biology. Can one in good faith describe Haeckel’s anti-Semitism as ‘negligible’ – far from it? Richards insists on this while meticulously deleting the abundant examples of Haeckel’s Aryan racism and anti-Semitism, sentiments that are cast across the whole spectrum of his writings and easily verifiable.

In addition to being a racist and having a firm commitment to Gobineau style Aryanism Haeckel was a proto-Nazi for a host of other reasons – all not mentioned or overlooked by Richards. Haeckel’s idiosyncratic Monist religion and social program corresponded to the principal ideological tenets of National Socialism and comprise a far-reaching Nazi like agenda. Haeckel originated an elaborate anti-Christian metaphysics, a theory of history that blamed the Jews for the weaknesses of Western Civilization, and a plethora of eugenic and social Darwinian ideas that served as the first comprehensive summary of Nazism in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. It was

⁶ Ibid

Haeckel who articulated what became the fundamental notion of Nazism, that politics is applied biology. Such contravening facts are purposefully passed over in Richards' account of Haeckel and his flawed analysis of history is rooted in his failure to comprehend the nature of the material he is concerned with.

Richards likewise mocks my assertion that Italian Fascism shows very clear influences of Haeckel's Monism, but he makes no effort to refute the extensive source material that supports my assertions – assuming that by simply stating an objection he can undo my hypotheses. He accuses me of mistakenly relying upon the 'fallacy of mono-causality: the attempt to explain complex historical phenomena by appeal to one simple cause.'⁷ But this is a baseless objection; it is not 'one simple cause' that I rely on as the explanation for Nazism and Fascism, but offer rather an analysis of a multitude of factors including a deconstruction of a complex ideology that has many ramifications. Richards makes no effort to summarize accurately what I am saying and avoids being candid about my writing, inevitably inviting censure for courting dishonesty.

Down this path of deception unfounded criticisms are adduced ad infinitum: 'Gasman's ... analysis impute[s] moral responsibility to Haeckel for the crimes of Hitler and the Nazis, injudiciously ignoring the tangle of social, political, religious, and economic causes that snaked through the interwar period to foster the rise of Hitler and his party. [He] also appear[s] to have been completely unaware that Nazi party officials rejected Haeckelian mechanistic materialism as having anything to do with *völkische Biologie*.'⁸ Apart from the self-contradictory and misleading reference again to Haeckel's 'materialism' and to Haeckel's *völkisch* affinities that he glaringly avoids mentioning elsewhere in his book [how can Richards then return to the main theme of his book:

⁷ Ibid, 449

⁸ Ibid

Haeckel's romanticism?], Richards might have reported more accurately that I do in fact point out in my *Scientific Origins of National Socialism* that the Nazis, from an Aryan perspective, rejected the idea of the animal origin of man and therefore Haeckel never became an official Nazi hero. That Richards discovered further confirmation of this in the anti-Haeckel rhetoric of some Nazi officials adds little to the discussion. But at the same time he also omits the whole gamut of Haeckel's influence over Heinrich Himmler,⁹ Josef Mengele,¹⁰ and the SS and the practice of Nazi genocide that we have discussed elsewhere. Richards tries to give the impression that he possesses a more satisfactory theory about the nature of Nazism and its origins, but in fact no relevant details are forthcoming and in the end his remarks add nothing new to the discussion; his thinking obviously devoid of fresh insights and like the intellectual hollowness endemic to other parts of his book he is unable to provide a reliable interpretation of the Nazi phenomenon and ideology.

Furthermore, it is misleading to assert that I neglect the complexities of German history that led up to Nazism. What I have done is to argue that Haeckel formulated a National Socialist like ideology more clearly than anyone else before World War I. That ideology carried over into the Nazi period. If the general historical situation had been more benign in Germany after World War I and during the Weimar Republic, it is quite likely that Nazism would not have come to power, but this in no way negates the proto-Nazi content of Haeckel's Monism. As we have pointed out many times, the fact that some Nazi officials rejected Haeckel's Monism does not mean that their historical analysis of the ideological origins of Nazism was correct. Some Nazi officials were not

⁹ Himmler drew upon the expertise of a number of members of the *Ernst Haeckel Gesellschaft* at the University of Jena for the implementation of Nazi racial programs.

¹⁰ Josef Mengele, at the end of his life, was known to have been studying the writings of Gerhard Heberer, a devoted follower of Haeckel and a member of the SS to which he was inducted directly by Heinrich Himmler, and belonged as well to the Nazi controlled *Ernst Haeckel Gesellschaft* during the war.

comfortable with the idea of the animal origin of man: they preferred the Aryans to have existed from time immemorial and to have arisen detached from the mundane laws of evolution. But in the broader scientific community which supported the Nazis, in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes, and in the SS itself such rejections of Haeckel played no role at all and did not negate the influence of his racism, anti-Semitism, mystical philosophy of biology, and eugenics that had a key role in carrying out The Final Solution and other destructive Nazi racial programs.

Richards lambastes those historians and scholars who have concurred with what I have written of acting ‘without scholarly scruple. Stephen Jay Gould immediately endorsed it.’¹¹ But this is an incredible accusation and Gould of course is no longer in a position to defend himself. After what has been exposed as misrepresentations and fabrications on his part, Richards is about the last person in the world who should be raising the question of ‘scholarly scruples.’ What would be the motivation of Gould to adopt, according to Richards, a totally mistaken view of Haeckel? ‘After reading Gasman,’ Richards explains the point and complains, ‘[Gould] felt compelled to denigrate the German’s science at almost every turn.’¹² In other words, I have played the role of the ultimate Svengali and corrupted Gould’s thinking. Should I be flattered about the possession of such magically manipulative powers or just offer sympathy to a hopelessly confused and malevolently driven writer? I never met Gould, but it is apparent from all I knew about him he would have been the unlikeliest of individuals to have allowed himself to fall under the spell of another person. For Richards, to criticize Haeckel is by definition to fall into error, but it is Richards who is in error because Gould’s and my own criticisms and evaluations of Haeckel remain entirely valid in the absence of any substantiated refutations on the part of Richards. Not only Gould, but

¹¹ Richards, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 449.

¹² Ibid 451

many other historians of science like Jacques Roger and Peter Bowler, for example, also concluded that Haeckel's biology is vastly different from that of Darwin: have they also fallen under my spell? Richards' allegations are ludicrous, and there is no palpable justification for his manifestly libelous comment: 'The collective efforts of Gasman, Gould, and [Michael K.] Richardson have continued to keep Haeckel's accomplishments in the sulfurous regions of sinister thought.'¹³ The only 'sinister' ideas floating around are those of Richards himself who seems to be in touch with a 'sulfurous' underworld as he falls short of exposing erroneous science and deliberately turns a blind eye to Haeckel's undeniable anti-Semitism and proto-Nazi brainstorming.

Richards' Historiographical Blunders

Unless, therefore, one is constantly on guard, it is easy to be blindsided by Richards' self-assured tone and deceptive writing. Richards martial's up complex stratagems and elaborate historiographical subterfuges to deceive the reader into believing that Haeckel was not anti-Semitic, that in fact, he was an admirer and friend of the Jews; but this takes rather creative trickery because virtually all of Haeckel's comments about Jews are derogatory, so Richards has to toil in overdrive to falsify his evidence and construct an illegitimate methodology to achieve the desired end. According to Richards, the fact that Haeckel lived in close proximity to some Berlin Jewish neighborhoods, or travelled to exotic parts of the world where he interacted with Jews, or met some Jews in medical school or rubbed shoulders with them in scientific gatherings, is advanced as an indication that Haeckel was an admirer of the Jews – Richards, in other words, intentionally juxtaposing unrelated facts in order to reach a predetermined but misleading and erroneous conclusion.

¹³ Ibid, 452

‘The Berlin of [Haeckel’s] student years,’ Richards writes, ‘had a significant Jewish population, with a high concentration not far from the university along *Oranienburgerstrasse*, where Eduard Knoblauch’s magnificent New Synagogue was begun in 1859; and the medical school at Würzburg also had a few Jewish students, whom Haeckel knew. Further, he came into intimate association with Berber and Jewish merchants and intellectuals during his excursions along the coast of Morocco in the spring of 1867’¹⁴ – all this cited by Richards to suggest that Haeckel had a harmonious and admiring interaction with Jews.

But based simply on this information how does Richards know what was actually going on in Haeckel’s mind? The fact that Haeckel traversed Jewish neighborhoods or lived in their vicinity or even befriended some Jews, tells us nothing one way or another about Haeckel’s feelings or deeper sentiments. In fact, in his interview with Hermann Bahr that we discussed in our previous essay, Haeckel looked with contempt on that part of Jewry that derived from Eastern Europe. If he chanced upon any eastern European Jews in Berlin he undoubtedly would have viewed them with the same feelings of disgust that he voiced in the Bahr Interview. And if Haeckel spotted a Synagogue, most likely he would not have admired it, but hoped based on Monist religious principles, for its demise. The fact that the Synagogue itself was an imposing building conveys, in the way Richards presents his material, the false impression that Haeckel appreciated in a positive way its spiritually artistic and religious significance – a patently false and unjustifiable conclusion. The misleading positioning of such material does not meet even the most elementary standards of objective historical analysis and the need for a responsible alignment and interpretation of evidence.

¹⁴ Richards, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 246.

In regard to Haeckel's contact with Jews during his travels, Richards assures us that 'undoubtedly Haeckel's firsthand experience with Jews and Berbers led to his positive estimation of their development.'¹⁵ However, there is nothing that Richards adduces historically to back up this claim. In fact, and this is omitted by Richards, whatever Haeckel said about the Jews on his travels had a decidedly anti-Semitic content to it. What Richards does not report were Haeckel's descriptions of Jews during his travels as a 'crafty' people addicted to money.¹⁶ Or, as Haeckel described the Jews in the *Riddle of the Universe*: "'The characteristics which distinguish [Christ's] high and noble personality, and which give a distinct impress to his religion, are certainly not Semitical; they are rather features of the higher Arian [sic!] race.'"¹⁷ Or as Haeckel indicated in his discussion with Hermann Bahr, anti-Semitism was a positive historical movement and that the Jews were alone responsible for their own persecution and he explicitly demanded their disappearance from German life.

Even when Richards lists examples of individual Jews Haeckel befriended his inexcusable lack of adequate research is manifest. For example, Richards makes much of Haeckel's acquaintance with Magnus Hirschfeld, the Monist researcher into the nature of Homosexuality and the founder of the Monist science of Sexology. For Richards, Haeckel's friendship with Hirschfeld is proof of Haeckel's philo-Semitism. But in this regard Richards lacks a satisfactory grasp of what Hirschfeld actually stood for personally and ideologically. Hirschfeld was a deeply conflicted individual whose historical role actually serves to confirm Monism's links with Nazism, rather than an

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ As Haeckel wrote: 'the Jews among us have absorbed large sums of money;' or, 'the Jews in Europe being enterprising, calculating, and even crafty with a special aptitude for money matters.' Ernst Haeckel, *A Visit to Ceylon*, New York: Eckler, 1881, 52, 89. Even as a young student Haeckel exhibited strong anti-Jewish sentiments. In 1853 he wrote to his parents from Würzburg that an 'insolent Jew boy' a 'disgusting insolent person' was injured in a duel. Haeckel went on to write that his 'very nice' gentile friends 'slashed his Jewish face about handsomely, without receiving even a scratch in return.' Ernst Haeckel, *The Story of a Development of a Youth*, New York: Harper, 1923, 83.

¹⁷ Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004, 157. [1971]

individual who symbolizes Haeckel's philo-Semitism. To be sure, Hirschfeld was violently persecuted by the Nazis and forced into exile because he was both Jewish and the publicly prominent director of the famous Institute of Sexology, a facility condemned and dismantled by the Nazis. At the same time, in exile in France, until his death in 1938, and even with the experience of his own abuse at the hands of the Nazis in fresh memory, Hirschfeld continued to view the nature of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in highly sympathetic and hopeful terms. He evaluated these regimes above all, in the context of his Haeckelian inspired radical racial eugenics and Monism. Hirschfeld praised Mussolini for attempting to foster a fascist biological elite and looked approvingly to the Nazis whom he hoped would put into practice the eugenic measures advocated by Haeckel's Monist movement. Hirschfeld, in other words, provides confirmation of the links between Haeckel and Nazi ideology, rather than someone who exemplifies Haeckel's broadmindedness and tolerance for Jews. Hirschfeld himself repudiated any personal Jewish ties and turned his back on the travails of the Jewish community. His Jewish identity was for all intents and purposes non-existent and therefore Richards' attempt to conjure up Hirschfeld to validate Haeckel's philo-Semitism is a further example of Richards' research gone badly awry.

Richards Manipulates Evidence of Haeckel's Eugenics

In our previous review we noted that a particularly reprehensible component of Richards' analysis of Haeckel resided in his denial of Haeckel's eugenics program, and a few additional words should be said about this because of its importance. Haeckel, Richards asserts, despite all evidence to the contrary, was not prepared to carry out Nazi-like eugenic policies: 'There is no evidence that Haeckel seriously advocated, as a workable policy, the kind of eugenic practice he mentioned. He places his faith in the

corrective hand of natural selection!’¹⁸ But this statement is pure fabrication on the part of Richards because Haeckel actively sponsored the need for direct state intervention in carrying out eugenic programs. For example, as Haeckel clearly stated: “We are not bound,” he wrote, “under all circumstances to maintain and prolong life, even when it becomes utterly useless.” He complained that “hundreds of thousands of incurables – lunatics, lepers, people with cancer etc. – are artificially kept alive ... without the slightest profit to themselves or the general body.” He suggested that the number of insane and incurably ill was steadily on the increase and therefore not only was eugenic action necessary for the protection of future generations but the present population of the diseased had to be eliminated. He thus advocated the setting up of a commission which would decide on matters of life and death for the ill and the deformed. Upon a decision of the commission the “redemption from evil” should be accomplished by a dose of some painless and rapid poison.’¹⁹

It is thus clear, and in contradiction to all available sources, that Richards, despite his protests to the contrary, masks the fact that Haeckel explicitly supported the idea of the deliberate physical elimination of the unfit: that the laws of nature had to be applied directly to the way in which the state was organized, a program bearing an unmistakable parallel to the actual eugenic practices of Nazism and not left at all to the unregulated effect of Natural Selection. “Was it not,” Haeckel wrote, only a “traditional dogma,” for life to be sustained under all circumstances. The Spartans, he believed were absolutely correct in their practice of the elimination of infants born weak or with biological defects.’²⁰ And Dr. Wilhelm Schallmayer, a prominent Monist whom the Nazis honored posthumously as a pioneer in the creation of racial eugenics stated proudly that the

¹⁸ Richards, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 327.

¹⁹ Gasman, *Scientific Origins*, 95.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 91

contribution Haeckel made to politics was that he ‘did not shrink’ from advocating the application of racial eugenics to the solution of the problems of mankind.²¹ Richards’ account, therefore, of what Haeckel actually advocated for society in terms of eugenics remains firmly in the realm of historical fiction.

Likewise it is pure fabrication on the part of Richards to maintain that Haeckel was laodicean, not wishing any political conclusions to be drawn from his scientific work, even if Haeckel himself occasionally voiced such self-serving comments which were not to be taken at face value. ‘As against the likes both of Virchow and Bebel, one must, however, carefully consider Haeckel’s ultimate conclusion about the positive political implications of evolutionary theory – namely, that there were none!’²² There is not a shred of truth in this statement simply because Haeckel demanded literally from the start of his career that politics is applied biology and there are multitudes of demands that Haeckel and his followers made for the political, religious, and scientific regeneration of society based on Haeckelian biological principles. Despite Richards’ assurances, Haeckel always believed that his evolutionary ideas had a religious and a political mission to perform – so as to racially strengthen the German state. And even Richards himself concedes that after 1900 Haeckel increasingly did spell out political demands, thus contradicting his earlier comment that Haeckel did not apply the ideas of Monist evolution to politics.²³

Richards goes on to paint a benevolent picture of Haeckel’s social programs, a person who was really anti-militaristic and who objected to war based on an ethical commitment that derived from his morally charged eugenic principles: ‘Haeckel regarded the bloodlust of the military as running contrary to natural processes; they

²¹ Ibid, 92

²² Richards, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 327.

²³ Ibid

relied on the better revolver instead of the better brain.’²⁴ The idea that scientific biological selection was the preferred method to improve society was a belief common in Haeckelian inspired Social Darwinist literature, but does not substantiate the purported ethical values that Richards wishes to attribute to that belief, i.e., that Haeckel was absolutely opposed to war and that his eugenics did not constitute a grave moral hazard. In fact, Haeckel supported strong military action to create a greater German Empire based on Aryan considerations in addition to supporting the need for rational racial eugenic measures to strengthen German society at home. He might have preferred the elimination of the unfit through eugenics as preferable to war, but he did not also shrink from military solutions to Germany’s need for Empire both on the European continent and across Africa and Asia. And contrary to his own descriptions of himself, Haeckel was hardly a pacifist – advocating the forceful acquisition of colonies in competition with the French and English and becoming one of the founders of the imperialistic and deeply anti-Semitic Pan-German League.²⁵ As I pointed out in my *Scientific Origins*: ‘Imperialism, Haeckel contended, was only a natural consequence of the “struggle for existence” among the nations and the sooner the Germans realized how “vulnerable” their “geographical position” was in Europe, the sooner would they understand that the acquisition of colonies was a “question of life itself.”’²⁶

Such examples of Richards’ capricious and fraudulent evaluations of Haeckel have not been detected or commented upon by his reviewers – and innumerable similar assessments of Haeckel by Richards are still stacked up in the wings – suggesting clearly that his book still calls for further objective scholarly scrutiny.

²⁴ Ibid, 232

²⁵ Gasman, *Scientific Origins*, 128.

²⁶ Ibid

Richards' Reviewers

The quality of writing to date among reviewers who are ecstatic about Richards' book gives the overwhelming impression that critical insight into the validity of his work is seriously lacking. The noted historian of science, for example, Michael Ruse, has been among the first to evaluate Richards' book.²⁷ The fact that his comments are favorable to Richards – a 'magnificent biography' – should come as no surprise since Ruse and Richards are often collaborators academically and share a common outlook on Haeckel, especially in regard to contesting Haeckel's relationship with National Socialism. Ruse, as a prolific writer on evolutionary subjects frequently portrays himself as a stalwart defender of the integrity of science. Yet, his review of Richards' book is replete with error and his defense of Richards' work reveals unacceptable blunders when measured against the accepted norms of historical analysis, and the fact that all too frequently Richards' book is apparently fabricated has escaped his scrutiny.

Writing in *The Lancet*, an on-line medical journal, Ruse, apparently in a jovial mood, makes his pitch that not only Creationists, but 'some prominent evolutionists' have leveled the 'charge that Haeckel was a racist, lousy scientist, and a fraud to boot.' Ruse, rather, accepts Richards' countervailing evaluation of Haeckel that he was an impressive scientist and did much for evolution – points not really in dispute – but also accepting Richards' rejection of Haeckel's connection with National Socialism – a position that seems to confirm that Ruse is woefully untutored in German history, National Socialist ideology, and European cultural and political history in general. In posing as an authority on these subjects, Ruse does the history of science a great disservice because each confirming statement he offers in agreement with Richards can be shown to be either historically incorrect or at best, historically naive.

²⁷ Michael Ruse, 'A Reappraisal of Ernst Haeckel,' *The Lancet*, 373(9665), 28 February 2009, 711-712.

Ruse repeats the distortions of Richards' account of the Haeckel-Virchow controversy 'over whether or not evolutionary ideas should be taught in state-school classrooms.' Ruse takes the dispute to be straightforwardly a conflict over the teaching of evolution in schools run by the state. As we have noted in our previous review Virchow objected not so much to the idea of evolution, but to Haeckel's problematic understanding of evolution and his insistence that Monism be turned into a state sponsored religion – Ruse not mentioning any part of this story.

In fact, Ruse has nothing to say about Monism and its meaning for Haeckel – especially that it should replace Christianity. Consequently, it is a distortion for Ruse to argue that Haeckel was simply fighting against conventional religion in the interests of securing victory for the 'secular, post-Enlightenment forces that science represented.' Haeckel, in fact, rejected many of the assumptions of typical Enlightenment thought like political freedom and social equality and promulgated a mystical religion that would have been at odds with the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

But it is, above all, Ruse's defense of Richards' denial of a connection between Haeckel and Nazism that should give one pause. 'The charges of being a proto-Nazi are wrong to the point of being ludicrous,' Ruse knowingly assures us. 'Haeckel, like almost everyone else in the 19th century (including Darwin), stand indicted of racism as judged by today's standards. Like many others from this period, one can find eugenical sentiments in Haeckel's writings.' But these dismissive lines from Ruse are highly misleading: to say that because racism was commonplace in the nineteenth century and therefore of no relevance for the subsequent history of National Socialism is a specious argument. It was 19th century racism that provided the foundation for National Socialism. But it is also important to remember that there were degrees and varieties of racism: Haeckel was an adherent of a particularly radical form of Aryanism and was obsessed

with the critical importance of race for defining German national identity infinitely beyond what was typical for many other biologists including Darwin. Haeckel accepted the racial myths of Count Gobineau and was in agreement with and indeed inspired the proto-Nazi racism of figures like Georges Vacher de Lapouge. This information has apparently not yet reached Ruse. In addition, it is not a question of eugenics in general that applies to Haeckel but rather his elaboration of a comprehensive program for eugenic state action which became a major contributing factor for Nazism. Ruse has apparently never examined the incriminating material in the Monist journals and in general his remarks reveal inadequate knowledge about the history of German eugenics and the ideological foundations of Nazism.

Ruse goes on to comment that ‘anyone who believes in natural selection, and Haeckel did, believes in the struggle for existence.’ But the attempt once again to submerge Haeckel in the general notion of struggle in the nineteenth century and thereby discredit his specific links to Nazism will not pass muster. For Haeckel the struggle for existence was raised to the level of a clearly defined ideology of world- wide racial struggle between superior Aryans and other inferior races and groups, thus presaging Nazi ideology.

And lastly Ruse seems to be as inventive as Richards in claiming possession of unique information that professes to debunk any connection between Haeckel and Nazism. ‘But *Lebensraum* is not to be found in [Haeckel’s] works,’ Ruse informs us with the unassailable rigor of scientific authority – a hard to digest and egregious error, coming as it does from a respected academic figure. As we have pointed out, Haeckel was among the strongest advocates for the creation of a Germanic world-wide Empire, and demanded that the Second Reich contest the British Empire for world domination. Perhaps Ruse would care to inform his readers how he became privy to the knowledge

that the demand for *Lebensraum* does not appear in Haeckel's writings: this certainly would be a startling revelation in Haeckel scholarship, especially given Haeckel's leading role in the racially imperialistic Pan-German League.

Ruse, of course, is not alone in his veneration of Richards. Like Ruse, Lynn Nyhart, a historian of science specializing in the history of nineteenth century German biology also dismisses with great fervor any connection between Haeckel and Nazism.²⁸ Not surprisingly, she lauds Richards' book as a significant addition to the literature on Haeckel and the history of biology. She claims to speak for 'most historians' when she writes: 'Haeckel has also been accused of promoting European fascism via his monistic philosophy and of presenting a eugenic, biologically deterministic vision of humanity that led to Hitler's "final solution."' But Nyhart rejects such an idea with great confidence. 'Can one scientist be responsible for so much? Most historians would say no, arguing that it takes a community, rather than an individual to make a movement; that single-cause explanations are insufficient to account for something as broad as fascism; and that an individual cannot be held responsible for the ways in which others (such as Hitler) took up his ideas and molded them to new agendas after his death.'²⁹

Nyhart has obviously imbibed all the spurious arguments of Richards denying Haeckel's proto-Nazism and that his death before the advent of the Nazi era immunizes him from responsibility for Nazism. However, it is noteworthy that Richards himself says something quite different about Haeckel's influence over the cultural and scientific consciousness of his age, thoughts echoed by his publisher: 'Richards convincingly demonstrates the enormous impact Haeckel had on biology and larger scientific affairs

²⁸ Lynn K. Nyhart, 'Making German Evolution: Translation and Tragedy,' *Science Magazine*, Vol. 323, 27 February 2009, 1170-1171.

²⁹ There is an uncanny resemblance between the mindset underlying Professor Nyhart's argument that Haeckel could not have carried out such a widespread revolution in thought based simply on his own influence and the fallacious calculus frequently employed by Holocaust deniers that the Nazis lacked the technical ability and equipment to undertake the Final Solution on such an obsessive scale that claimed millions of victims.

during the last half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century,' the book's jacket enticingly informs us in direct contradiction with Nyhart's hasty assertions. Nor does Richard's text seem to suggest that my ideas have been rejected by most historians. On the contrary, Richards is careful to list a host of historians whom, he regrets, have mistakenly lent their support to my ideas, while at the same time is only able to conjure up just two writers who have assumed an opposing position. Despite what Nyhart asserts, therefore, Haeckel did not work in isolation from the rest of society: his books were for many decades bestsellers and the Monist movement which he founded was internationally prominent; Nyhart apparently has never heard of the German Monist League. Haeckel's influence over Marxist Social Democracy was also vitally important throughout Europe and had the tendency to transform Marxian ideas into Fascist programs, and such ideas literally reached millions of workers and many other members of the educated middle classes. It was not Haeckel as an isolated individual who was responsible for the formulation of Nazi-like programs, but the result rather of the enormous cultural forces that his scientific and political ideas unleashed across the spectrum of European intellectual and political life.

The repetition by Nyhart of Richards' absurd idea that Haeckel passed from the scene before the coming of Hitler and therefore cannot be held accountable for Nazi ideology and practice is an idea that we have discounted in our previous essay and one can only register astonishment at the reiteration of such a preposterous notion. Haeckel died in 1919 and was intellectually and politically active until his death. National Socialist ideology was generated precisely at the same time, during the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. Haeckel's Monism and the publications of the German Monist League which he founded clearly articulated a National Socialist like program as a direct outgrowth of the application of his ideas. And this is true not only in Germany

but also in France and Italy and other countries as well. Professor Nyhart appears not to be familiar with the diffusion of Haeckel's ideas and her remarks seem to suggest a profound lack of knowledge about the subjects she holds such strong opinions about. Does Professor Nyhart wish to argue that Karl Marx or Charles Darwin, for example, had no influence over the twentieth century: after all they died in the nineteenth century. Or is it only Haeckel, among all the other famous people in the history of the world who is in the unenviable position of not being privileged enough to exercise some influence after his death?

Finally, one must say that the limits of scholarly discourse are severely tested when Professor Nyhart claims that Richards writes 'responsibly' about Haeckel, implying of course that historians who link Haeckel with National Socialism labor irresponsibly: in itself an unjustifiable and irresponsible claim.

Lastly, similar enthusiastic sentiments about the qualities of Richards' biography are voiced by another historian of science, Sander Gliboff, who is unrelenting in his praise of Richards, and just as consistently in error as Michael Ruse and Lynn Nyhart when it comes to evaluating Richards' biography.³⁰ For Gliboff, Richards' book 'provides not only a biography of the controversial German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), but also an important piece of the emerging picture of the Darwinian Revolution in its international and intergenerational dimensions.' For Gliboff, Richards 'dispassionately dissects the accumulated mass of negative literature [about Haeckel] to expose its errors and ideological biases.' But, as we have seen, the errors seem to be on Richards' side and Gliboff in his enthusiasm for Richards is apparently uncomprehending about what constitutes legitimate historical analysis and material.

³⁰ Sander Gliboff, 'Love, Death and Darwinism,' *American Scientist*, 97(1), January-February 2009, 68.

Not surprisingly, for Gliboff, Richards successfully refutes the false view of Haeckel ‘opening the door to Hitler or otherwise inspiring Nazi ideology’ and praises Richards for his ability to call our attention to all ‘sorts of cautionary tales for both factual and methodological reasons.’ Haeckel, Gliboff asserts, but in total error, that ‘by 19th century standards, Haeckel’s views on race were moderate, and in particular, he had an unusually high opinion of Jews.’ Furthermore, the ‘Nazis themselves repudiated Haeckel and banned his books. And considering everything else that had to go wrong in Germany to result in the Holocaust – the complex of social, psychological and political developments that serious historians have been analyzing for half a century – it makes no sense to single out a 19th century scientific writer as a crucial factor.’ One wonders if Gliboff would object to naming Karl Marx as instrumental in the creation of the ideology of modern socialism, since he too can be ‘singled out’ as a writer, who lived, at times relatively obscurely, in the 19th century. Such an assertion would seem an absurdity and is no less an absurdity when applied to Haeckel.

Gliboff concludes his review with more unstinting praise for Richards: ‘By defending Haeckel from the excesses of his critics and bringing out the personal side of his science, this book marks a major rehabilitation of Haeckel as a mainstream Darwinian, and a full-blooded one at that.’ Gliboff views himself as a pacifying voice, helping to mitigate, if not completely dissolve the sense of difference that, before World War II, came to demarcate German science from the traditions of the West.³¹ Despite Gliboff’s criticism of the purported ideological biases that have resulted in criticism of Haeckel, there are actually even more disturbing ideological undertones to Gliboff’s efforts. What Gliboff

³¹ See Sander Gliboff, *H.G. Bronn, Ernst Haeckel, and the Origins of German Darwinism*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008. The assertions of Professor Gliboff about the overlapping parallels between the thought and science of Darwin and Haeckel seem to show a disturbing lack of familiarity with the actual writings of Haeckel and with the publications of the German Monist and Social Darwinist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

has to say about Haeckel is hardly based on verifiable evidence, but rather on uncritical acceptance of the glaring myths about Haeckel that Richards has wantonly disseminated that seem to appeal to a certain fashionable, but highly distorted mindset among a number of professors of the history of science. The question that should be raised about Gliboff's analysis is why he considers it vital to labor so assiduously to integrate Germany and Haeckel into the fold of Western history and to resolve the differences between Haeckel and Darwin. Since no authentic reconciliation is actually possible between the Haeckelian and Darwinian worlds such attempts can only lead to failure, but at the expense of an accurate portrayal of evolutionary thought and by morally and factually distorting the meaning of World War II and the Holocaust. For the moment, however, Gliboff might wish to concentrate simply on getting his facts straight about Haeckel, and this certainly will not be possible if he continues to rely upon Richards' account. In its current form, Gliboff's interpretation of Haeckel remains as much a threat to the integrity of the history of science, as do the outlandish theories of Creationism and Intelligent Design.

Postscript

Richards' efforts to rehabilitate Haeckel and to discredit my work, has recently surfaced again with the republication of an essay that originally appeared on the Internet about Haeckel's 'alleged' links with National Socialism and anti-Semitism.³² The essay repeats the same errors and analytical blunders that are apparent in Richards' biography of Haeckel. I took the occasion, on the release of the essay, to point out its defects to the editor of the volume where the article appears, Professor Ronald Numbers of the University of Wisconsin. There has not been a reply and I would hazard a guess that none

³² Robert J. Richards, 'That Darwin and Haeckel were Complicit in Nazi Biology,' in Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *Galileo Goes to Jail*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009, 170-177

will be forthcoming. Apparently it is not a problem for a leading American historian of science to sponsor fabricated material.

Of more interest, though, was the response to my concerns from Michael Fisher, the editor in chief of Harvard University Press, the publisher of the article. I advised Mr. Fisher that there is every reason to believe that the article is based on misrepresented material and I enclosed a translation of the Bahr Interview with Haeckel on the Jews to illustrate my concerns. The following is part of what he wrote back and his response should make us all fearful about the future of academic publishing where apparently accuracy and truth are no longer considered to be criteria for publication with Harvard University Press: 'The subject matter, as with many of the chapters in this book, is fraught with controversy because variant selection or interpretation of facts and source material can lead to different conclusions. However, the contributor, Robert Richards, has used appropriate citation in this chapter ... to support his opinions and argument.'

I am intrigued to learn that it is no longer necessary to verify the accuracy of source material for articles or books that are published by Harvard University Press, but rather that anyone should feel free to use whatever material is at hand even if it apparently cannot be validated. This clarification is from Michael Fisher, the Harvard University Press Editor-in-Chief and Executive Editor in Science and Medicine.