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Equality and difference in National Socialist racism

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This essay aims to shed light on the conceptual couple 'equality' and 'difference' by looking from a historian's point of view at National Socialism in Germany. Two implications of this approach are particularly important. First, the crucial core of National Socialism and its crimes was racism, in both theory and practice. In this context, therefore, 'equality' and 'difference' concern not only gender relations, but also race relations, and the groups that were discriminated against on racial grounds included both women and men. Second, while racism was not confined to National Socialism or Germany, but was an international phenomenon, National Socialism carried all forms of racism to unprecedented extremes. This was possible because National Socialism politicized racism by extending it from the social to the political sphere, transforming it into race policy; and where 'politics are centred around the concept of race, the Jews will be at the centre of hostility'.¹ Racism was from the beginning institutionalized within the state, so that measures ranging from the legislative to the bureaucratic could be marshalled in support of the persecution of Jews and the policy of compulsory sterilization, beginning in 1933, and ultimately in support of the massacres which started six years later. The following reflections will therefore be concerned with the political sphere and with this pair of issues—racist sterilization and racist massacre—which were forms of compulsory intervention in the body and in life. To put them in perspective, I will first outline some of the current opinions held by historians and non-historians on the topic of women and National Socialism, particularly those regarding gender difference and gender equality. In the second section of the essay I shall deal with various gender dimensions of National Socialist policies on

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procreation and welfare, and in the third with some gender dimensions of National Socialist genocide.

VISIONS OF WOMEN AND NATIONAL SOCIALISM

According to one opinion, National Socialism favoured women. A first version of this view holds that, before 1933, 'equality' was emphasized, particularly by the women's movement, 'difference' was played down, and having children was scorned. National Socialism is supposed to have made child-bearing respectable again, to have rewarded mothers and upgraded the family, to have promoted not an illusory and undesirable 'equality' of women with men but their 'equal value'. Another version of the same position underlines a different link between the earlier women's movement and Nazi gender policies. The former supported women's distinctiveness and 'separate sphere', the centrality of maternity and demands for the improvement of the situation of mothers; National Socialism is said to have taken over this radical feminist programme.² A further and influential version argued that, regardless of countervailing ideologies, National Socialism produced for women 'a new status of relative if unconventional equality'. Women experienced improved job opportunities and rising wages and benefited from social policies related to maternity; their loss of political status did not differ from the same loss as experienced by men.³

A second opinion, for many years the prevailing one among feminists and non-feminists alike, evokes a similar picture but evaluates it differently, seeing it not as pro-women, but as anti-women. It deplores the fact that, before 1933, the women's movement had proclaimed the value of motherhood, corporal as well as spiritual, and argues that National Socialism adopted largely the same view. National Socialism is thus interpreted as having valorized motherhood in both moral and material terms, thereby reducing women to mothers. This is held to have been achieved in several ways: by the use of propaganda, by incentives such as child allowances and various other subsidies given to mothers, and by coercive means (*Gebärzwang*) such as firing women *en masse* from their jobs, excluding them from the universities, outlawing birth-control, tightening up the anti-abortion law and vastly increasing the number of convictions for abortion. These measures, designed to keep women out of the labour-force and to encourage them to bear as

many children as possible, are seen as constituting a policy of extreme pro-natalism and a cult of motherhood, which are in turn interpreted as the essential and distinctive features of National Socialist sexism and of the regime's victimization of women.

Both these opinions are problematic, particularly with respect to the issues of maternity and female 'difference'. Their proponents often confuse propaganda with actual policies, take account of only selected parts of this propaganda and misrepresent historical facts. For example, the National Socialist image of women limited them much less to a 'separate sphere', to motherhood and housewifery, than, for instance, the image of women dominant in the United States of the 1930s.⁴ Despite a number of Nazi and non-Nazi voices in 1933–4, women were not fired *en masse* during the National Socialist era and the number of employed women increased, particularly in the industrial labour-force and among married mothers. The decline in the number of women university students was not so much due to the regime's intervention as to economic developments—except for the exclusion of Jews of both sexes.⁵ Financial incentives were paid not to women, but to men. The number of convictions for abortion did not increase, but decreased by one-sixth by comparison with the Weimar Republic period.⁶

Most important, however, is the fact that millions of women and men under the National Socialist regime were discouraged from having children at all. The National Socialist state did not abolish birth-control, but took it over. In 1933, prior to the introduction of any pro-natalist measures, it introduced a law ordering compulsory sterilization of those considered to be of 'inferior value', thus embarking on a policy of anti-natalism. This anti-natalist policy was designed to improve the 'quality' of the population, to bring about 'race regeneration' and 'racial uplift' (*rassische Aufartung*). In 1933–4, an enormous propaganda campaign attempted to render this policy popular, and around one and a half million people were officially declared to be 'unworthy of procreating' (*fortpflanzungsunwürdig*). In 1935, abortion on medical and eugenic grounds was included in the sterilization law. In the same year, two laws introduced marriage prohibitions, one against marriages between Jews and non-Jews, the other between the eugenically 'inferior' and other (non-sterilized) Germans, with the aim of preventing 'racially inferior' offspring. From 1939 on, this anti-natalist policy receded into the background as mass murder and genocide took over. The female among the victims of these policies include otherwise very diverse groups. Between 1933 and 1945, almost 200 000 women

were sterilized on eugenic grounds, one per cent of those of child-bearing age. The number of those prevented from marrying is as yet unknown. From 1933, about 200 000 German Jewish women were exiled, and after 1941 almost 100 000 of them were killed. From 1939, probably over 80 000 female inmates of mostly psychiatric institutions were killed, including all those who were Jewish. Over two million foreign women performed forced labour during the war, and hundreds of thousands of them had to undergo involuntary abortions and sterilizations. Several million non-German Jewish women were killed in the massacres during World War II, as were an unknown number of other women, mostly gypsies and Slavs.

In view of these figures and policies concerning the female victims of National Socialist racism, the assertion that the essence and distinctiveness of National Socialist policy towards women consisted in 'pro-natalism and a cult of motherhood' must be called into question. Equally problematic is the further assertion, common to both the opinions I have outlined, that in the National Socialist state gender relations were based not on 'equality' but on 'difference' between the sexes and that men and women were treated differently. On the one hand, within the groups that were racially discriminated against, both men and women of the racially discriminated groups were considered to be 'alien' and 'different' (*anders, fremd, artfremd*); they were treated as 'unequal' and above all as 'inferior' (*minderwertig*). On the other hand, both men and women of the racially privileged groups were considered and treated as 'equal' (*gleich, gleichartig, artgleich*) and above all as 'superior' (*wertvoll*). The race theorists of National Socialism held gender relations, and specifically conceptions of 'equality' and 'difference', to be different in different ethnic groups. Thus in their view only the women of 'superior' ethnic groups were 'different' from men and fit to occupy 'separate spheres'. The 'inferior' women and men, by contrast, whether Jews, blacks, or gypsies, were held to display 'sexual levelling' (*sexuelle Applanation*). According to one of these authors, 'the division into manly and womanly characteristics is a specific feature of the Nordic race, so that this race most purely embodies the manly and womanly essence', and Nordic men and women 'differ more sharply from each other' than the men and the women of other races.⁷ Finally, and most importantly, National Socialist policy-makers by no means treated 'racially inferior' women 'differently' from the men of their groups, but 'equally'. Both men and women became victims of forced sterilization, forced

labour, and massacre. For these women, there was no 'separate sphere'.

In order to revise prevailing opinions, we must include and place at the centre of our analysis racism both as theory and as practice. However, when we turn to research on National Socialist racism, on anti-Jewish and anti-gypsy policies, and on sterilization and euthanasia, we usually find that any discussion of gender relations is conspicuously absent.⁸ Occasionally, we even find eminent historians of the genocide supporting, without any qualification, the view that 'women's emancipation' was considerably accelerated under the National Socialist regime.⁹ Moreover, we find in this body of scholarship another common opinion which argues or implies that, in the context of National Socialist racism, the issue of women and gender relations is irrelevant or even inadmissible, because, on the one hand, not 'all women' became victims of National Socialist racism and, on the other, both men and women were equally its victims, numerically as well as in virtue of the equal treatment they received at its hands.¹⁰ Racist policies, it is sometimes said, were not directed against women; their female victims became victims not 'as women', but irrespective of their sex, as gender-neutral members of certain racial groups. Yet the view that women's history is irrelevant to the history of racism is merely the obverse of the opinions already mentioned, which imply that the history of racism is irrelevant to the history of women. It condemns half the victims of racism to historical invisibility. But it also poses a series of questions: Does 'gender equality' or 'equal treatment' of the sexes among the victims actually mean gender neutrality? What has 'equality' come to mean in this context? Would a focus on the female victims of racism be legitimate only if all or most of its victims had been female, or if all women had been its victims (instead of a minority of hundreds of thousands of German and millions of non-German women), or if victimized women had been treated differently from victimized men?

There have indeed been attempts to overcome the limitations inherent in so much recent scholarship and to link women's history to National Socialist race policy and genocide. One resulting view focuses not on the female victims of National Socialist racism, nor on the minority of women who played an active part in the promotion of race policies, but on the majority of the women who belonged to the groups considered to be racially 'superior'. According to this view, these women were guilty of and responsible for genocide not just generally, because of the German nation's

collective guilt, but specifically and individually 'as women'—as mothers, wives and home-keepers. Their guilt is held to stem from the fact that they lived and believed in their female 'difference' and in the value of their 'separate sphere', thereby sharing and supporting Nazism's conception and treatment of women. Far from victimizing women, Nazi pro-natalism and its cult of motherhood drew upon women's own aspirations to be, and be valued as, mothers. Women willingly 'lent the healthy gloss of motherhood', of human and family values, to cover up a criminal regime and are therefore seen to be at the 'very centre' of 'Nazi evil'. The elaboration of ideas of gender difference, maternity, and separate spheres by males, females, and feminists since the late eighteenth century is said to have paved the way for the National Socialist massacres; the prescription of 'polarized identities for males and females'—among the victims as well as among those who were not—is held to be at the roots of the massacres. Precisely because of their 'difference' as a sex, German non-Jewish women are held to have been 'equally' guilty of genocide, 'no less than men' who are usually at the centre of historical studies of the Holocaust.¹¹

This concept of equal guilt deriving from sexual 'difference' confronts us with another difficult sense of 'equality'. No less important in this context is the problematic fact that this view is based on the traditional picture of Nazism as a pro-natalist regime which fostered a cult of motherhood—an assumption which we have already seen to be fraught with contradiction and difficulty. A still further contradiction relates to the issue of women's power which is of course central to the argument of women being at the very centre of the Nazi crimes. On the one hand, female difference—expressed in motherhood and the separate sphere—is held to be the source of powerlessness, not even implying some 'invisible power' of women. On the other hand, it is held to have been a source of women's power to bring about genocide.¹² Another influential version of this view attempts to overcome the contradiction by claiming that, indeed, female 'difference' implied female power, the 'power of the mothers'; such 'power of the mothers' is then held to have been at the roots of genocide.¹³ Although neither sources nor historical scholarship support this assumption, its function is obvious. It revives the old myth of Nazi 'pro-natalism and cult of motherhood', which is so thoroughly jeopardized by even a superficial glance at the depressing and contradicting facts of racism and genocide, by presenting it as a female version of genocide. Despite the problems of this approach, it poses important questions: What really was

women's contribution to and guilt and responsibility for National Socialist race policy and genocide? Was it specific to the female sex and therefore grounded in female 'difference'? If not, was it equal to the contribution of men, and in what way? If so, how 'separate' actually were the 'separate spheres' under National Socialism?

I shall explore some of these issues by focusing on some gender and race dimensions of National Socialist policies of sterilization, of welfare, and of massacre. The exploration will conform to a methodological requirement which I consider indispensable: that in any adequate analysis of National Socialist racism, its agents and its victims must be central. No generalization can be valid unless it is also valid for these groups. It will emerge that National Socialist racism was by no means gender-neutral any more than National Socialist sexism was race-neutral. On both levels, in the sources as well as in historical analysis, the conceptual couple equality/difference has an essential place. At the same time, however, it is context dependent.

ANTI-NATALISM AND THE 'PRIMACY OF THE STATE IN THE SPHERE OF LIFE'

'Superiority' and 'inferiority', *Wert* and *Minderwertigkeit*, were the main categories common to all forms of Nazi racism. These terms were, moreover, intimately linked to the language of 'equality' and 'inequality'. The sterilization law of 1933, like the anti-Jewish laws, put into practice the classical racist demand, proclaimed in Germany specifically by the advocates of eugenic sterilization: 'Unequal value, unequal rights' (*ungleicher Wert, ungleiche Rechte*).¹⁴ According to section 14 of the law, sterilization was forbidden to the 'healthy' members of both sexes, while according to section 12 it was compulsory for their 'inferior' members. In addition, these notions were linked to the language of the 'private' and the 'political'. The sterilization law was officially proclaimed, upon its enactment, as enforcing the 'primacy of the state over the sphere of life, marriage and family' (*Primat des Staates auf dem Gebiet des Lebens, der Ehe und der Familie*). It was thus through the policy of birth-prevention that the private sphere came to be subordinated to and ruled by the political sphere. The sterilization law was, according to its official commentators, an expression of the view that 'the private is political', and that any decision about the dividing line between private and political is

in itself political.¹⁵ Finally, this policy was linked to the concept of 'biology' which assumed a variety of meanings in this discourse. It referred not to the different bodies of men and women, but to a superior or inferior 'biological value' which was, for women and men alike, genetically transmitted. 'Biology' also, and most importantly, meant bodily intervention for the sake of social change. In this respect, the sterilization law went even further than the anti-Jewish laws of 1933, since it ordered compulsory bodily intervention and was thereby the first of the Nazi measures that sought to 'solve' social and cultural problems by what were referred to as 'biological' means. It was in these terms, rather than in the language of gender, that in 1936 Himmler praised the sterilization law to the Hitler Youth: 'Germans . . . have once again learned . . . to recognize bodies and to bring up this God-given body and our God-given blood and race according to its value or lack of value.'¹⁶

Forced and mass sterilization was pursued for the sake of 'uplifting the race' or 'the people', of 'eradicating inferior hereditary traits' by preventing 'inferior' people from having children and passing on their traits to posterity. The Nazi sterilization law, which was the culmination of the preceding international movement of eugenics or race hygiene, was an integral component of National Socialist racism as defined by the regime itself:

The German race question consists primarily in the Jewish question. In second place, yet no less important, there is the gypsy question . . . [But] degenerative effects on the racial body may arise not only from outside, from members of alien races, but also from inside, through unrestricted procreation of inferior hereditary material.¹⁷

The sterilization law established psychiatric grounds for sterilization, particularly feeble-mindedness, schizophrenia, epilepsy, and manic-depressive derangement. It did not specifically mention Jews, gypsies, blacks, or Poles and therefore seemed to be ethnically neutral. Interestingly, Hitler objected briefly to sterilizing persons of non-German ethnicity, on the grounds that they deserved no 'uplift' of their race. But this objection was soon overcome, and 'inferior' Germans and emotionally or mentally disabled persons of other ethnic groups were subjected to the law on equal terms. (After 1945, this fact was appealed to by those who claimed, defending the sterilization policy, that it had nothing to do with racism.)

None the less, ethnicity made a difference. Psychiatric theory and practice established various links between ethnicity and psychiatric constitution, for example that western Jews were more prone to

schizophrenia than 'normal' people and eastern Jews more prone to 'feeble-mindedness'. Gypsies were likely to be classified as 'feeble-minded', and black people were thought to be more prone to both feeble-mindedness and schizophrenia. In 1937, all Afro-Germans who could be found were sterilized. Like many gypsies they were sterilized both within and outside the 1933 law. In 1941—the year when the deadly deportations from Germany to occupied Poland began—a Berlin Jewish woman was sterilized because she had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, a derangement 'proven' by the fact that she had 'depressions' and had attempted to commit suicide. From March 1942, Jews were exempted from the sterilization law, but by then the massacres did to them what sterilization would have done to their offspring—prevented them from living.¹⁸

Because neither women nor men were mentioned in the sterilization law it seemed to be gender-neutral and to affect the sexes equally. Yet even this apparent gender-neutrality was not self-evident but the subject of controversy. Interestingly, there was up to 1933 a public debate as to whether it might be unjust or unwise to sterilize women and men in equal numbers, since the operation on women (salpingectomy, including full anaesthesia, abdominal incision and the concomitant risk) was so much more dramatic than that on men (vasectomy), and the higher rate of complication and death might provoke resistance. In 1933, however, the Propaganda Ministry announced that just as many women as men would have to be sterilized, regardless of their sex, for reasons of 'justice' and the 'logic' of hereditary transmission. In fact, the 400 000 sterilization victims were about half women, half men.

None the less, gender made a difference, and the sterilization policy was anything but gender-neutral. Compulsory and mass sterilization of women meant violent intervention not only with the female body but also with female life. Probably about 5000 people died as a result of sterilization, and whereas women made up 50 per cent of those sterilized, they made up about 90 per cent of those who died in the process. Many of them died because they resisted right up to the operating table or because they rejected what had happened even afterwards.¹⁹ An unknown number, mainly women, committed suicide. Hence, the first National Socialist massacre, scientifically planned and bureaucratically executed for the sake of 'racial uplift', was the result of anti-natalism, and its victims were mostly women. Historians have not noted it because women's bodily difference seemed to be unimportant, even in the case of a policy of bodily intervention.

There were also other respects in which sterilization was not gender-neutral. Childlessness, like having children, had a different meaning for women and for men. Their reactions and forms of resistance to sterilization consequently differed in many ways. Women as well as men protested against their stigmatization as 'second-class people'—in thousands of letters preserved among the documents of the sterilization courts—but women complained of the resulting childlessness more often than men. This was especially true for young women (the minimum age for being sterilized was 14). Many women attempted to become pregnant before sterilization. Their resistance was sufficiently important for the authorities to give the phenomenon a special name: 'protest pregnancies' (*Trotzschwangerschaften*). One girl emphasized that she had got pregnant in order 'to show the state that I won't go along with that'. These protest pregnancies were a major reason for the expansion of the sterilization law in 1935 into an abortion law, after which abortions could be performed on the same eugenic grounds as sterilizations. (This law also allowed abortion on the ground of a woman's state of health.) When abortions were performed for eugenic reasons, sterilization also was compulsory, and the number of such cases was about 30 000.²⁰

Physically, sterilization means the separation of sexuality and procreation, and it had different meanings for women and men. A particularly important issue for male victims was the fear of castration, and here the medical authorities attempted to explain the difference and allay their anxieties. One doctor wrote about sterilized men in 1935: 'Happy that nothing can happen to them any more, that neither condoms nor douches are necessary, they fulfil their marital duties without restraint.' With respect to women a quite different aspect of sexuality was discussed in the professional press. Tens of thousands of women who, as one of them asserted, did 'not care at all about men' and had never had sexual intercourse, were sterilized because, according to the opinions of the all-male jurists and doctors, the possibility of pregnancy through rape had to be taken into consideration.²¹ Therefore, the commentary to the law explicitly laid down that 'a different assessment of the danger of procreation is necessary for men and for women', and in the sterilization verdicts the following phrase, supported by government decree in 1936, regularly appeared. 'In the case of the female hereditarily sick, the possibility of abuse against her will must be taken into account.' Frequently, compulsory sterilization was advocated as a means of preventing the 'consequences' of a potential rape,

namely pregnancy. The risk of 'inferior' women being raped was thus taken to be so high as to be a ground for the sterilization of women. At the same time, sterilized women often became objects of sexual abuse.

Those to be sterilized were denounced mostly by doctors, psychiatrists, and the heads of psychiatric institutions who handed to the authorities 80 per cent of the almost 400 000 denunciations in 1934 and 1935. Members of the same professional groups drew up the decisive applications for sterilizing specific persons; the most active agents here were 'state doctors', occupants of a position created in 1934 specifically for the purpose of searching for sterilization candidates. Sterilizations (and marriage prohibitions) were decided upon by about 250 specially created courts in which the judges were exclusively male doctors, psychiatrists, anthropologists, experts in human genetics, and jurists. This brought with it a highly important innovation: state power to decide on the subject of procreation was conferred on male doctors and scientists. However, women were also involved in the procedure. For instance, some social workers and female doctors (mostly, but not exclusively, those in the respective Nazi organizations) were among those who denounced possible candidates; their number seems to have declined as the 'state doctors' took over most of this activity.²²

The courts decided on psychiatric diagnoses, using different criteria for women and men. Those for women measured their 'departure from the norm' against norms for the female sex, and those for men against norms for the male sex. To determine female 'inferiority', heterosexual behaviour was regularly investigated, and negatively evaluated when women frequently changed sexual partners or had more than one illegitimate child. The comparable behaviour of men was less investigated, and any findings carried little weight in the sterilization verdict. Women, not men, were tested on their inclination and capacity for housework and child-rearing (tests which were also applied to childless women). Women as well as men were assessed as to their inclination and capacity for extra-domestic employment. All these criteria were particularly prominent in the most crucial diagnosis, that of 'feeble-mindedness'. Indeed, whereas this diagnosis was the reason given for almost two-thirds of all sterilizations, women constituted almost two-thirds of the group sterilized on these grounds. About 10 per cent of the trials ended with acquittal;²³ women were let off when they could prove, to the satisfaction of the doctors and lawyers in court, who often came to inspect them at home and consulted their superiors

at the extra-domestic work-place, that they did their work adequately inside as well as outside the home.

Unlike the later policy of extermination, the sterilization policy was not carried on secretly, but almost entirely in public view. In contrast to the impression given by many studies of women under National Socialism, the population was virtually bombarded with anti-natalist propaganda from 1933 on (before the Nazi rise to power, public sterilization propaganda was largely limited to the professional press). When in 1933-4 the Propaganda Ministry organized an aggressive campaign on 'population policy', Catholics were prevented from participating because of their pro-natalist and anti-sterilization stance, and the Catholic mothers' leagues were suppressed in 1935 on account of their anti-sterilization activities. Whereas in 1933 the 'women's page' of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the official Nazi daily, dedicated 15 per cent of its space to the topic 'motherhood', it was reduced to 5 per cent by 1938.²⁴ National Socialism by no means wanted children at any cost and never propagated the slogan 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' which has frequently, but wrongly, been ascribed to it;²⁵ equally, the biblical injunction 'Be fruitful and multiply' was explicitly rejected.²⁶ The Propaganda Ministry sharply denounced the misunderstanding that 'the state allegedly wants children at any cost' and reminded citizens that the goal was 'racially worthy, physically and mentally unaffected children of German families'. Official and influential authors estimated only a minority of somewhere between 10 and 30 per cent of German women to be 'worthy of procreating', and an equal percentage to be 'unworthy of procreating' (*fortpflanzungsunwürdig*).²⁷

Often, propaganda was specifically addressed to the female sex, because it seemed to require more effort to make women understand the new anti-natalism than to get it across to men.²⁸ In 1934 the *Völkischer Beobachter* argued against women to 'see the value of their existence in having children' and proclaimed the sterilization law as the 'beginning of a new era' for women. Millions of pamphlets explained to women that 'the state's goal' was not prolific propagation but 'regeneration', and that they should present themselves and their children to the sterilization authorities if they felt that anything was wrong with them. Maternalism (*Mütterlichkeit*) became the target of vigorous polemics, many of them in journals for women and by female authors. According to one such writer, a medical doctor, there was 'a great danger arising from women precisely because of their maternalism', since 'it acts, like any egoism, against the race'. The 'unfortunate struggle between the sexes' was

to be replaced by their common struggle for the 'future generation'. The traditional view that 'woman, because of all her physical and mental characteristics, is particularly close to all living beings, and has a particular inclination towards all life' was sharply criticized because it would encourage women to practise 'the worst sin against nature' ('nature' was understood as 'eradicating' the weak if left undisturbed by humane and charitable intervention).²⁹ Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, the 'Reich Women's Leader' who advocated sterilization and spoke against Catholic women workers' rejection of this policy, agreed with male Nazis on another aspect of 'female nature'. Like them, she insisted on the profound racial difference between 'German and un-German science', but denied that any differences of gender were relevant in this field: 'There is nothing like a specifically "female" knowledge, any more than a specifically "female" method'; and 'no gender-based scholarship'.³⁰

Such Nazi visions of nature, women, and anti-natalism contrasted sharply with the widespread maternalism of the moderate majority and a radical minority of the earlier women's movement. But ironically, whereas many historians have interpreted this maternalism as a precursor of the Nazi conceptions of gender, the voices of some radical feminists who, before 1933, advocated the sterilization of the 'inferior' (hoping thereby to render birth-control acceptable and respectable) are not usually regarded as precursors of Nazi policies.³¹ Whatever the precise historical relationship turns out to be, it seems probable that the earlier feminist views on these issues—both maternalism and anti-natalism—did not influence the rise of National Socialist conceptions and policies. As to the latter, it is evident that never before had there been a state which, like the National Socialist regime, pursued an anti-natalist policy of such dimensions and efficiency in theory, in propaganda and in practice.

What, then, is the substance of Nazi pro-natalism and its alleged cult of motherhood? How did National Socialism conceive of gender relations in this area, and how is this area linked to anti-natalism and to race policy in general? Clearly, more 'German and healthy' babies were desired, but propaganda on this issue never failed to stress the contrasting policy of anti-natalism. In an important public speech of June 1933, the Minister of the Interior explained the hoped-for numerical relation between pro- and anti-natalism: 300 000 more children per year should be born (30 per cent of the birth rate), but 12 million Germans (20 per cent of the population) were suspected of being 'inferior'.³² More importantly,

no terror or compulsion was employed and no new bureaucracy developed for pro-natalist purposes. Rather, Nazism relied here on volition, tradition, and a range of welfare measures such as marriage loans (1933), tax rebates for the head of household in respect of wife and children (1934, 1939) and child allowances (1936). While these benefits did not succeed in raising the birth rate (its rise between 1933 and 1938 was rather due to increasing and then full employment), they resembled those introduced in most European countries as an integral component of the emerging welfare states, in contexts where pro-natalism was sometimes less, sometimes more rampant than in Nazi Germany.

National Socialist family subsidies nevertheless differed from those in other European countries in two significant respects: they were shot through with sexism and with racism. In connection with the first issue, studies of Nazi pro-natalism have overlooked the role of men, just as studies of Nazi anti-natalism have overlooked the role of women. As in the other masculinist dictatorships, Italy and Spain, Nazi state welfare privileged fathers over mothers, and glorified fatherhood as 'nature'; one Reich minister declared: 'The concept of fatherhood has been handed down through age-old processes of natural law', and 'the concept of the father in unambiguous and must be placed at the centre of financial measures for the family'. Race theorists insisted on the 'patriarchal spirit of the Nordic race'. Unlike female 'nature', male 'nature' seemed to require economic rewards. As the male head of the Nazi Party's organization Mother and Child emphasized:

There is no more beautiful image of selfless service than that of a mother with her children . . . who never thinks whether she is going to get anything in return . . . At the very moment at which she began to calculate returns, she would cease to be a good mother.³³

Begetting children was considered more valuable than bearing and rearing them, and child allowances were paid to fathers, not to mothers; unmarried mothers obtained them only if the father of their child was known to the authorities. This gender policy differed sharply from that prevailing in the European democracies, where child allowances were paid to mothers, if only in response to the tenacious struggles of maternalist feminism.³⁴

The second characteristic feature of Nazi family subsidies; its connection with racism, was unique, differing even from practice in the other dictatorships. All those classified as 'inferior'—such as eugenically 'unfit' parents and children, Jews, gypsies, and labour-

ers from Eastern Europe—were denied benefits and discouraged from having children.

Thus, while state welfare for families and procreation was not in itself sexist or racist, National Socialism nevertheless linked the emergence of modern state welfare to sexism and racism by privileging men over women and 'valuable German' men over 'racially inferior' men. Welfare policy met its limits in race policy; the latter had priority over the former. Pro-natalism focused on fathers, and was shaped by the requirements of anti-natalism for the sake of 'racial uplift'. Hence, the unique and specific gender dimension of National Socialist population policy consisted not in 'pro-natalism and a cult of motherhood', but in anti-natalism and a cult of fatherhood and masculinity; whereas the latter was largely traditional, state anti-natalism was entirely novel. A historical continuity leads from there to the escalation of racism in the 1940s.

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF GENOCIDE

National Socialist race policy was directed, in both principle and practice, not only against men, but equally against women. Yet despite the equal treatment meted out to victims of both sexes, race policy was in many respects directed against women precisely as women. This is obvious in the case of racist anti-natalism, since when it comes to giving life human activities are obviously gender-based, and the anti-natalist 'primacy of the state in the sphere of life' assumed new features in the 1940s. But gender issues and gender difference were also important when it came to the 'primacy of the state in the sphere of death', particularly to genocide.

When war was declared in 1939, the practice of legalized sterilization was curtailed in order to liberate work-forces for war and massacre. Anti-natalism was now directed almost exclusively against women, particularly against those who had to perform forced labour and those in the concentration camps. Early in the war, Polish women who became pregnant were sent back east, and it seems that many took deliberate advantage of this policy in order to avoid forced labour. Their gesture was babies against war-work. But from 1941, when war was declared on Russia, the policy changed and pregnant Polish and Russian women had to stay in Germany. They were encouraged, and often forced, to undergo abortion and sterilization, and often had their children taken away

from them. Pregnant Russian women were put to work at 'men's jobs' in the munitions industry so as to increase the chance that they would miscarry: a policy of war-work against babies. Around the same time, sterilization experiments were pursued under Himmler's command, particularly in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, on Jews and gypsies. Originally they were meant for the future sterilization of those *Judenmischlinge* who were exempted from extermination, and the experiments were performed on both women and men. But they soon focused on women, who received injections into the uterus performed by doctors with previous experience of sterilization. Their aim now was to develop a technique for the mass sterilization of women who were considered 'inferior' on both ethnic and eugenic grounds. Jewish and gypsy women in the camps were used for the experimentation of a policy that in future was to overtake hundreds of thousands of ethnically and eugenically 'inferior' women all over Europe.³⁵ In all these instances, female difference was used to prevent maternity.

The pre-war sterilization policy was also a 'forerunner of mass murder',³⁶ of genocide as well as of 'euthanasia' (called Aktion T4); the massacre of the ill in which up to 200 000 ill, old and disabled people were killed between 1939 and 1945. Most of them were inmates of psychiatric clinics, women as well as men, and they included all Jews in such institutions. To kill them, gas was used for the first time. Anti-natalism anticipated certain features of this massacre in that, first, it had grown out of a mentality which saw sterilization not as a private and free choice, but as a 'humane' alternative to killing for the sake of the *Volkskörper*, as an 'elimination without massacre',³⁷ as a political substitute for 'nature' which 'naturally' (that is, without modern charity and medicine) prevented 'unfit' people from surviving. Second, it was through the policy of sterilization that the experts and authorities had already become used to dealing with bodily intervention and death, particularly in the case of women. Third, the very first victims of this massacre were 5000 disabled children aged 3 and under, precisely those whose mothers (and fathers) could not previously be identified as sterilization and abortion candidates (either because of the limits of bureaucracy or because the child's handicap was not hereditary). They were searched out through the channels of the sterilization bureaucracy. Finally, the activists of T4—mostly doctors and other medical personnel—had also been advocates and practitioners of compulsory sterilization, and many of them also played an important role in the genocide of the Jews.

Late in 1941, the T4 gas chambers and the male members of the teams who operated them were transferred from Germany to the death camps in the occupied East where they served for the systematic killing of millions of Jews and gypsies, women as well as men. This transfer was not just one of technology but had several significant gender dimensions. Before gas was used, hundreds of thousands of Jews had already been killed, mostly by mass shooting. The SS men involved seem to have experienced considerable 'psychological difficulties', particularly in shooting women and children, as was acknowledged, for instance, by the commandant of Auschwitz. Even Himmler became nervous while watching executions which included the killing of women and children. Soon after, gas technology was introduced not only as a means to accelerate killing, but also as 'a "suitable" method', a 'human' alternative to overt bloodshed, which would relieve the largely gender-specific scruples of the killers. Some of the first mobile gas vans used for killing Jews were used exclusively on women and children. Women were the majority of those who were delivered from the ghettos to be killed in the gas chambers of the death camps in occupied Poland. Nazi doctors in the death camps, who had turned from healers into killers, were able to function—sometimes over years—largely because of male bonding, heavy drinking, and their adaptation to an 'overall Nazi male ideal'.³⁸

'Men, women and children' was the frequent description of the victims in many contemporary documents. In Auschwitz it was mostly Jewish women, and particularly those with children, who were selected for death as soon as they arrived in the camp ('every Jewish child meant automatic death to its mother'), whereas most able-bodied Jewish men were sent to forced labour. Almost two-thirds of the German Jews deported to and killed in the death camps were women, as were 56 per cent of the gypsies who were sent into the Auschwitz gas chambers.³⁹ The precise number of women among the other millions of dead will probably remain unknown. Hannah Arendt described the situation, the 'image of hell', as a massacre where no difference was made 'between men and women', a 'monstrous equality without fraternity or humanity', the 'darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality'.⁴⁰

Historians have not yet explored this kind of 'equality' nor the meaning of the fact that the initiators, decision-makers and actors involved in these massacres were men, and that at least half of their victims were women. But the male massacre experts were by no means blind to such gender dimensions and did not consider this

'equal treatment' of the sexes among their victims as self-evident or self-explanatory. Rather, they felt that such murderous violence against women needed to be especially legitimized and its necessity particularly emphasized. Goebbels, in a widely broadcast radio speech of 1941 which explained why the Jews had to wear the Star of David, emphasized that Jewish women had to wear it too because they were just as dangerous as Jewish men, even though they 'may look utterly fragile and pitiful'.⁴¹ But in Himmler's view, the justification for killing Jewish women was gender difference. In 1943, he felt the need to respond to a 'question which is certainly on people's minds. The question is: You know, I do understand that they kill adult Jews, but women and children . . .?' He addressed his SS men and other high officials, summarizing previous reflections and urging his audience 'only to listen but never to speak about what I am going to tell you here':

We came to the question: what about the women and children? I have decided to find a clear solution here too. In fact I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men—let us say killing them or having them killed—while letting avengers in the shape of children grow up.

Hence, Jewish women were killed as women, as child-bearers, and mothers of their people. But Himmler went further, placing female victims at the centre of his own definition of genocide:

When I was forced somewhere in some village to act against partisans and against Jewish commissars . . . then as a principle I gave the order to kill the women and children of those partisans and commissars too . . . Believe you me, that order was not so easy to give or so simple to carry out as it was logically thought out and can be stated in this hall. But we must constantly recognize that we are engaged in a primitive, primordial, natural race struggle.⁴²

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In this kind of 'logical thought',⁴³ in this—successful—attempt to override male scruples about a war of men against women, the most extreme form of the National Socialist 'natural' *Rassenkampf* was defined as a deadly struggle of men not just against men—as in a traditional military campaign—but particularly against women as mothers.

Occasionally, historians have perceived the centrality of the massacre of all Jewish women, boys and elderly men to the *Rassenkampf*; others consider it as self-evident and unworthy of specific mention.⁴⁴ Still others have singled out, as the most important gender dimension of the Holocaust, the notion that non-Jewish women participated in it by believing in female difference;

particularly in motherhood, and by being mothers and wives. There were, in fact, many women who actively participated in Nazi race policies, but they do not correspond to this notion. They were a minority among the perpetrators and a minority among women at large, though a remarkably tough and efficient one, as their victims often emphasized. The more active among them were usually unmarried and without children; they were drawn from all social classes except the highest ones; and their participation in racist policies was mostly, as was often the case with comparable men, a function of their job or profession. Whereas the sterilization policy was entirely directed by men, some female social workers and medical doctors helped select the candidates. In the six T4 killing centres, female nurses assisted male doctors in selecting and killing. Female clerical workers worked alongside men in the offices and bureaucracies which dealt with race policies and genocide. Some women academics co-operated with their male superiors in gypsy studies and laid the groundwork for the selection and extermination of gypsies. Female camp guards who supervised women in the concentration camps came mostly from lower-class backgrounds and had volunteered for the job because it promised some upward mobility. Of all the women activists, they were closest to the centre of the killing operations and the most responsible for their functioning.⁴⁵ National Socialist racism was not only institutionalized as state policy, but also professionalized. Female participation in it, and responsibility for it, did not depend on a commitment to female difference, separate spheres, and motherhood, but on the extra-domestic adaptation of women to male-dominated and professionalized race policy. These women did not act as mothers, nor did they believe in maternalism as a feature of the female sex.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have aimed to show why a range of prevailing opinions about the place of women in National Socialism are problematic. Many of their problems are due to traditional and simplified conceptions of the meaning of gender equality and gender difference for the National Socialist regime, particularly in the context of its racism and for the history of women under this regime. I have attempted to focus not only on some top Nazis' ritualized pronouncements on women, conjuring up 'the nobility of

motherhood', but on the conceptions which were relevant to actual policy-making; not only on the majority of 'healthy German' women, but on the minorities which became victims of race policy—and which were soon to become much more than just a minority. Some of the results are summarized here.

The notions of gender equality and gender difference are context dependent. The context on which they depended in National Socialist theory and practice was, first of all, its racism. Race policy was what gave National Socialism its novelty and specificity. Moreover, this context is important because it applied the concepts 'equality' and 'difference' not only to gender relations, but also to race relations. Concepts and policies which focused on race relations also shaped National Socialism's visions of women and gender relations. Therefore, the latter were not traditional, simple and coherent, but in many ways novel, multiple, and contradictory.

There is no essential continuity between early twentieth-century feminist maternalism and National Socialist visions of women. Whereas in the feminist view, female 'difference' was the ground on which claims for women's 'equality' were based, National Socialist notions of race-based gender 'equality' and 'difference' were the ground on which 'racially inferior' women received a treatment which was equal to that of the men of their groups—persecution, sterilization, and death. Moreover, the National Socialist notions allowed a number of 'racially superior' women to participate in the development of the theory and practice of race policy. They did not act as mothers and wives, but acted on equal terms with the male agents of racism and in virtue of their extra-domestic roles. Hence, neither the female victims nor the female agents of National Socialist race policy inhabited a separate sphere dedicated to female 'difference'. Yet precisely this novel and 'monstrous equality' requires to be explored in terms of gender.

No image of essential female difference and no cult of motherhood were at the core of the National Socialist view and treatment of the female sex, nor was the image of women as mothers, where it appeared, specific to National Socialism. From its beginnings, National Socialism had broken with these images in many ways, most of all in its race policy. The essential and specific gender dimension of National Socialist birth policy did not consist in pronatalism and a cult of motherhood, but in anti-natalism and a cult of fatherhood and masculinity.

In particular, it is impossible to conceive a more profound contrast than that between Himmler's view of Jewish women doomed

to death by virtue of being (potential) mothers, and the visions of motherhood developed by the strong German Jewish feminist movement before 1933, at a time when it constituted a pillar of the moderate German women's movement. Jewish feminists had often pointed to the parallels between women's emancipation and Jewish emancipation, and had claimed the right to be different both as women and as Jews. One of their crucial concerns, similar to that of other contemporary women's movements, was the value of motherhood; this was perceived as one form of female 'difference' which had not been sufficiently protected and empowered and which had not yet had a chance to develop its own cultural forms. Like all the other Western women's movements of that period, the German Jewish one had searched for a desirable relation between the recognition of women's equality and that of women's difference.⁴⁶

National Socialism put an end to such efforts, a fact which suggests that modern racism and modern sexism have a parallel structure (even though Nazi sexism was largely traditional, whereas Nazi racism was both novel and deadly). Both deduce, from selected 'differences' among human beings, their 'inequality' in the sense of a hierarchy of values; and both measure 'inferiority' against the cultural norms of an allegedly 'superior' group. They deny the actually or allegedly different group not only the right to be 'equal', but also the right to be different without being punished for it: to live 'differently' in physical, emotional, mental—in short, in cultural—respects. As long as equality is understood as 'sameness' and difference as 'inferiority'—in terms of gender as well as of race—there is no space for human plurality, for the right and liberty to be different.

Notes

1. H. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. R. H. Feldman (New York: Grover Press, 1978), 160. She emphasized the importance of the fact that for National Socialism, anti-Semitism and racism were not only social but eminently political issues; see H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966).
2. For references to this view see K. Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs*, 14 (1988), 154.
3. D. Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 191–2.
4. L. J. Ruppl, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), esp. chs. 2, 3.
5. C. Huerkamp, 'Jüdische Akademikerinnen in Deutschland 1900–1938', forthcoming in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (1993). For women's employment see

1. D. Winkler, *Frauenarbeit im 'Dritten Reich'* (Hamburg: Hofmann & Campe, 1977); R. Hachtmann, *Industriearbeit im Dritten Reich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989). For a comparable situation in the United States see A. Kessler-Harris, 'Gender Ideology in Historical Reconstruction: A Case-Study from the 1930s', *Gender and History*, 1 (1989), 31-49.
2. G. Bock, *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986), 160-1, 170-3.
3. H. F. K. Günther, 'Rassenkunde des jüdischen Volkes', app. to H. F. K. Günther, *Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes* (Munich: Lehmann, 1923), 421-2; P. Schultze-Naumburg, 'Das Eheproblem in der nordischen Rasse', *Die Sonne*, 9/1 (1932), 25.
4. An exception is T. Wobbe (ed.), *Nach Osten: Die Verbrechen des Nationalsozialismus und die Verfolgung von Frauen* (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1992).
5. S. Friedländer, 'Überlegungen zur Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus', in D. Diner (ed.), *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), 35.
6. See the discussion in M. Broszat (ed.), *Deutschlands Weg in die Diktatur: Internationale Konferenz zur nationalsozialistischen Machtübernahme im Reichstagsgebäude zu Berlin. Referate und Diskussionen* (Berlin: Siedler, 1984), 237-53.
7. C. Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), 6, 17, 405, 419.
8. Ibid. 181-3, 218-19.
9. K. Windaus-Walser, 'Gnade der weiblichen Geburt?', *Feministische Studien*, 1 (1988), 131.
10. H. Burkhardt, *Der rassenhygienische Gedanke und seine Grundlagen* (Munich: Reinhardt, 1930), 93.
11. A. Gütt, E. Rüdin and F. Ruttke, *Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses vom 14. Juli 1933* (Munich: Lehmann, 1934), 5, 176.
12. Heinrich Himmler: *Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen*, ed. B. F. Smith and A. F. Peterson (Frankfurt: Propyläen, 1974), 54-5.
13. W. Feldscher (Ministry of the Interior), *Rassen- und Erbpflege im deutschen Recht* (Berlin: Deutscher Rechtsverlag, 1943), 26, 118. See also K.-D. Bracher, 'Stufen der Machtergreifung', in K.-D. Bracher, W. Sauer, and G. Schultz, *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960), 284-6; D. Majer, 'Fremdvölkische' im Dritten Reich (Boppard: Bolt, 1981), 103 ff., 180-1.
14. R. Pommerin, 'Sterilisierung der Rheinlandbastarde': *Das Schicksal einer farbigen deutschen Minderheit 1918-1937* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1979); Bock, *Zwangssterilisation*, 358-60.
15. Information on these issues is available, among other sources, in around 200 doctoral dissertations accepted by medical faculties in the 1930s and 1940s which dealt with the sterilization mostly of women; see Bock, *Zwangssterilisation*, 181-2, 372-81.
16. See Ibid. 384-8.
17. The available sources do not tell if some among these women were lesbians. Among thousands of cases, I have found only one where this was an issue. For the documents see ibid. 389-401.
18. Ibid., chs. 4 and 5.

23. Hundreds of thousands of denunciations were not passed on to the sterilization courts, but were included in the 'hereditary census' of the German people; its files, which were said to comprise 10 million entries by 1941, focused on persons with 'negative hereditary traits'. Many of the cases not handed to the courts were postponed for the time after the war.
24. H. Kessler, *'Die deutsche Frau': Nationalsozialistische Frauenpropaganda im Völkischen Beobachter* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1981) 42 ff., 86 ff.
25. B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), 32; T. Childers, *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundation of Fascism in Germany, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 1983), 174, 189.
26. One example is E. Rüdin (ed.), *Erbpflege und Rassenhygiene im völkischen Staat* (Munich: Lehmann, 1934), 8-9.
27. For documents see Bock, *Zwangsterilisation*, 24-5, 122-5, 456-61 (instructions from the Propaganda Ministry, the views of the blood-and-soil ideologue Richard Walther Darré, the head of the party's Race Office Walter Groß, et al.).
28. There were some good reasons for this belief. For instance, in 1934 the Kassel Secret Police reported that women were particularly hostile towards the sterilization law (Deutsches Zentralarchiv Potsdam, 15.01/26060, f. 297).
29. *Völkischer Beobachter*, 31 Jan. 1934; E. von Barsewisch, *Die Aufgaben der Frau für die Aufrichtung* (=Schriften des Reichsausschusses für Volksgesundheitsdienst, no. 5) (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1933), 13-14; A. Blum, 'Das Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses', *Die Frau*, 41 (1934), 529-38. For the journals of women's organizations see Bock, *Zwangsterilisation*, 130-1; for this propaganda see also Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand), 58-62.
30. G. Scholtz-Klink, *Die Frau im Dritten Reich: Eine Dokumentation* (Tübingen: Grabert, 1978), 364, 402, 379. For her speech see Bock, *Zwangsterilisation*, 208.
31. See A. T. Allen, 'German Radical Feminism and Eugenics, 1900-1918', *German Studies Review*, 11 (1989), 45-6.
32. W. Frick, *Bevölkerungs- und Rassenpolitik* (Schriften zur politischen Bildung, no. 12/1) (Langensalza: Beyer, 1933).
33. H. Frank, lecture to the committee for race and population policy in the Ministry of the Interior, 1937 (Bundesarchiv Koblenz, R 61/130); Günther, *Rassenkunde*, 274 ff., 345-6; Erich Hilgenfeldt to Bormann, reporting a conversation with Himmler in 1942 (Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NS 18/2427).
34. G. Bock and P. Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s* (London: Routledge, 1991).
35. Bock, *Zwangsterilisation*, 440-56.
36. R. J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 23.
37. H.-W. Schmuhl, *Rassenhygiene, Nationalsozialismus, Euthanasie: Von der Verhütung zur Vernichtung 'lebensunwerten' Lebens 1890-1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 40.
38. Lifton, *Nazi Doctors*, 159, 462 (quotes); R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3 vols., rev. and definitive edn. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), i. 332-4; ii. 690-1; iii. 871; J. M. Ringelheim, 'Verschleppung, Tod und Überleben: Nationalsozialistische Politik gegen Frauen und Männer im besetzten Polen', in Wobbe, *Nach Osten*.