

Hitler's evolutionary ethic

A review of
Hitler's Ethic:
*The Nazi Pursuit of
Evolutionary Progress*
by Richard Weikart
Palgrave Macmillan,
New York, 2009

Lael Weinberger

In 2004, Richard Weikart garnered widespread attention for his book, *From Darwin to Hitler* (Palgrave Macmillan). In that book, Weikart traced the emergence of 'scientific racism' in the Darwinian tradition, particularly in Germany. He concluded that the racist ideology and eugenic practices of the Nazis drew considerably from supposedly scientific evolutionary ideas developed by Darwin's followers. Weikart, professor of history at California State University, Stanislaus, presented the book in careful, scholarly terms, but nonetheless drew criticism from some writers who feared that Weikart was giving ammunition to critics of Darwinian evolution. Then Weikart appeared in the pro-design documentary, *Expelled* (2008), explaining how evolutionary thinking had been used to justify the horrific racism of the Holocaust under the guise of science. The critics increased their volume, arguing that Weikart exaggerated the role that evolutionary thinking actually played in Nazi ideology.

Now the critics have a new work to reckon with, *Hitler's Ethic*. In this scholarly book, Weikart makes a detailed investigation into the role of evolution in Hitler's own thinking. Weikart contends that evolution was not only a factor, but was a basic component of Hitler's ethic.

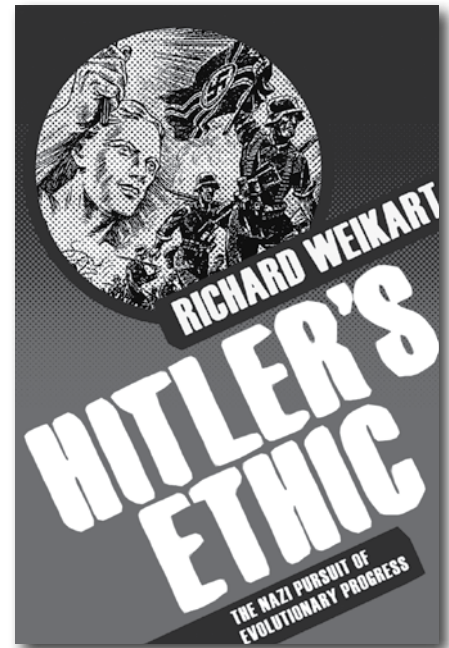
Hitler had an ethic?

It may seem surprising to some to think that Hitler was in fact driven by any form of ethics. "Most people suppose that Hitler was a power-

hungry opportunist who simply ignored morality whenever it got in his way", Weikart acknowledges (p. 1). Weikart disagrees with this popular perspective. He says instead that Hitler did have a coherent ethic to which he consistently adhered. In fact, Weikart suggests in his introduction, Hitler believed that biological advancement of humanity was the highest good: "for Hitler the highest arbiter of morality and political policies was the evolutionary advancement of the human species. In the final analysis, Hitler based his morality on a racist form of evolutionary ethics" (p. 8).

Weikart deals with three preliminary issues before turning to the heart of the study. First, Weikart offers a brief review of possible sources that first exposed Hitler to 'scientific' racist ideas. Ideas that certain races were more highly evolved than others were widely circulating in Germany and Austria in the early twentieth century. So were corollary ideas that higher races should come to increasingly dominate or gain mastery over lower races in the evolutionary struggle. Weikart covered these developments in detail in his earlier book, so this is really just quick background information.

Second, Weikart provides a background review of Hitler as a 'moralist'. "It seems grotesque in retrospect", Weikart writes, "but Hitler posed as a moral crusader" in his public advocacy. The question that Weikart is interested in is whether Hitler really believed that he was acting morally or whether he was lying the whole time, which brings him to consider, third, Hitler as a liar. Hitler was certainly an inveterate liar. So how do we know when we can believe what Hitler says? Weikart suggests that we can still get a good idea of Hitler's genuine beliefs by looking for, first, consistency between statements and actions, and, second, basic consistency in his stated positions over long periods of time. Weikart suggests that we find both kinds of consistency in Hitler's adherence to evolutionary ethics.



Evolutionary progress

From this point, Weikart turns to the heart of Hitler's ethic. Hitler was a faithful adherent, Weikart says, to the "cult of evolutionary progress". He firmly believed that the most basic law of nature was struggle. Through struggle, the fittest make themselves known as they survive and the less fit die. "Nature's laws, especially the law of struggle, are supreme, Hitler asserted" (p. 31). "Hitler embraced the social Darwinist idea of the struggle for existence as a positive force, bringing progress and improvement to biological organisms, including the human species" (p. 36).

In Hitler's own words:

"History itself represents the progression of a people's (*Volks*) struggle for life" (p. 36). "All of nature is a powerful struggle between power and weakness, an eternal victory of the strong over the weak" (p. 37). "[I]n the limitation of this living space (*Lebensraum*) lies the compulsion for the struggle for life, and the struggle for life, in turn, contains the precondition for evolution" (p. 36). "The entire universe appears to be ruled only by this one idea, that eternal selection takes place, in which the stronger

in the end preserves its life and the right to life, and the weaker falls” (p. 39).

This translated into a might-makes-right philosophy; as Hitler succinctly put it, “The stronger is right” (p. 26). Hitler, according to Weikart, “depicted the struggle for existence between humans as a positive force, because it got rid of the weak and sick, preserving only the healthy, and thus producing ‘higher evolution’ (*Hoherentwicklung*)” (p. 36).

Hitler’s speeches and writings reveal frequent references to struggle, survival of the fittest, natural selection, and yes, evolution. Hitler’s evolutionary philosophy has often been overlooked, Weikart suggests, in part because the term he used for ‘evolution’ (*Entwicklung*) and ‘higher evolution’ (*Hoherentwicklung*) are often translated as simply ‘development’ in the standard English edition of *Mein Kampf* (p. 36).

While Hitler’s ideas were not drawn directly from Darwin, they did build logically on Darwinian ideas about struggle. Darwin wrote,

“Natural selection follows from the struggle for existence ... Had he [man] never been subjected to natural selection, assuredly he would never have attained to the rank of manhood ... [I]t

may well be doubted whether the most favorable [circumstances] would have sufficed [to produce human evolution], had not the rate of increase been rapid, and the consequent struggle for existence severe to an extreme degree” (*Descent of Man*, quoted by Weikart, p. 34).

Hitler extrapolated further to conclude that the struggle could and should be pursued violently against what he considered lower races of men. “Darwin would no doubt have been horrified by the way Hitler applied his theory to humanity”, Weikart writes, but Hitler did reflect concepts that Darwin taught, “that humans have attained their present rank via ‘rapid multiplication’ causing a struggle for existence”, and that “this ‘battle for life’ is necessary to continue evolutionary progress” (p. 35).

Hitler’s philosophy of evolutionary struggle and competition was summarized in a remarkable comment from his personal press secretary, Otto Dietrich:

“Among Hitler’s own justifications for his actions was his primitive philosophy of nature. Both in public speeches and private conversations he would repeatedly refer to this philosophy, his purpose being to convince his listeners that this philosophy represented the final truth about life. He took

such principles as the struggle for existence, the survival of the fittest and strongest, for the law of nature and considered them a ‘higher imperative’ which should also rule in the community life of men. It followed for him that might was right, that his own violent methods were therefore absolutely in keeping with the laws of nature” (pp. 40–41).

Struggle between races

For Hitler, the struggle among men was between competing races. As Hitler put it,

“[T]he folkish philosophy [i.e. Hitler’s own view] finds the importance of mankind in its basic racial elements. ... Thus, it by no means believes in an equality of the races, but ... feels itself obligated ... to promote the victory of the better and stronger, and demand the subordination of the inferior and weaker ...” (p. 56).

Hitler was not original here. At the time, it was widely believed to be scientific fact that races differed in their evolutionary progress. Weikart is careful to point out that the idea of higher and lower races was around well before Darwin, but he also points out that Darwin and his late-nineteenth century admirers integrated racial theories into evolutionary thought. (Standard histories and historians of evolution, such as Peter Bowler, admit as much, so Weikart is hardly preaching a novel doctrine.¹)

Racism became infused with evolutionary meaning by a host of writers, creating a “Darwinian vision of racial inequality that viewed races as having evolved in varying amounts from their simian ancestors” (p. 58). Weikart contends that Hitler’s racism fit neatly into this tradition, merging his devotion to the ‘law’ of struggle and survival of the fittest with his racist beliefs to create the racial policies of the Third Reich. Weikart points out that Hitler came to use the word *Volk* interchangeably with race, leading some to conclude that nationalism was Hitler’s basic value. But this misses the fact that Hitler defined the nation (*Volk*) in racial terms: “He ... regularly insisted that the *Volk* is defined by its blood, meaning its biological, hereditary qualities” (p. 61).

To highlight the fact that biologically-conceived racial groups were more important to Hitler and the Nazis than simple German nationalism, Weikart describes the varied attempts that Nazi planners made to integrate certain racial groups into German society. The Scandinavians and Dutch



In this famous photograph, Nazi soldiers march Jews out of the Warsaw Ghetto. In his latest book, historian Richard Weikart explores the perverted ethics that were used to justify the horrors inflicted on millions by Hitler and his Nazi regime.

were considered fellow Aryans, and Hitler “expressed the desire” that they would populate “the Eastern occupied territories” (p. 67). The Interior Ministry embarked on an ambitious mission to screen Czechs for their racial qualities in order to allow those deemed sufficiently Aryan to be assimilated into the German community. Poles were to be scrutinized to determine whether they were “ethnically German” and “capable of re-Germanization”; those who did not qualify were given a lesser legal status as “subjects of the German Reich”, while “Jews and Gypsies were given no legal status whatsoever” (p. 68).

Hitler believed that social morality was itself a function of race.² The Jews were immoral, and this was an immutable biological characteristic. The Aryans were a moral people, and this too was a biological characteristic. Hence the imperative to prevent a dilution of Aryan blood—it would damage the progress of morality itself. What did Hitler mean by ‘morality’? Weikart says that Hitler seems to have been usually referring to traits such as “diligence, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and so on” (p. 93)—perhaps, above all, the trait of altruism, the willingness of the individual to sacrifice for the group. Good Aryans were moral because they were willing to sacrifice for the good of their racial comrades. Hitler once remarked to a friend that the true moral principle was not to love your neighbor as yourself; it was, “Love your racial comrade as yourself” (p. 27). Even when speaking of morality itself, Hitler’s moral vision implicitly held that the highest good was advancing the race in the biological struggle for life.

Evolutionary policies

Hitler’s evolutionary ethic provided a rationale for a number of Nazi policies. When Hitler finally decided to pursue the extermination of the Jews, the step was justified in Hitler’s eyes as the practical outworking of an evolutionary ethic. The Aryan race had to struggle for existence, and it was for the evolutionary, progressive

good of humanity itself that the highest form eliminate a parasitic lower form to promote its own survival.

Understanding Hitler’s evolutionary ethic is helpful for understanding some Nazi policies which otherwise may appear conflicting. The best example is the Nazi policy on reproduction. Some writers have viewed Hitler as a social conservative because, they claim, he encouraged marriage, praised large families, and promoted a domestic role for women, while opposing abortion and homosexuality. But this ‘traditional morality’ interpretation is completely inconsistent with eugenics policies the Third Reich pursued simultaneously. Weikart says the solution is to interpret both as equally logical projects of Hitler’s evolutionary philosophy.

Traditional families were promoted in order to increase the Aryan race. Abortion was discouraged only for *Aryans* because it would decrease the potential stock of healthy, strong racial ‘comrades’. The weak would be eliminated in the struggle of life. Abortion was evil when practiced by Aryans because it was as likely to eliminate the strong as the weak, and moreover, because the Aryans were already reproducing at a lower rate (and thus were threatened by) many ‘lower’ races. At the same time, though, Nazi policy approved of abortion and sterilization of many women with undesirable traits. Some 400,000 women with hereditary illnesses were sterilized by Nazi doctors in less than twelve years (p. 153), and from 1934 on, all women who fell within the scope of the sterilization law could have abortions. The Third Reich’s pro-natalism policy was not in tension with its eugenics policy; both were based on the same evolutionary ethic.

Weikart does not devote much discussion to the issue of homosexuality, other than noting that an evolutionary



Photograph from Deutsches Bundesarchiv, wikipedia.org

“It seems grotesque in retrospect”, Richard Weikart writes in his study of Hitler’s ethic, “but Hitler posed as a moral crusader” in his public advocacy.

emphasis on reproduction can help explain the anti-homosexuality policy. (This still leaves unanswered questions about the curious position of homosexuals in the early Nazi leadership.³)

The territorial expansion of Germany was also linked to Hitler’s philosophy of evolutionary progress. The Aryan race was, he believed, about to experience a population explosion through Hitler’s pro-natalist policies. Expanding the available living space of the German nation was for the good of humanity, Hitler could reasonably believe, since it would help provide for the continued prosperity and ever-increasing dominance of the most evolved race.

Conclusion

Understanding the evolutionary basis of Hitler’s ethic makes sense of much that Hitler did. Actually, Weikart warns at the beginning of the book that focusing on Hitler’s philosophy poses a danger of making Hitler appear more consistent than he really was (p. 10).

Hitler was neither a deep nor a systematic thinker. But he was not a madman in the sense that many people imagine him to be. He had a theoretical, ostensibly scientific rationale for his racism, aggression, and German nationalism. For historians of Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Third Reich, Weikart has provided a very helpful study of the mind of Hitler.

For students of evolution and its impact on moral and social theory and practice, Weikart provides a rigorous argument that evolutionary ideas did indeed make way for Hitler's evil. Weikart is a careful historian, and in this book sticks closely to the original sources: Hitler's writings and his contemporary's recollections. Weikart never opines on the validity and morality of Darwinian evolution. Also, Weikart never claims that belief in Darwinian evolution *necessarily* leads to racism, eugenics, and holocaust. He does, however, present a powerful argument that, as a matter of historical fact, ideas based on Darwinian evolution have been used as a rationale to justify some of the most horrific events of the twentieth century. With any attempt to find causes and explanations for historical events, there will always be room to debate details. But it seems certain that no one can blithely dismiss the role of evolutionary thinking as trivial in the Nazi edifice of evil. Modern day Darwinists may be uncomfortable with this conclusion, but at one level or another, serious scholars will have a hard time denying this.

References

1. Bowler, P.J., *Evolution: The History of An Idea*, rev. ed., University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p. 88, 1989.
2. This belief was shared by many other social Darwinists in the early 20th century, although it should be noted that only one subset of these were anti-Semitic.
3. The classic history of Nazism, William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, Simon & Schuster, p. 38, 1960, describes Ernst Röhm (leader of the Blackshirts) as "like so many of the early Nazis, a homosexual" (see also pp. 50, 120 and 225).

Britain's decline— a novel approach?

A review of
*The Undercover
Revolution: How Fiction
Changed Britain*
by Iain H. Murray
The Banner of Truth Trust,
Edinburgh, UK, 2009

Carl Wieland

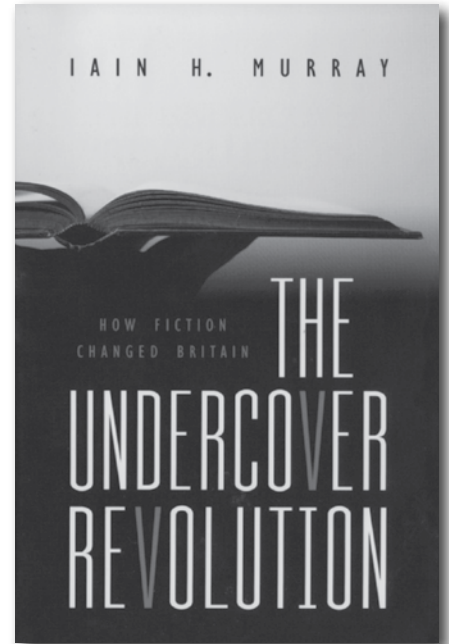
I loved Iain Murray's biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones. So I couldn't resist getting into this booklet—more like a handful of brief essays—when someone sent it to me. Easy to down at one sitting, I found it almost an odd little book by comparison. And there is a thread running through it that led to some disquiet, as will be seen.

The first chapter deals with Robert Louis Stevenson (of *Treasure Island* fame), the second with the novelist Thomas Hardy. The third, called "The novelists multiply" details a number of other writers of the period with links to the first two and each other. The names covered at least briefly include George Bernard Shaw (writer of *Pygmalion*, from which the musical *My Fair Lady* was derived), the philosopher Bertrand Russell and science fiction pioneer H.G. Wells.

The closing chapter, "Is Christianity Fiction?" is really more of an appendix, with standard apologetic arguments for the reality of the death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Despite the subtitle's promise, the book spent little time on the mechanics of how "fiction changed Britain". The following points seemed to be largely assumed:

- Everyone knows of Britain's staggering post-Christian moral decay.
- The authors in question were immensely popular in the years transitioning to the current decay,



and so would have greatly influenced the culture.

Murray's compact text leaves a fair few dots for the reader to connect. Most of it is taken up with how these writers, who also mingled with one another, were in a state of anti-Christian rebellion and that their lives showed the consequences of this.

Murray repeatedly concludes that wilful rejection by these writers of Christ's claim on their lives was the root cause of the moral decay and its negative consequences that they each experienced (and also, by extension, of the moral decay they caused via their popular writings).

But in emphasizing this biblically indisputable, almost self-evident, truth (of wilful rejection emanating from a rebellious and unregenerate heart), it frequently comes across as if he is deliberately seeking to downplay the conclusions of those who have pinpointed the powerful influence of evolutionary thought in triggering and nurturing these radical social upheavals. Murray acknowledges