Chapter 1
The Young Oppenheimer’s Utopian Horizon: Socialism, Darwinism and Rassenhygiene
Race, Antisemitism and Jewishness

Until these final chapters [of Oppenheimer’s autobiography], one cannot say that this former actively fraternity member is carrying something like the cross of his Jewishness with him — but then he is carrying it after all.¹

Franz Oppenheimer was born on March 30, 1864, in Berlin’s Spandauer Vorstadt, the city’s old Jewish Quarter. Like many of his generation, he grew up in an acculturated German Jewish home. His birth house on Krausnick Street was just around the corner from the grand New Synagogue, which would open its portals two and a half years after his birth. Oppenheimer’s father, Julius, was a reform rabbi serving in the Johannis Street Synagogue, Berlin’s first reform temple. Hence, the logical starting point for an inquiry into Oppenheimer’s Jewishness would be his upbringing in reform Judaism and its ingrained social message.

In his autobiography Oppenheimer framed his major career turning points in the ethical core of his upbringing, which included scorn for “Mammonism” widespread among educated Jewish middle class families like Oppenheimer’s.² This was a guiding principle both in his initial decision to pursue a career in medicine following in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather, and in his later transition to academic sociology and social reform.³ Accordingly, biographers commonly explained Oppenheimer’s Jewish identity by reference to tikkun olam, which literally means “to repair the world,” and is a central precept of Liberal Judaism calling for positive action to improve the lot of the socially deprived.⁴

Following Oppenheimer’s self-proclamations would not be necessarily wrong, but it could be misleading in reference to the centrality reform Judaism played for him. As will be seen in the discussion of Oppenheimer’s Zionist inclinations, he was certainly influenced by the universal message of the prophets of Israel, an important staple of reform Judaism. Yet all too often Oppenheimer downplayed the influence of Judaism on his thinking, as in this example:

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¹ Peter Panter, “Auf dem Nachttisch,” Die Weltbühne, March 1, 1932, 333. Peter Panter was one of Kurt Tucholsky’s pseudonyms.
² Caspari and Lichtblau, Franz Oppenheimer, 17–18.
³ Oppenheimer, Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes, 44 and 69.
“When I look inwards, I find ninety-nine percent Kant and Goethe and only one percent Old Testament, and even that is considerably mediated by Spinoza and Luther’s Bible.” The fact that his father was a reform Rabbi could have actually had an adverse effect on his Jewish knowledge, according to Franz Rosenzweig who once described Oppenheimer as “this impressive hot-headed person who is so ignorant in Jewish matters as only a rabbi’s son can be.”

In his memoirs, Oppenheimer recounted further sources for his interest in society’s woes. He attributed his political and ethical awakening to philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Leonard Nelson, as well as to encounters with prominent figures in Berlin’s bohemian scene such as SPD politician and anarchist Bruno Wille. Together with his sister Paula and his friend and brother-in-law Richard Dehmel, Oppenheimer frequented bohemian and naturalist circles such as the Friedrichshagener Dichterkreis, also trying his luck with poetry. Like a true naturalist writer, he focused his gaze on the suffering of society’s poor and downtrodden, especially those affected negatively by industrialization and urbanization. His adherence to the methodology of the natural sciences in his sociological undertakings could also be interpreted as an expression of his intellectual proximity to naturalism in a formative period.

Lisa Silverman has expounded on the problem of using rigid preconceptions of Judaism or “trying to fit individuals and events into the predetermined boundaries of a grander scheme,” suggesting instead an analytical approach that “takes into account concerns of contingency, agency and often completely over-

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6 Rosenzweig was a critic of Oppenheimer’s Zionist activity, especially his cooperation during the First World War with liberal Jewish leaders Hermann Cohen and Eugen Fuchs in the journal *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte*. After the war Oppenheimer invited to give an introductory lecture at the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, founded by Rosenzweig and Buber, for a series taught by his student Fritz Sternberg. The lecture attracted a large paying audience, and Rosenzweig regarded Oppenheimer as a magnet for students. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 1918–1929, ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, with the participation of Bernhard Casper (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1979), 262, 512, 859 and 881.
7 Oppenheimer, *Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes*, 125–129. Oppenheimer was close to the poets Detlev von Liliencorn and Richard Dehmel as well as many other artists and intellectuals in Berlin’s bohemian scenes. He was especially involved with naturalist circles such as Die Freie Bühne and the Friedrichshagener Dichterkreis. The latter was based in the Berlin suburb Friedrichshagen. The house of Oppenheimer’s sister Paula, an author of children poems and fables who was married to Richard Dehmel, served for a while as the Berlin meeting point for the Friedrichshagener Dichterkreis.
8 Oppenheimer approached social suffering as a poet, a writer and an urban physician; see Oppenheimer, *Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes*, 100–103 and 121–129.
looked, unconventional or marginal issues – elements that can perhaps better address those unarticulated aspects of ‘Jewish experience’ that may not feature traces of explicit ‘Jewish content.’” Silverman also advised against using the term “Jewish identity,” which she considered to be conceptually overloaded; she suggests instead the use of “‘Jewishness’ as an analytical category ... that is, the relationship between the constructed ideals of the ‘Jewish’ as opposed to the ‘non-Jewish’ – rather than any fixed notions of religion, ethnicity or culture.” Such an approach focuses on exploring the perceived boundaries between “Jewish” and “non-Jewish,” enriching our understanding of the Jewish experience within dynamic cultural frameworks.⁹

The prevalence of Jews in medical professions at the turn of the century is a prime example of the German Jewish experience woven into German cultural and social life.¹⁰ Medicine seemed to promise safe and stable earnings, as well as social esteem. However, this was also a time of crisis for the medical profession. The introduction of statutory health insurance and the excess supply of doctors increased competition for more lucrative private patients, aggravating the frustration and resentment of non-Jewish colleagues at Jewish physicians. Since pursuing an academic career for nonbaptized Jewish doctors was all but impossible, many of them turned to clinical specializations that enabled them to set up private practices.¹¹ Oppenheimer specialized in otolaryngology. He established a private practice, yet he struggled to attract patients. His public appointment as a general practitioner in a nearby first aid post helped. Insufficient earnings – along with his frontline experience treating a woeful Berlin underclass beset by a city undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization – led him to close his practice in 1896 and follow a new calling as a social economist.

The discipline of sociology was deeply rooted in social medicine. Oppenheimer’s medical background was not lost in the transition but, on the contrary, shaped his sociological stance. The convergence of sociology and medicine in Oppenheimer’s methodology and organicist thinking has already been adequately discussed in the literature.¹² Yet his Jewish perspective in this development has been widely ignored. His special interest in matters of race and the relationship between biology and sociology – as well as his dedication to combating academic racism and antisemitism – bear witness to such a relationship.

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¹⁰ While Jews comprised less than 1 percent of the population in Germany, they accounted for 10 to 16 percent of medical students between 1891 and 1911; 16 percent of physicians in Germany were Jewish in 1900; see Efron, Defenders of the Race, 30–31.

¹¹ Efron, Defenders of the Race, 30–32.

Antisemitism was a formative experience for Oppenheimer. Contrary to Kurt Tucholsky’s critic quoted at the outset of this chapter, Oppenheimer’s autobiography, completed two years before Hitler’s rise to power, is full of references to personal experiences and internalization, refutations of racial stereotypes, and expressions of Jewish pride – albeit not aimed specifically at combating the Nazi party.¹³ Tucholsky’s recognition of Jewishness solely in the final chapters of Oppenheimer’s autobiography, describing his explicit activity during the First World War for the relief of Jews in occupied Eastern Europe and in combating institutional antisemitism within the German military, can be perceived as a further manifestation of the problem of identifying Jewishness with Jewish content described by Silverman. Yet Tucholsky took a more sophisticated position in line with Silverman’s approach. In his short review of Oppenheimer’s autobiography, he mainly criticized Oppenheimer’s apparent vanity. As the “cross of Jewishness” Tucholsky singled out Oppenheimer’s relish in his mingling with Germany’s military elite and royalty and denounced it as subservience peeking out from beneath the cloak of conceitedness.¹⁴

Putting Tucholsky’s particular definition of the “cross of Jewishness” aside, a sense of its burden is omnipresent in Oppenheimer’s autobiography, which can be read as an apologetic defense against antisemitic slander, and at times as a proud manifest of Jewish belonging to Germany. The autobiography commenced with the following words: “I certainly can’t claim that I was ‘baptized’ [Oppenheimer used here the Berlin dialect jedooft] with Spree water; but I am an authentic Berliner, even a ‘fully authentic’ one [here, too, Oppenheimer wrote in Berlin dialect janz echter].” Oppenheimer played on the tension between not being baptized yet being totally immersed in the local dialect. He hypothesized that real Berliners were not high society in fine neighborhoods, but the social others, the proletariat, at Berlin’s furthest outskirts, in the Jewish quarter, and in other less well-to-do neighborhoods. In Berlin dialect these were labeled “Berlin j. d.” an acronym for janz draußen [way out] or “Berlin V” meaning Viehhof.

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¹³ Oppenheimer failed to recognize the danger emanating from the rapid rise of the Nazi party and of fascism in general. In early 1933 he considered the emergence of an “anticapitalist majority” of Communists, Social Democrats, and National Socialists as a positive sign. Due to their anticapitalist disposition, he considered supporters of the Nazi party as potential followers of his “liberal socialism” if only they would shake the yoke of the agrarian lobby and big industry. Shortly after the Nazi seizure of power, he tried to win over the masses in his book Weder so – noch so: Der Dritte Weg! The book was withdrawn from print soon after. Vogt, Franz Oppenheimer, 211–216. Other books by Oppenheimer such as Der Staat, Die soziale Frage and Das Grundgesetz der marxistischen Gesellschaft were banned and burned by the National Socialist German Student Union in mid-1933.

[stockyard] – a play both on the supposedly wild nature of these social outcasts, as well as the nickname for the Jewish quarter’s Scheunenviertel [Barn Quarter].

Oppenheimer was famous for utilizing the Berliner dialect in his extremely popular lectures and public talks. The dialect amplified Oppenheimer’s wit, humor and charisma. On occasion of Oppenheimer’s seventieth birthday a contemporary recalled:

My earliest Zionist memories show me an unforgettable picture of Franz Oppenheimer on the podium in front of an overfilled hall promoting with almost fanatical enthusiasm the “Oppenheimerian Utopia” … “Jeben Sie mir doch endlich das lumpige Jeld!” [“give me at last the paltry money” in Berlin dialect] he called at the end and stormed out. The phrase lived on in our circle as a saying … it revealed the whole man: the Berliner as well as the Jew.

Besides the dialect’s entertainment bonus, it was a conscious expression of Oppenheimer’s feeling of deep rootedness and belonging in Germany and Berlin, as well as the liberal conception that a shared tongue forms the foundation for belonging. Oppenheimer traced his maternal family’s settlement in Berlin to the seventeenth century and emphasized that his paternal side was part of an old dynasty mainly from lower Saxony and along the Rhine where Jews lived “before the first Germanics glimpsed the stream.” His father’s side supposedly also had Sephardic origins carrying the family name Ben Ari, meaning “lion’s son.” The lion was a part of the insignia of the tribe of Juda and implied the family’s noble descent from the house of David, according to Oppenheimer: “I will not deny that it is not an unpleasant consciousness to be aware of genealogical roots so deep in the soils of historical heroic epochs and to feel an offspring of Goliath’s slayer. Who can still boast such old nobility?” Oppenheimer’s claim to Sephardic lineage was not uncommon among German Jewry and especially Jewish anthropologists who in the time of the rise of race science came to view the Sephardi “as the equivalent of the Jewish ‘Aryan,’ a glorious figure, characterized by his nobility, breeding and poise. He was portrayed as the physical counterpoint to the ignoble Jew of Central and Eastern Europe.”

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15 Oppenheimer, Erlebtes, Erstrebttes, Erreichettes, 15.
16 Lokman, “Franz Oppenheimer: der Jude,” Jüdische Rundschau, March 28, 1934, 17. Oppenheimer’s academic lectures were just as popular, drawing at times an audience of over one thousand people; see Caspari and Lichtblau, Franz Oppenheimer, 80.
17 Oppenheimer, Erlebtes, Erstrebttes, Erreichettes, 35–38.
Oppenheimer’s interest in physical anthropology and racial theories permeated his autobiography. The supposed ignobility of the mixed breed manifested itself in the stereotypical Jewish racial features that Oppenheimer ascribed to himself. He internalized Enlightenment conceptions presupposing racial theory connecting aesthetics and morality, epitomized by notions of classical beauty that idealized facial features above all others.\(^{19}\) Oppenheimer felt he could never satisfy these ideals due to the inalterability of his nose. He described his ugliness as a baby with large eyes and an oversized nose,\(^ {20}\) adding that even though his complexion gradually improved, he could never attain “classical beauty” since the “famous ‘Hittite nose’ remained and branded me as a member of a race which was generally viewed and treated with a traditional – and somewhat benign – enmity by the blonde Berliner.”\(^ {21}\) As a sociologist and patriotic Berliner, he distinguished between traditional resentment utilized for differentiation between social groups living in close proximity, and the hate and enmity of “subsequent, quasi scientifically founded antisemitism of the upper classes.”\(^ {22}\) According to Oppenheimer, scientific antisemitism did far more to question Jewish belonging to Germany than the mockery of Jews by commoners.

While Oppenheimer transitioned from medicine to sociology, he worked as a freelance journalist. He was proud of the diverse subjects covered in his articles, joyfully recalling a remark by Maximilian Harden, editor of *Die Zukunft*, that Oppenheimer shoots at every hare that crosses his path.\(^ {23}\) As a first step on the way to understanding Oppenheimer’s Jewishness, this chapter focuses on the diverse issues Oppenheimer dealt with during this transition period – which was also a transition into the folds of the Zionist movement – and how they flowed into his social utopian thinking. An important focus of this inquiry into Oppenheimer’s intellectual biography is themes connected with the racial discourse that recurs often in Oppenheimer’s articles, because of their importance as an expression of Oppenheimer’s Jewishness. Furthermore, his numerous journal and newspaper contributions on the matter, as well as his input at the founding conventions of academic sociology in Germany, have often been ignored in prior research.


\(^{20}\) While the stereotype of the Jewish nose is widely known, Oppenheimer’s depiction of large eyes as characteristic of Jews was not that common. He referred to this stereotype again when talking about Galician Jews, e.g., Franz Oppenheimer, “Genossenschaftliche Kolonisation im Dienste der osteuropäischen Juden,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, May 31, 1901, 258.


\(^{22}\) Oppenheimer, *Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes*, 16.

They are, however, crucial to understanding his exceptional position among Jews and Zionists who dealt with racial issues. According to John Efron, “the most vocal and influential Jewish race scientists were German Zionists.” Many of them came from the medical profession. Since Oppenheimer filled both these criteria, an inquiry into his position seems overdue. Oppenheimer began dealing with racial issues as a physician and used this experience to transform himself into a sociologist for whom researching antisemitism was “unfortunately, a part of my [Oppenheimer’s] scientific business.”

Race science, anthropology and medicine were practically synonymous from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Physical anthropologists were physicians who either autodidactically acquired the methods of racial theory or learned it from racial scientists with a medical background. They published their findings on the racial determination of certain diseases and pathological conditions in medical journals. In a sense “the medical profession echoed in the language of science the German’s concerns about the anomalous position of the Jews.”

As an expert physician, Oppenheimer dealt with the scientific expression of these concerns in articles and reviews published in popular newspapers, as well as in professional journals. As a Jew marginalized through racial theory, he attempted to fight back through intervention in racial discourse. His subtle repudiations of some of the main tropes of scientific antisemitism – such as Jewish susceptibility to mental illness, sexual deviousness and physical degeneracy – should be considered an expression of his Jewishness.

From Medicine to Sociology: An Organicist Approach to Utopia

Since the mid-nineteenth century, anthropology has aimed to empirically establish the place of human beings in nature. The assumption was that harmony between natural man and the universe is paralleled by harmony between body and soul, expressed in a manner that can be empirically determined. This led to the founding of phrenology and physiognomy as methods of supposedly determining the personality of an individual or group by analyzing the shape and size of the skull or facial traits, respectively. Even in his earliest articles in popular newspapers, Oppenheimer dealt with these purported scientific developments.

26 Efron, *Defenders of the Race*, 17.
27 Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, 2.
Whereas Oppenheimer was dismissive of phrenology – going through great lengths to prove the inconsistency of its advocates’ arguments – he supported physiognomy and the supposition of a connection between bodily appearance and personality. Oppenheimer nevertheless argued that the possibility of inferring from one to the other did not necessarily entail the conclusion that physique and personality were unalterable. On the contrary, he argued that empirical findings demonstrated that even the supposedly inalterable and racially predetermined skull could be shaped at will at a young age.²⁸

According to Oppenheimer, both body and personality could be shaped by human effort. Either one could be the starting point for the alteration process, with psychology being the link between these two spheres. It was important for him that this link would not be attributed to a physical location, either in the nervous system or any other body part. Consciousness was the connection between body and character, which made it a term of crucial importance to Oppenheimer’s sociological construction of identity and belonging. Ideas introduced into the consciousness through the senses or memory could have immediate physical responses. In a review of the psychosocial aspects of Max Hirsch’s medical manual about suggestion and hypnosis, Oppenheimer wrote that consciousness was prone to suggestibility, allowing it to be influenced and shaped by other people’s ideas, subsequently affecting even the body. He believed the physician, for example, could apply suggestion therapy, especially when functional disorders of the nervous system had no anatomic sources, to facilitate the body’s healing process by strengthening the patient’s belief in his own healing power. This concept also formed a fundamental principle in Oppenheimer’s cooperative principle of mutual aid. Beyond its advantages for physical health, suggestion therapy was for him fundamental for the formation and separation of social groups and the creation of a shared consciousness transforming individuals into organic society: “Suggestion is one of the most powerful formative forces in the works of human life. It is everywhere the ultimate cause of mass movement in state and society ... Through powerful, inherited beliefs, it transforms youths into useful citizens ... mellow citizens into blood thirsty beasts. ... it connects people in close blood ties and separates them as lurking foes.”²⁹

Oppenheimer regarded his medical-social approach as part of a long tradition of physicians-turned-sociologists and -economists starting with Bernard

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²⁹ Franz Oppenheimer, “Suggestion und Hypnose,” Vossische Zeitung, January 7, 1894. There are no page numbers in the Sunday supplement.
de Mandeville and François Quesnay. As physicians, they observed how bodily organs acting in their own interest nevertheless provided for natural harmony and furthered the well-being of the whole organism. As liberal social thinkers they viewed society as an organism whose health depended on a stable harmonic equilibrium between all classes pursuing their own interests. This had a couple of implications for Oppenheimer. First, egoistic action was not to be admonished as immoral and corrosive to social cohesion. On the contrary, it was to be fostered as the bonding agent of society. Hence, a harmonic state of society was not characterized by an absence of conflicted interests, but by their natural balance. Second, an organicist perspective endorsed an economy founded on division of labor, since cohesion, growth and complexity of an organism depended on the ability of social groups to adapt and specialize in specific tasks, thereby metaphorically forming different organs in the body. Third, society has regenerative powers just like an organism. A social diagnosis must consider the balance and harmony of organic society as a whole, as opposed to focusing on the condition of any particular social group, class or organ as a point of reference.

Oppenheimer, who especially in his early works was a “flaming supporter of organismism,” was well aware of the intellectual pitfalls of this philosophy. He emphasized that an organicist approach to society was only a metaphor enabling a heuristic investigation of society. It did not imply that societies go through the

30 Franz Oppenheimer, “Physiologie und Pathologie des sozialen Körpers,” in Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze, vol. 1, Wege zur Gemeinschaft (Munich: Verlag der Hochschulbuchhandlung Max Hueber, 1924), 30. Since this speech was given to a medical audience, Oppenheimer emphasized the connection between medicine and sociology. Organicist and medical thinking were nevertheless the foundations of Oppenheimer’s sociological system. Stölting regarded Oppenheimer’s self-portrayal in a medical-sociological tradition as arbitrary, since he could just as well have named many other nonphysicians agriculturally oriented thinkers as his predecessors; see Stölting, “Medizinisches und soziologisches Denken,” 50.


32 According to Erhard Stölting, organicist thought always expressed a conservative tendency. However, Stölting regarded Oppenheimer as “anything but conservative” and as free of racist or social Darwinist tendencies. He claimed that Oppenheimer had always distanced himself from organicist analogies despite being influenced by biological-medical thought. Stölting, “Medizinisches und soziologisches Denken,” 43–44. However, Oppenheimer’s relationship to organicist thought was more complex. His dissociation from organicism was certainly not clear cut. Haselbach showed where especially the young Oppenheimer criticized, but also adopted, organicism. Organicism was a too narrow foundation for Oppenheimer’s goal of establishing sociology as an exact quantitative science. He limited organicism’s role in sociology to qualitative conclusions about society, while distancing himself from other organicist theorists. At any rate, his System of Sociology bears obvious affinity to organicism. His group theory, in particular, was derived
life cycle of an organism, with a period of youth leading to maturity until old age and decay [Untergang] kick in, and every society ultimately dying. He argued that societies have indeed risen and fallen in history but never due to decay. Their eventual demise was caused by external threats or internal pressures. An organicist understanding of society was therefore not necessarily conducive to cultural pessimism. On the contrary, organicism’s positive reassessment of the human ego planted the seed to a utopian optimism centered on individual freedom in the economic, religious and political spheres.33

In Oppenheimer’s utopian vision, the organism metaphor replaced the need for a fixed model of the perfect society. It postulated a natural, primordial and healthy condition of society that could be reached organically. An analysis of the symptoms of society’s supposed sickness would discover the source and point the way towards the necessary intervention. The source of society’s woes would most probably be external since organic systems usually lose their natural balance through external influences. Once found, the social physician could remove the malign foreign influence like he would in the human organism, thus facilitating society’s regeneration to its healthy condition. In Oppenheimer’s opinion, the main task of the sociologist was not to postulate the form of the perfect society but to remove obstructions to society’s free and natural development. Oppenheimer regarded state institutions as the main culprit of society’s woes. The healing of society would require the removal or reformation of those state institutions contaminating society under the auspices of the “tutelary custodianship” of the social physician acting as an “enlightened despot.”34

Yet the absence of an existing healthy society, of a utopian prototype, impeded the ability of the social physician to determine the normative state of society and judge which state institutions were the cause of the sickness. To solve this problem, Oppenheimer turned to Greek philosophy. He argued that the perfect society needed to be imagined as an ideal primal society founded on natural law or a social contract, as a tool for deducing its makeup and as a normative point of comparison. Yet in accordance with the temporal turn in utopian thinking since the end of the eighteenth century, utopian constructs ceased to be perceived as an unreachable island but instead became a subjective dream of a better future attainable through a transformative “social process.”35

from organicist thought and Herbert Spencer’s evolutionist sociology. Haselbach, Franz Oppenheimer, 36–38.
33 Oppenheimer, “Physiologie und Pathologie,” 32–33.
34 Oppenheimer, “Physiologie und Pathologie,” 34 and 43–44.
According to Oppenheimer, modern liberal and mythical thought followed organicist tradition. Yet these two approaches differed greatly in the ability to accept change and add a dynamic dimension to their utopian society. Mythical thinking was pessimistic. It imagined the growth and diversification of society as inevitably endangering a supposed natural and original community, ultimately leading to its degeneration. Liberal thought was optimistic in imagining the growth of society and political entities within a dynamic “social process” with positive utopian horizons. Oppenheimer viewed Adam Smith as the pioneer of a liberal utopian imagination whose premise was that a small society could grow and develop while maintaining its ideals, if spared from the political violence of the state.

Another difference between mythical and liberal expressions of organicism was that the former portrayed societies or nations as having a unique soul and innate national characteristics. By contrast, liberal organicism traced the sources of national character to political and economic distinctions and not in-born racial constitutions. When Oppenheimer referred to a Volksseele [people’s soul], it was in an illustrative manner, attempting to “carefully circumvent the edge of the crater that can drag one down into abysmal mysticism.” When he referred to the saying that a healthy soul resides in a healthy body to describe society, he ascribed to society a normative ideal of health that could be restored through social reform.

Oppenheimer’s organicism was geared towards a utopian regeneration of society. Yet it brought him into the racial discourse of his time in which an aestheticized medical science served as the yardstick to measure races, with superior races (and individuals) considered healthy and inferior ones sick, infectious and degenerate. “The continuous transition from science to aesthetics is a cardinal feature of modern racism,” wrote George Mosse. “Human nature came to be defined in aesthetic terms, with significant stress on the outward physical signs of inner rationality and harmony.” Anthropology and especially the medical fields of forensics, sexology and psychiatry composed the area of transition de-

38 Franz Oppenheimer, “Unsittlichkeit und Erziehung,” *Neue Deutsche Rundschau (Freie Bühne)* 6 (1895): 596.
40 Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, 2.
termining behavioral norms and legitimizing “the distinction between normality and abnormality.” The purpose here was to provide scientific legitimacy for pre-existing conceptions of society’s outsider. “Racism sought to perpetuate medical notions which were based on prejudice, rather than science, at a time when these were slowly changing.”

**Countering Cultural Pessimism and Concepts of Degeneration**

Romanticism of nature – and its disruption through rationalism, industrialism and urbanization – was popular in Germany during the fin-de-siècle. It gave rise to the dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* [community and society] fundamental to German sociology in its early stages, which differentiated it from English-language and French sociology, with its fundamental dichotomy of state and society, and imbued it with an anticapitalist overtone. Romanticism of nature also underpinned theories of degeneration and decay which became popular among the educated classes as a means of rejecting progress, liberalism and cosmopolitanism. Instead, they promoted a *völkish* ideology, including a return to imagined national roots and a life lived closer to nature. Although Oppenheimer endorsed the romantic ideals of a return to nature – both as a social economist and as a physician – he also vehemently fought the pessimism and antiliberalism that accompanied degeneration theories. Especially in his early writings he participated in this discourse from a medical perspective.

In a scientific book review for a popular newspaper, Oppenheimer was clearly supportive of William Hirsch’s undertaking to counteract attempts by Moreau

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41 Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, xiv–xviii.
42 According to Georg Lukács, the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* was the foundation of the “new school of German sociology”; see Dirk Käsler, *Die frühe deutsche Soziologie 1909 bis 1934 und ihre Entstehungs-Milieus: Eine wissenschaftssoziologische Untersuchung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1984), 177–178. Käsler brought further opinions on German sociology’s distinguishing characteristics. René König was critical of the influence of this terminological polarity on German sociology; see René König, *Soziologie in Deutschland: Begründer, Verräter, Verfechter* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1987), 86–87. The term *Gemeinschaft* gained on popularity in the Weimar Republic as a countermage of bourgeois society; see Erhard Stölting, *Akademische Soziologie in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1986), 346–348.
43 For more on conceptions of degeneration, decadence and decay [Untergang] and their effects on Zionist thought, see Stefan Vogt, “Between Decay and Doom: Zionist Discourses of ‘Untergang’ in Germany, 1890 to 1933,” in *The German-Jewish Experience Revisited*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim and Vivian Liska (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015).
de Tours and Cesare Lombroso to radically confine the spectrum of mental health to unremarkable mediocrity by equating genius with insanity. Hirsch questioned the capability of science to draw up a catalog of symptoms providing a clear dividing line between mental health and illness. Oppenheimer quoted him, saying “there is nothing more erroneous and unscientific than to assume a so-called normal person and to classify everything deviating from it as ill.”

In Oppenheimer’s opinion, this was valid for mental illness, as well as for attempts to infer physical illness from irregular physical traits alone. No individual traits or symptoms could form the basis of valid psychological diagnosis. Rather, one must conduct a systematic analysis referring only to the individual, their complex symptoms and history of psychic prolapses. “Furthermore,” Oppenheimer added, “a very personal taste that may subjectively be the supreme judge in aesthetic questions cannot possibly be considered as an objective supreme judge in psychiatric questions.”

Hirsch continued to deride this obsession with sickness and degeneration as the reflection of an enfeebled mental health community. As a case in point, Oppenheimer highlighted Hirsch’s criticism of the writings of Max Nordau, a neurologist, cultural critic and Zionist leader who believed the modern era to be plagued with hysteria and degeneration, and who viewed metropolises as “sorrowful hospitals.” According to Hirsch there was nothing unusual about the modern age. Collective hysteria expressed in the then fashionable diagnosis of neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion) and superstition has always been a part of human history and was a motor for change. The exaggerated use of the term “degeneration” thus needed to be curbed, Hirsch argued, as there was no statistical evidence supporting the cultural pessimist claim that the modern age was more afflicted by degeneration and hysteria than any before.

Although Oppenheimer shared with Nordau both an organicist approach to society, which advocated the healing power of sport and the creation of a “muscular Judaism,” as well as the wish to protect liberalism and rationalism, he disagreed with Nordau’s diagnosis of society as degenerate. This balancing act was typical of German Zionists who retained a liberal, emancipatory worldview.

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44 Franz Oppenheimer, “Genie und Entartung,” Vossische Zeitung, December 9, 1894. There are no page numbers in the Sunday supplement.
45 Oppenheimer, “Genie und Entartung.”
46 Oppenheimer, “Genie und Entartung.”
47 For an overview of Nordau’s writing on race and degeneration, see Melanie A. Murphy, Max Nordau’s Fin-de-siècle Romance of Race (New York: P. Lang, 2007). For more on Nordau’s unique contribution to the degeneration discourse and its influence on Zionism, see Vogt, “Between Decay and Doom,” 80–81.
being abandoned in the society around them, and made futile attempts to recon-
cile them with up and coming völkish conceptions.⁴⁸ However, their attempts to
renegotiate these irreconcilable ideological differences enabled Oppenheimer
and Nordau to remain relevant within the framework of contemporary racial-sci-
entific discourse in which medicine and society were interlinked.

Oppenheimer questioned the hypothesis that the increased frequency of
mental illness resulted from a corrupting influence of culture. In an article pub-
lished in a medical journal in 1900, he claimed that statistics demonstrating an
increase offered no clue as to the causes or solutions of this complex phenom-
ena. Yet he conceded that mental illness might, indeed, be one of many victims
in “the war of civilization against barbarism.” In the civilizing process, he ar-
gued, traditional law was replaced with one founded on reason and technology.
Such a vast process was beneficial overall but not without shortcomings and vic-
tims. For example, it brought suffering to the colonized indigenous peoples and
hunger to craftsmen competing against modern industry.⁴⁹

Oppenheimer argued that when focusing on the psychological effects of the
civilizing process, both positive and negative effects need to be weighed out
against each other. He presented such a balance drawn up by renowned psychia-
trist and neurologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, one of the main advocates of diag-
nosing neurasthenia in Germany. Krafft-Ebing clearly blamed modern civilization
for the rising frequency of mental illness and degeneration. Nevertheless, he con-
sidered this a small price to pay for the tremendous contribution of civilization to-
wards the evolution of humankind. Oppenheimer emphasized Krafft-Ebing’s op-
inion that the most devastating result of modern civilization was the creation of
metropolises, as well as the obsession with wealth and luxury resulting in cut-
throat capitalist competition. Yet he disagreed with Krafft-Ebing’s pessimist prog-
nosis that the symptoms will only be aggravated in the future. Oppenheimer ar-
gued that metropolises were not a unique phenomenon of modern times. They
already existed in antiquity, built on the backs of slaves. Modern industrial slavery
has led to their contemporary recurrence. The inexistence of metropolises between
antiquity and the modern era gave Oppenheimer cause for cultural optimism. It
seemed to him that they were not caused by linear cultural accumulation but
were rather symptoms of a temporary phase or crisis.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Franz Oppenheimer, “Kultur und Geisteskrankheit,” Die medicinische Woche, September 24,
October 1, October 8, October 15, 1900, 381.
⁵⁰ Oppenheimer, “Kultur und Geisteskrankheit,” 381.
Crisis, another term out of the medical lexicon, was not all negative for Oppenheimer. He saw it as nature’s way of calling the physician’s attention to the source of the problem. The social physician Oppenheimer located the crisis in modern industrial slavery, which aligned him with Marxist influenced socialists of his time. Yet Oppenheimer critically differed in focusing not on the urban proletariat but on a rural one whose migration to cities fueled the growth of the urban proletariat. The migration of rural workers was mainly caused by the obstruction of land through large manor holdings which he called Bodensperre [land enclosure]. Once this economic protectionism favoring gentry manor holders – enforced by the brute political power of the state – was removed, a natural healing process would begin, and the flow of migration would be reversed. The urban proletariat would return to the countryside as free farmers toiling on their own lands.

In his view, tealing society would thus not require a revolution or even political reform. The main tool facilitating this process would be the creation of cooperative agricultural settlements, which Oppenheimer called Siedlungsgenossenschaften [settlement cooperatives]. Not only would these assist in reversing migration from the cities to the countryside; they would also start a snowball reaction by attracting farmers from the large manors through higher wages and the promise of independence. They would further aggravate the shortage of labor on large manors, eroding their profitability and resulting in the eventual downfall of this “remainder of the old feudalism.” The anarcho-capitalist leaning, liberal-socialist Oppenheimer believed that with the abolishment of land enclosure the last hurdle to the creation of a truly free market would be lifted. The class of large manor holders, which Oppenheimer considered the most dangerous foreign element to the social organism, would be “social-hygienically extruded.” With the victory of the rural proletarian class the last stages in the regeneration of society could unfold, culminating in a social utopia in which it would not be necessary to choose between freedom and equality, or between liberalism and socialism. 

51 Stölting, “Medizinisches und soziologisches Denken,” 44.
Interpreting Darwinist Evolution between Socialism and *Rassenhygiene*

Oppenheimer’s reference to hygiene quoted at the end of the last section contextualized his position within an area of convergence of various threads of utopian and scientific thought at the closing years of the nineteenth century. The hygienic discourse shaped Oppenheimer’s transition from medicine to sociology, as well as to utopian socialism. He wrote, “hygiene is a sociological discipline and, as such, closely related to national economy.” Public and private hygiene presented a technocratic administrative task requiring cooperation between various experts: physicians, engineers, architects and administrators.⁵³ For Oppenheimer the career of Rudolph Virchow – who set out as a pathologist to research typhus in Silesia and Bavaria and returned as a politician demanding urgent social reforms – embodied the political imperatives of the hygienic discourse.

Oppenheimer was fascinated with Virchow for a variety of reasons. First, he regarded Virchow’s cell research as groundbreaking and fundamental for organismic thought. Second, Virchow fulfilled Oppenheimer’s definition of scientific genius, due to his ability to fuse different fields of science together into a new “higher” field. This was an enormous contribution to what Oppenheimer perceived as the ultimate goal of science: the integration of all its disciplines into one system. In order to advance this goal Oppenheimer focused on synthesizing biology with sociology. Finally, due to his experience as urban physician Oppenheimer shared Virchow’s conviction that social conditions facilitated the spread of many epidemics such as tuberculosis. Oppenheimer argued that a physician’s task must be broadened from the focus on healing individuals to the healing of society.⁵⁴ For this purpose, Virchow founded social medicine with hygiene as its main tool, striving “to ensure the best possible development of already existing traits ... by creating a highly favorable environment or living conditions for a given population.”⁵⁵ Oppenheimer called hygiene “the art of the ‘medical statesman’” or, in other words, practical sociology.⁵⁶

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⁵⁵ Sheila Faith Weiss, *Race Hygiene and National Efficiency: The Eugenics of Wilhelm Schallmayr* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 121. By the 1890s, Virchow’s comprehensive understanding of social hygiene was replaced by a narrower focus on bacteriology. This ensued from Robert Koch’s astounding discovery of tuberculosis and cholera bacilli in 1882 and 1883, respectively. See Weiss, *Race Hygiene*, 17–18.
Social medicine’s sudden popularity at the end of the nineteenth century gave rise to new disciplines such as *Sozialhygiene*, a precursor to public health, and *Rassenhygiene*, the German terms for eugenics. Oppenheimer was at first positively inclined towards *Rassenhygiene*. He was full of praise for Alfred Ploetz who coined the name *Rassenhygiene*, though he felt Ploetz was overzealous in the centrality attributed to the new theory.\(^5\) In contrast to English eugenics, German *Rassenhygiene* was a discourse in which the participation of physicians was predominant. It was then a developing and increasingly specializing field of medicine, and one which presented a source of self-criticism on the possibly adverse role that medicine played in evolution by supporting the sick and weak.\(^5\)

Oppenheimer did not rule out social Darwinist arguments concerning the negative effects of medical intervention, of *Sozialhygiene*, on “biological fitness.” In fact, he admitted that – besides its clear benefits for the working class – medical progress may have encumbered the advances of *Rassenhygiene* by decreasing infant mortality rates, thus allowing many “inferior” elements of society to reach a reproductive age. According to Oppenheimer, one of the most important contributions of *Rassenhygiene* to medicine was the positive connotation it gave some diseases, due to their eugenic “sociological” benefits.\(^5\) With this newfound appreciation for disease, Oppenheimer tapped into an important common denominator between neurologists and psychiatrists, on one side, and eugenicists on the other. To put it another way, the theory of the hereditary origin of neurasthenia and degeneration helped relieve physicians of performance pressures, as the medical establishment had, to that point, lacked any therapeutic success with “Imperial Germany’s nonproductive or otherwise dangerous elements: the insane, the criminal, the feeble-minded, the homosexual and the alcoholic.” Consequently, these groups were collectively labeled as degenerates whose treat-

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\(^5\) Oppenheimer, “Kultur und Geisteskrankheit,” 382. Oppenheimer was referring to Alfred Ploetz’s *Die Tüchtigkeit unserer Rasse und der Schutz der Schwachen*, Berlin 1895. Oppenheimer misquoted the title as *Die Züchtung unserer Rassen*, using the plural form “races” and replacing the word “efficiency” with the word “breeding,” which fit in better with his argumentation. It is important to note that Oppenheimer advocated for *Rassenhygiene* at a time when Ploetz’s book had not yet received much attention. Weiss, *Race Hygiene*, 178, footnote 1.


ment was agglomerated under the “social question,” as it was called, together with others uprooted and pauperized as a result of the industrial revolution.⁶⁰

Oppenheimer did however criticize the lack of empirical evidence concerning hereditary transmission of mental illness. He distanced himself from the negative approach of Rassenhygiene advocates who, by extending the hygienic principle to the political sphere, tended to focus on the reduction of offspring from people with supposedly inferior genetics. Oppenheimer preferred the positive approach of English eugenics, whose founder, Francis Galton, aimed to increase the production of offspring from people with supposedly superior genetics, and assist in the development of presumably superior mental capacities.⁶¹

With this approach to Rassenhygiene, Oppenheimer attempted to rebut Krafft-Ebing’s cultural pessimism. He argued that human mental capacities were not strained, but rather advanced by industrialization and civilization. However, he also thought that the shift in urban life from physical to mental labor disturbed the balance between the steadily advancing mind and the neglected body, causing a rise in mental illnesses. In places like factories where physical labor remained strong, machines and the division of labor made work monotonous and repetitive: the body as a whole was not activated, only the mind or specific body parts. Oppenheimer endorsed gymnastics and noncompetitive sport as a remedy to the side effect of physical degeneration. In the Jewish context, gymnastics were the key for balancing Jewish lopsided intellectualism, especially in Eastern Europe. This connected Oppenheimer with other Zionist thinkers such as Max Nordau who called for the creation of “muscular Judaism.” Yet this was crucial for the entire urban proletariat to which most Eastern European Jews belonged. He considered the growing popularity of physical training in the industrial era as proof of nature’s organic healing powers and natural striving for equilibrium and harmony.⁶²

Oppenheimer also criticized eugenic schemes of human breeding. In his opinion, the goal of Rassenhygiene was not to restore an “Aryan” body idealized in the presumed gigantic dimensions of Teutonic antiquity, but rather to support the ultimate evolutionary goal of mind development by strengthening the body. Human breeding programs were bound to fail, due to their misjudged focus on what they defined as desirable traits, thus neglecting a holistic breeding approach. A successful endeavor should be attentive to nature’s balancing power

⁶⁰ Weiss, Race Hygiene, 21–22. For an in-depth theoretical and statistical study of the social question with special focus on Oppenheimer, see Kruck, Franz Oppenheimer, 36–67.
⁶¹ Weingart, Kroll and Bayertz, Rasse, Blut und Gene, 38–39; Weiss, Race Hygiene, 80.
disclosed by nature’s tendencies, as well as the complex heredity and social influences on the breeding process.⁶³

At its inception some of the main adherents of Rassenhygiene were not necessarily openly antisemitic. For example, in his early writings Ploetz objected to the association of Rassenhygiene with antisemitism. He ascribed a positive role to Jews and miscegenation. With his turn towards racial purity, he revised this view. In 1911, Ploetz cofounded a secret “Nordic Ring” within the German society for Rassenhygiene and other pro-Aryan and antisemitic völkisch organizations. Wilhelm Schallmayer, cofounder of Rassenhygiene, also opposed racist interpretations of Rassenhygiene and support from within its ranks for Aryan supremacy. In his opinion, class differences made more of an impact than racial ones.⁶⁴ Both Schallmayer and Ploetz linked Rassenhygiene with socialism, regarding capitalism and class privilege as detrimental to sexual selection. Oppenheimer and other leaders of German socialism shared with the main proponents of Rassenhygiene the faith in progress that natural sciences would provide a better future for the working class and further the scientific foundation for dismantling class privilege.⁶⁵

Some time earlier, in 1877, Ernst Haeckel, one of the main Darwinist apostles in Germany, sought to drive a wedge between Darwinists and Social Democrats by publicly rejecting this association in a public debate with Virchow. In 1900, the industrialist Friedrich Alfred Krupp initiated and sponsored a competition that to prove socialism and Darwinism were incompatible, and that Darwinism was not a threat to the state but, on the contrary, crucial to its preservation in being applied in population management. Haeckel agreed to preside over this competition, which was won by Schallmayer with his book Vererbung und Auslese [Heredity and selection]. Haeckel’s endorsement of Schallmayer endowed Rassenhygiene with the aura of being the official representative of social Darwinism in Germany.⁶⁶

Oppenheimer’s medical and socialist background informed his view of Darwin’s scientific acumen. He admired Darwin and opposed what he perceived as a misappropriation of his writings.⁶⁷ Oppenheimer caught on to the conservative bias of the Krupp competition and joined the chorus of critics of Schallmayer’s winning treatise, which later became, in a revised edition, the standard eugenic

⁶⁴ Weingart, Kroll and Bayertz, Rasse, Blut und Gene, 91–102; Weiss, Race Hygiene, 148–149.
⁶⁵ Weingart, Kroll and Bayertz, Rasse, Blut und Gene, 103–112.
⁶⁶ Weingart, Kroll and Bayertz, Rasse, Blut und Gene, 113–120; Weiss, Race Hygiene, 64–89.
⁶⁷ Franz Oppenheimer, Freiland in Deutschland (Berlin: W. F. Fontane, 1895), 35.
textbook in Germany.⁶⁸ The competition required all participants to take an interdisciplinary approach linking politics, biology, sociology and other disciplines. The critics, including Oppenheimer, who published not one but two reviews in popular newspapers, repudiated this encroachment into their fields and the subsequent intellectual superficiality it allegedly produced. Oppenheimer emphasized that Schallmayer underestimated the cultural and material influences of socioeconomic conditions in racial evolution such as nutrition, housing and treatment, thus failing in his attempts to distance himself from racial theorists.⁶⁹

Schallmayer responded that his subject matter was social biology and the problem of degeneration, and not socioeconomic themes. He rejected Oppenheimer’s allegation that this was due to a lack of exposure to socioeconomic literature on land reform. After all, he dedicated a part of his work to an analysis of land reform in China. He simply did not concur with Oppenheimer’s view that once all people are sufficiently nourished and free the problems of selection will become superfluous. Oppenheimer’s contention only reinforced his conviction that the founding of the new discipline Rassenhygiene was necessary.⁷⁰ This new discipline needed to be distinguishable from social anthropology, public hygiene and social theory. Most of Schallmayer’s critics came from these fields. In order to distinguish Rassenhygiene from social anthropology, a term used at the time for racial theorists working “to provide a scientific legitimation for ideologies of Aryan supremacy,” Schallmayer preferred Germans use the term “Eugenic” or at least “Rassehygiene” with race in the singular, instead of plural, form. This was, however, futile since the term “Rassenhygiene,” coined by Ploetz, was already in circulation.⁷¹

While openly distancing himself from racial theorists, Schallmayer wished for cooperation between eugenicists and public hygienists. Initially, the main conflict was over the accusation that public hygienists promote counterselection through their success at decreasing infant mortality, thus harming the overall strength and vitality of the nation. Schallmayer emphasized that no eugenicist was calling for an end to public hygiene. Rather, a delineation of the methods, scope and focus of the two fields – and the recognition of the two fields as in-

⁶⁸ Weiss, Race Hygiene, 74 and 90–125 for a full account of the critics.
⁷¹ Weiss, Race Hygiene, 92–104.
dependent disciplines at an even status level – would be the most beneficial for the necessary cooperation “in a larger overarching ‘biological policy’ or ‘national biology’ – a systematic program to upgrade the biological fitness of the nation.” Yet the goal, according to Schallmayer, should be determined by Rassenhygiene.⁷²

The strategy of cooperation through separation was also employed by Ploetz to deal with conflicts between social and eugenic policy. Like Schallmayer, Ploetz was an opponent of liberal free market capitalism and Darwinist interpretations that supported it, preferring a scientifically founded state socialism. According to Ploetz, the solution to this conflict of interests was to recognize the primacy of the biological over the economic perspective. Once heredity laws were understood and acted upon, the struggle for existence in the form of capitalist selection would not be necessary at all. Social policy could be enacted without the risk of long-term damage to the biological constitution of the nation through overproportionate support for the innately “unfit.”⁷³ In his reply to Oppenheimer, Schallmayer quoted the zoologist Heinrich Ernst Ziegler, who was one of the three judges in the Krupp competition, to vouch for his “tendency to a socialism corresponding to the inclination of our time” and focusing on individual dispositions, instead of on a “socialism soliciting the favor of the masses.”⁷⁴

Schallmayer called for a fusion of social sciences with natural sciences, whereby biology would be the foundation.⁷⁵ Oppenheimer, who also proposed connecting biology and sociology with the goal of uniting all science, accused Schallmayer of arbitrarily picking and choosing biological theories of descent. Oppenheimer took especially strong umbrage at Schallmayer’s rejection of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics and at the adaptation of August Weismann’s emphasis on selection and limitation of evolution to variations in hereditary substance. He accused Schallmayer of being driven by ideology, since he lacked biological expertise beyond his medical training.⁷⁶ Oppenheimer was greatly influenced by neo-Lamarckism, which was at its climax in popularity. Lamarck’s inheritance theory was crucial for Op-

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⁷² Weiss, Race Hygiene, 114–125, citation on p. 123.
⁷³ Weiss, Race Hygiene, 104–114.
⁷⁴ Schallmayer, Beiträge zu einer Nationalbiologie, 235.
⁷⁵ Weiss, Race Hygiene, 84 and 104–114.
⁷⁶ Oppenheimer, “Darwinistische Soziologie,” 8; Oppenheimer, “Vererbung und Auslese,” 2. The rules of the competition practically required the participants to choose between Lamarckism and Weismannism. See Weiss, Race Hygiene, 69 and 77.
penheimer’s understanding of race as dynamic and malleable within the span of one or two generations, which he called “plasticity of race.”

Like Schallmayer, Oppenheimer believed in the importance of the struggle for existence in a moderate climate for an optimal evolution of a people through Darwinist “adaptation.” Yet Oppenheimer’s arguments for the advantages of a moderate climate were of a technological nature, whereas, as a proponent of Weismann, Schallmayer was concerned about extreme weather damaging the germ-plasm containing the hereditary substance. Oppenheimer considered climate to be the educator of humanity and the sole adversary of the struggle for existence. In his opinion, all humans descended from a common forefather in a tropical land full of apes. This forefather was not the biblical creation but a man with very limited reason. Human evolution was first and foremost an evolution of the mind. Consequently, Oppenheimer understood civilization in a technical sense. The human being was, in the words of Benjamin Franklin, a “tool-making animal.”

Oppenheimer’s perspective on evolution and civilization was fundamentally Eurocentric. The balance between creativity and motivation to work was best when climate-induced hardship and volatility existed in a moderate form. Most regions of the world were either too fruitful, making hard work superfluous, or too harsh, making hard work unrewarding. Europe was exceptional in its optimal balance. The young Oppenheimer recognized early technological accomplishments such as fire making, weapons and canoes originating outside of Europe. Yet it did not deter him from asserting European evolutionary supremacy. He was a socialist utopian protecting the underprivileged, and yet his defense of “primitives” facing an overpowering “tropical nature that still today often mocks the domination power of the white man” was not without a patronizing note.

Further, Oppenheimer argued that extreme weather and diets had made Eskimos and Africans into “passive” rather than ‘active races,’ whose history is world history” deprived of “candidacy for something better.” Oppenheimer propagated the idea that belonging to a historical people meant being colonial, an important convergence of the racial and colonial discourses.

77 For more on Oppenheimer’s concept of “plasticity of race,” see chapter 2.
78 For more on Weismann’s influence on Schallmayer’s theories, see Weiss, Race Hygiene, 115–120.
80 Oppenheimer, “Der Einfluss des Klimas,” 1823–1824
81 Oppenheimer, “Der Einfluss des Klimas,” 1827.
82 Vogt, Subalterne Positionierungen, 113.
Oppenheimer explained that climate changes forced Europe’s forefathers out of tropical regions to Asia where new civilizations, technologies and organizational systems, with slavery being the most important, were created. New waves of immigrations of their former kinsmen – now disparaged as barbarian invasions – paved the path to Europe. This was “a new step in the development of the human race, until now the largest and most important.” The moderate climate of Europe “hardens the human being but does not annihilate it.” Europe’s soil “demands hard work but is also worthwhile.” The most unique development brought forth by the settlement of Europe was “for the first time a powerful separation into distinct tribes, who have never lost the consciousness of being sons of a people.” The competition between these tribes prevented the creation of a central power with its tendency to exploitation and slavery.⁸³

Oppenheimer’s early evolutionary treatises already contained the foundation of his identity theory, which elucidated the tension between a “tribal” or national consciousness of origin on the one side, and European cohesion, on the other, as well as his faith in a decentralized Europe proud of its regional idiosyncrasies. Oppenheimer’s Germanophile vein was also revealed here in the claim that humanity has reached its highest point with the Teutons. Yet Oppenheimer made another identity-revealing remark regarding waves of Eastern European immigration, especially of Jews fleeing pogroms that were taking place at the time he was writing. He posited that Slavs were different – because they were not formed by a (Western) European climate, but by one similar to the Asian steppe – and therefore that their barbaric invasions no longer posed a threat. Western European culture was simply too strong to be overrun. On the contrary, Western European culture could progress when

[that, which the wild natural selection of nature in the struggle for survival began is continued by deliberate natural selection of man ... so high can the race someday stand that evolves beyond itself through deliberate natural selection of man: Germanic warrior strength and Hellenic beauty, Gallic spirit and German profundity. That is the “Übermensch” of which we dream.⁸⁴

It is important to note that Oppenheimer’s “deliberate natural selection” did not aim to protect Teutonic blood from invaders and sanctify race as a glorious past; rather, it sought to understand Darwinism as a continuous and positive process of evolution and miscegeny merging supposed positive characteristics of different (European) peoples, with race as a promise for a common European future.

⁸⁴ Oppenheimer, “Der Einfluss des Klimas,” 1828.
Population Policy and Oppenheimer’s Settlement Cooperative

Comparisons between the birthrates of one’s own Volk with adjacent, competing ones was another important theme of cultural pessimism and the degeneration discourse conjoined with racial theories. Both decreasing and increasing birthrates could be, and were, interpreted as foreshadowing an imminent extinction.\textsuperscript{85} Thus population policy became a contested field for technocratic intervention. Oppenheimer grappled not only with social Darwinists, but also with Malthusian and neo-Malthusianism theory in his attempt to correct the prevalent German interpretation of Darwin’s struggle for existence. In his population theory, Thomas Robert Malthus postulated that while population grows exponentially, the growth in sustenance remains linear, resulting in catastrophic cyclic corrections. Oppenheimer regarded this theory as a wrong turn towards misunderstanding evolution, and criticized it in his book \textit{Das Bevölkerungsgesetz des T.R. Malthus und der neueren Nationalökonomie: Darstellung und Kritik} [The Population law of T. R. Malthus and recent theories in national economics: exposition and critique].

From its inception in 1871 until the beginning of the First World War, the population of the German Empire increased by 50 percent. After a few decades of population growth stemming from industrialization, the statistics revealed a slight decrease in birth rates. Nevertheless, since the 1880s fear of overpopulation was in vogue. It accompanied the social question resulting from the woes of rapid urbanization. In a pre–First World War atmosphere tainted by racial overtones of colonial population politics, class hierarchy was transformed by racial concerns, with the Nordic race on top and the supposedly Asiatic masses on the bottom. Thus, the gap between rising population and decreasing birth rates was given a qualitative explanation. While birthrates among supposedly educated Nordic classes were decreasing, fertile Slavic hordes were allegedly threatening to corrode German society and culture from within. Since eugenics “was a political strategy denoting some sort of social control over reproduction,”\textsuperscript{86} advocates of \textit{Rassenhygiene} sought to increase birth rates among the educated classes, while reducing it among the uneducated through (voluntary) marriage prohibitions. For this reason, racial hygienists pointed to neo-Malthusianism, promoted in Germany since 1889 by various organizations encouraging rational family planning and birth control, as the main culprit. While the movement might have found proponents among the educated, it was hardly noticed by

\textsuperscript{85} Vogt, “Between Decay and Doom,” 79.

\textsuperscript{86} Weiss, \textit{Race Hygiene}, 1.
its main target group – the working class – and had almost no advocates in government or administration.  

By publishing his criticism of neo-Malthusianism in a medical journal, Oppenheimer aimed to amend the understanding of Malthus among physicians working as public hygienists. Malthus hypothesized that any social reform providing more nourishment for the underprivileged would lead to overpopulation and subsequent starvation. Oppenheimer approved of this hypothesis for the animal world. Yet he argued that Malthus forgot that humans have arms and not only mouths. The creativity and innovation of the human being, the “tool making animal,” would be able to sufficiently increase agricultural production, and thus support a stable increase in population. He based his thesis on statistics since the mid-nineteenth century showing increased production and an improved distribution of wealth through implementation of machinery in agricultural production. In his own opinion, Oppenheimer shared his economic and technological optimism with leading socialists such as Julius Wolf and Eduard Bernstein. Progress, innovation and a new cooperative-oriented organization of the economy was the key to realizing Oppenheimer’s utopian socialism – not through reform or revolution, but through avantgarde agricultural cooperatives. The adversaries of his technocratic aspirations were reform oriented Kathe-dersozialisten [academic socialists] and other socialists who disparaged agricultural machines as instruments of capitalism causing displacement and poverty.

Oppenheimer retained his allegiance to the Enlightenment’s optimist faith in the unlimited progress of the human mind and the ideal of a rational transformation of the world so typical for Western utopian thinking. He disparaged the pessimism fueling the popularity of Malthus’s population theory and the fear that insufficient employment for the growing population would lead to dissatisfaction and uprisings of the proletarian masses. Oppenheimer dubbed this apocalyptic reading “prophetic Malthusianism,” which derived, in his opinion, from a misunderstanding of Malthus’s use of the term tendency “as some kind of vague future threat in the sense of saying: ‘He has the tendency to become

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89 Franz Oppenheimer, Genossenschaftliche Kolonisation in Palästina (Vienna: Selbstverlage des Vereins, 1907), 11.
a good-for-nothing.””⁹² With this example Oppenheimer drew a bridge from neo-Malthusianism to racial theories advancing the claim that science can determine the character and value of an individual through a supposed tendency ascribed to them. Oppenheimer warned against these perverted moral implications: “The Malthusian proposition ... means nothing other than that by force of unyielding natural law a multitude of people must be continually ousted into the abyss of extinction through sustenance deprivation.”⁹³

According to Oppenheimer, Malthus’s appropriation by social Darwinists in support of reactionary ideology limited the utopian horizon of socialism by claiming “murderous” competition to be inherent to social life.⁹⁴ Darwin himself expressed reservations about the negative, martial connotations of the German translation for struggle for existence into _Kampf ums Dasein_.⁹⁵ Oppenheimer was not innately averse to competition. On the contrary, he viewed competition and hardship as an important evolutionary force, as long as it was free from political arbitrariness and control. His utopian settlement cooperative aimed at breaking monopolies, beginning with the concentration of land in the hand of the state and the privileged, in order to enable equal competition in which talent will prevail.

Oppenheimer adopted Peter Kropotkin’s position that Darwin’s struggle for existence described man’s struggle against nature, and not a struggle between social groups or races.⁹⁶ There was an inverse relationship between these two struggles. The more formidable and excruciating the struggle with nature became, the more people needed to cooperate for survival. Kropotkin’s Darwinist principle of mutual aid became a foundational tenet for Oppenheimer’s utopian cooperative model as a method of a peaceful transformation of society.⁹⁷ The veneration for the anarchocommunist Kropotkin connected Oppenheimer for a

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⁹⁵ Julia Voss, _Charles Darwin zur Einführung_ (Hamburg: Junius, 2008), 123. In a letter to Thierry William Preyer from March 29, 1869, Darwin wrote: “About the term ‘Struggle for Existence’ I have always felt some doubts ... I suspect that the German term Kampf &c. does not give quite the same idea – The words ‘Struggle for Existence’ express, I think, exactly what concurrence does – It is correct to say in English that two men struggle for existence who may be hunting for the same food during a famine, and likewise when a single man is hunting for food.” A transliteration of the letter can be viewed online in the Darwin Correspondence Project: http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-6687.
time with other advocates of social anarchism and cooperative models, such as Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber.98

Oppenheimer did however share with neo-Malthusians the negative view of charity and philanthropy as counterproductive to moral reform. He established his settlement cooperative model on low-interest loans and other profit-oriented fundraising instruments. In his opinion, the task of the technocratic social engineer was to develop new social conditions and institutions that would appeal to the inalterable human ego. In the settlement cooperative everyone would be working for their own personal advancement in a manner that advances the whole group, instead of pitting members against each other. Through the cooperative structure the weak would not be deprived of sustenance by the strong, but rather supported and encouraged by them in the adaptation process. The threat of cut-throat competition would be removed in the settlement cooperative so that unskilled city dwellers could learn from adept farmers and agronomists to be self-sufficient.

An important constituency of neo-Malthusianism was German feminists of the middle and upper classes who endorsed neo-Malthusianism’s revision of the negative Malthusian view on late marriages and self-restraint. This facilitated their agenda of promoting women’s academic education and participation in the professional workforce. One of the women’s movement’s major issues was sexual reform, which also included a “new morality” for nonconservative elements in the movement. “The new morality defended the right of women to become self-conscious, free individuals able to lead productive and intellectually meaningful lives.”99

Oppenheimer was also involved in the debate on sexual reform. He clearly rejected the sexual intervention programs of Rassenhygiene, classifying groups as unfit for procreation and enforcing the selection through marriage prohibitions and sterilization, even if they were voluntary. He also disagreed with the main premises at the core of neo-Malthusian family planning—that it was better to have fewer children in whose education more can be invested, than to have many children; and that having a larger family would mean that more children would die young. Oppenheimer disagreed that infant mortality was an inevitable

result, because he believed that a reform of the economic order could create better hygienic conditions for their survival, in addition to increasing educational facilities.\footnote{Oppenheimer, “Rezension von Havelock Ellis, Rassenhygiene und Volksgesundheit,” CZA A161–47, 3–8.} In general, economic transformation would render obsolete many of the demands of Rassenhygiene and feminism, making it easier to focus on their remaining issues.\footnote{Oppenheimer, “Rezension von Havelock Ellis,” 3–8.} He also believed that the settlement cooperative, his main instrument of economic reform, would have a positive effect on sexual morals by eliminating the economic compulsions leading to prostitution and restoring love to the institution of marriage. In the cooperative, women would not be dependent on their husbands’ salaries. They would have equal status and rights. All marriages would be founded on love, as other incentives like wealth and status would lose their pull. If love ceased to exist, both sides could file for divorce more easily, since communal institutions would provide for the children and for new living arrangements for the divorcees.\footnote{Franz Oppenheimer, “Ein Frauenparadies,” Neue Deutsche Rundschau (Freie Bühne) 7 (1896): 1133–1135.}

There were eugenicists like Schallmayer who shared Oppenheimer’s resentment for social and economic privileges in partner selection, promoting meritocracy and love marriages instead. In his reply to Oppenheimer, Schallmayer emphasized his rejection of neo-Malthusianism’s objective to limit population growth.\footnote{Schallmayer, Beiträge zu einer Nationalbiologie, 236.} Oppenheimer also opposed the neo-Malthusian focus on moral educational, because he was skeptical that it could succeed in curbing population growth, neither among the educated nor uneducated masses.\footnote{Oppenheimer, “Die Bevölkerungsgesetz,” 199.} The focus on moral education and birth control were a mere diversion from issues of social injustice. Oppenheimer argued that moral educators were misguided in their efforts to educate individuals. The masses were like an organism affected by the mechanics of suggestion overriding individual moral judgement. Malthusian natural catastrophes caused by overpopulation could only be averted through technocratic solutions. Besides, he also considered preaching morality to be condescending. In reference to Ferdinand Lasalle, Oppenheimer stated that morality was not objective but a historical and situational category whose modifications were a revelation of nature’s regenerative reactions.\footnote{Oppenheimer, “Unsittlichkeit und Erziehung,” 594–595.}

While birth control was the preferred neo-Malthusian tool of population control, population policy was intrinsically connected with control of migration as a
source and outlet of overpopulation. A negative view of immigration was anchored in the arsenal of the degeneration discourse. Considered especially “physically and intellectually primitive,” in the words of Max Weber, were migrants from Eastern Europe, who were perceived as a threatening source of national degeneration. The connection between social pressures and mass migration was of special interest to Oppenheimer, the prospective sociologist and former physician. According to him, individual action could be independent from class consciousness. However, collective human action was an expression of a natural predicament and could be described through natural law. These natural laws formed the foundation of his sociological undertakings. In 1893, Theodor von Goltz, a conservative agricultural policymaker, formulated such a natural law to describe migration waves. Goltz hypothesized that an increase in large estate holdings, or a decrease in smaller farming parcels, would cause an increase in rural migration. This led Oppenheimer to identify land enclosure as the main source of urbanization and root of the social question. The shift of focus from the industrial proletariat to an agricultural one was in his opinion his main break with Marxism. In a sense he felt he was even a truer Marxist, since he took Marx at his word that the improvement of society should start with the lowest class, the farmers that even Marx neglected.

Oppenheimer’s theory of human action was at least partially formed by his perception of man as a *homo economicus* who is not good or evil, but rather follows the path of minimal resistance. From this followed Oppenheimer’s technocratic focus on changing societal conditions to govern human action. He further applied the law of minimal resistance to migration to determine its destination, postulating that human groups “flow from the plane of higher economic and social pressure to that of lower pressure along the line of least resistance.” This was one of the most important principles of history since “all of world history is in its core a history of migration.” According to Oppenheimer, world history began with the creation of the state and ensuing subjugation. Migration and conquest were the initial impetus of state formation and have continued to play that role ever since. Waves of migration were “immense forces

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106 Vogt, “Between Decay and Doom,” 75.
107 Oppenheimer, Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes, 91 and 145.
108 Oppenheimer, Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes, 106.
shaping and changing, uniting and tearing apart, states while time after time enormously transforming the internal constitution and structure in the process.”¹¹¹ As an advocate of historical materialism, Oppenheimer regarded collective groups and masses as the main agents of history. He dismissed traditional heroic narratives of history as disregarding sociological-historical perspectives. Nevertheless, he established a new historical hero: the social engineer. The technocratic ability to control and guide migration was the key to shaping history.

To conclude, already in Oppenheimer’s early writings, during his transition from medicine towards economy and sociology, Oppenheimer adapted discursive positions that prepared him to become a social engineer in the service of Zionism, Oppenheimer’s most explicit Jewish engagement, which we will expound on in the second part of the book starting from chapter 3. These included his romantic beliefs in the healing power of nature, sport and farming, his contemplation of broader issues of population, migration and settlement policy as well as over antisemitism and the relationship between race, heredity and social environment. Yet these concurrencies did not clear away fundamental discords that Oppenheimer had with other Zionist physicians who participated in racial discourse. Oppenheimer remained an optimistic liberal who shunned notions of natural decay, degeneration and imminent doom, innate racial differences between Jews and other European peoples, and the infeasibility of Jewish integration in German and Western European society. The next chapter will show how Oppenheimer mediated between his progressive socialist ideals and the rising importance of the racial discourse in his conception of race in general and Jews in particular. It will also demonstrate how, armed with liberal convictions and a class-oriented concept of race, Oppenheimer fought off attempts to introduce racial theory into the emerging academic discipline of sociology of which he was a founding father in Germany.