Nazis Versus Cancer: The Flip Side of Fascism?

By ACSH Staff — December 1, 1999

The Nazi War on Cancer (Princeton University Press, 1999) the latest book by Robert N. Proctor, Professor of the History of Science at The Pennsylvania State University integrates themes from, and has the same strengths and weaknesses as, two of his previous works, Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know About Cancer (1995) and Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis (1988). One cannot fully comprehend The Nazi War on Cancer without referring to these earlier works. The book under consideration echoes the chemophobia of Cancer Wars. In the latter book Proctor, scholar that he is, presented opposing viewpoints outstandingly but generally portrayed distinguished, non-chemophobic scientists and scientific organizations as right-wing, pro-industry hacks at bottom.

Springtime for Hitler?

While The Nazi War on Cancer has merit, its core propositions have serious flaws. Proctor's aim was to show the flip side of fascism. He evidently found that, although fascism is "disturbing," it was the setting for "work that we, today, might regard as 'progressive' or even socially responsible . . . some of [which] was a direct outgrowth of Nazi ideology." This "progressive" work included environmentalism and conservatism; animal-rights advocacy; vegetarianism; a clampdown on "quack medicine" (e.g., occult medicine, including dowsing, and the treatment of cancer by chiropractors); and objections to petrochemicals in favor of the "natural," to excessive use of asbestos and x-rays, and to overmedication. The Nazis of Hitler's Germany objected especially to tobacco use and pioneered epidemiological work that related tobacco use to the development of cancer. Overall, these predilections and disapprovals plus an acceptance of homeopathy [See "Homeopathy and Its Founder"], of magnetotherapy, and of what we might call "holistic healing" make the Nazis look somewhat like New Agers.

Most persons conversant with the Holocaust and World War II cannot or will not tease out from these enormous tragedies any currents of Nazi thought or action construable as praiseworthy. This is understandable, lest humanity forget the atrocities and how they unfolded. But Proctor's argument is valid that not every Nazi deed was necessarily a contributor to mayhem, murder, and the Final Solution. He further argues, correctly, that persons or groups cannot reasonably be labeled as Nazis simply because they hold beliefs, or engage in practices, reminiscent of Nazis. Specifically, Proctor justly criticizes the tobacco industry for "seeking to identify smokers with ghettoized Jews and antismokers with Nazis."
This criticism, however, is a double-edged sword. Some groups that Proctor apparently would regard as "socially responsible" or as promoting "progressive" ideals, themselves equate their opponents and Nazis. Animal-rights advocates and vegans, for example, often represent meat-eating and the use of animals in medical research as a "holocaust."

Nazis and Science

The dust-jacket blurb for *The Nazi War on Cancer* includes the question "Can good science come from an evil regime?" The contention that the Nazi reign resulted from the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, with its alleged philosophy of domination, has become a staple of postmodern and antimodernistic writings on fascism and on modern thought, such as those of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, German-Jewish exiles from Nazi Germany whom Proctor cites. But Hitler's ideology resembled neither that of the Enlightenment nor that of the Scientific Revolution. Hitler spoke approvingly of "the end of an age of reason." In his memoir, Hermann Rauschning, a defector from the Nazi Party who had been a Nazi official, quoted the dictator: "[A] new era of the magical explanation of the world is rising. There is no truth, in the scientific sense." According to Rauschning, Hitler ascribed "the crisis of science" to science's shift to "the wrong track": the pursuit of "objectivity" (a sentiment whose expression would today elicit approbation in many academic circles).

Proctor's case that an evil system Nazism engendered "good science" and progressive endeavors is strongest in regard to tobacco. That Nazi society preoccupied with bodily and racial "purity," ethnic and other "cleansing," and homeopathy was opposed to the intake of tobacco, tobacco smoke, and anything else it imagined was un-wholesome is not surprising. But was the opposition to tobacco use grounded in science? In the 1950s epidemiologists criticized German scientists under the Nazi regime for having derived their conclusions, particularly those concerning asbestos and lung cancer, from limited clinical cases. Still, Proctor's crediting the Nazi regime with inaugurating the field of tobacco-cancer research and the scientists under this regime with producing evidence of a fact then not widely recognized outside Germany i.e., that tobacco use is carcinogenic is correct. That these researchers did so is understandable: German scientists until the Nazi period had won more Nobel Prizes in scientific fields than had scientists of any other nation. Moreover, some German tobacco-cancer research, as Proctor shows, had occurred before the Nazis took power.

The chapter on tobacco closes with the section "Tobacco's Collapse," which features a chart showing that German cigarette consumption increased by more than 50 percent between 1930 and 1940 and was above prewar consumption at the war's end. This, plus factors Proctor cites that may have led to underestimation of tobacco consumption (e.g., the black market and home cultivation of tobacco), suggests that the Nazi war against tobacco use was not entirely successful.

Nevertheless, Proctor's case concerning the anti-tobacco efforts of the Nazi leadership and the pioneering work of German scientists is impressive. How significant his case is, on the other hand, depends on whether these tobacco-related efforts were anomalous or were fruits of a system of progressive policies and practices. As one would reasonably expect, in *Racial Hygiene Proctor* cited the "more heinous aspects of Nazi medical crime," and in the book under consideration he cites offenses such as abusive experimentation and human sterilization. But he also explains how
the criminal, so-called medical experiments were not particularly scientific. The question remains: In general, were Nazi cancer-prevention-related policies and such practices that Nazi leaders advocated soundly describable as progressive, at least in terms of the health of white German Gentiles?

Progressiveness or Regressiveness?

Let's look at some of the practices, ideals, and concerns that Proctor at least tacitly categorizes as progressive:

**Biodynamic farming**

Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess and other Nazi leaders were advocates of biodynamic farming. This is the system of organic farming developed by Austro-Hungarian occultist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), founder of the religion of anthroposophy. Biodynamic farming allegedly yields foodstuffs that nourish both the body and the "spirit."

Nazi advocacy of biodynamic farming is somewhat ironic in that it was the work in organic chemistry of Frederick Wöhler, Justus von Liebig, and other 19th-century German scientists that led to the manufacture of urea as a source of agricultural nitrogen and to an understanding of plant nutrition. The effects on a plant of its absorbing a nutrient from naturally decomposed manure are the selfsame effects of its absorbing that nutrient from a manufactured fertilizer. Unlike manure, manufactured fertilizer comes in tailor-made formulations. Furthermore, pathogenic microbial contamination of crops grown with manure is much more probable than such contamination of crops grown with manufactured fertilizer. The notion that manure conveys an inexplicable salubrious essence to plants that manufactured fertilizer does not convey is about as valid as a similar Nazi misbelief: that human body heat was likelier to revive comatose persons with hypothermia than was heat from other sources.

**Concern about pesticide use**

Most troubling to me was Proctor's treatment of the Nazi concern over the agricultural use of pesticides. He writes of the 1920s as a time "when arsenic-based pesticides began to be sprayed onto vineyards to combat insect pests." Most readers would be apt particularly in the context of Proctor's treatment of pesticides in previous books and of popular acceptance of mistaken pesticide dogma to misinfer from the sentence in question that arsenic-based preparations were first used agriculturally in the 1920s. But arsenic compounds have been used agriculturally in Asia for at least 2,000 years, and in Europe for centuries at least. In the 19th century and early in the 20th century, copper acetoarsenite with the trade name "Paris Green" was often the pesticide of choice.

Other poisons used agriculturally before the appearance of modern chemical pesticides include hydrogen cyanide, nicotine, potassium antimonyl tartrate, and sodium arsenite. Understanding why such toxic chemicals were thus used is not difficult. The domestication of plants that were scarce in nature resulted in very large increases in the homegrown plants' concentrations of nutrients nutrients for humans and nutrients for birds, rats, insects, fungi, bacteria, viruses, and so on. For several millennia humans have tried to protect crops against nonhuman competitors, and
such efforts have often featured coating the crops with potentially harmful substances. As Proctor knows, when these substances fail, fungal or other diseases induce plant synthesis of toxins, many of which may well be very carcinogenic. Indeed, according to Bruce Ames and various studies sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, by weight the human intake of toxins and carcinogens of plant origin is 100 to 10,000 times greater than the intake of such substances that are manmade.

Much of the impetus for the consumerist movement in the United States came from opposition to the agricultural use of arsenic. By the 1930s arsenic's harmfulness was obvious. The Nazi anti-arsenic movement was by no means special. And to liken, as Proctor has tacitly done, the Nazi opposition to the agricultural use of arsenic to the present-day opposition to the agricultural use of modern pesticides which have obviated the use of their highly toxic forerunners is ridiculous.

Vegetarianism

The Nazi ideologues politicked about such questions as what constituted "the original human diet." They favored a "return to a more natural diet free of artificial colorings and preservatives," with a minimization of meat consumption. But vegetarianism is not more natural than omnivorousness. Humans have consumed meat since the dawn of humanity. Moreover, humankind's closest relatives are omnivores with a marked tendency to eat meat rather than plant foods when both types of food are available.

The growth of the hominid brain with the diminishment of the hominid gut over about 200,000 years required increasing energy intake despite a decrease in gastrointestinal capacity. The search for energy-dense foods fruits and nuts was evolutionarily advantageous with respect to memory and communication and social skills. Hunting, besides additionally promoting the aforementioned requisites to the development of civilization, promoted another: planning. If the words "natural" and "unnatural" have any meaning pertaining to such a culturally saturated behavior as eating, vegetarianism would be most unnatural, in that humanity's hominid ancestors could not have survived without eating meat. Only recently in humankind's history with, for example, the domestication of fruits and nuts, the domestication and milling of grains, modern transportation and refrigeration, and the mass production of vitamin B₁₂ has healthful, long-term, strict vegetarianism become practicable.

Promotion of herbal medicines

That the Nazi promotion of herbal medicines was healthful is questionable. Even today, the body of scientific knowledge about medicinal herbs is in its infancy. While there is fair evidence that some herbs have health utility as herbal remedies, there is also evidence that some herbal medicines are harmful or even deadly for example, because of interaction of the herb and a standard prescription.

"Preservationism"

Some current dubious conservation practices have a direct link with Nazi conservation principles that Proctor describes.

The late zoologist Bernhard Grzimek was a curator at the Frankfurt Zoo under Hitler. He became
one of the most vocal postwar "preservationists" and is honored as the father of African conservation. In his book *Serengeti Shall Not Die* (1961) the basis of the Oscar-winning feature documentary of the same name he declared: "[A] National Park must remain a primordial wilderness to be effective. No men, not even native ones, should live inside its borders."

This Nazi purism has given affluent Westerners moral license to collaborate with African governments to force peoples from their ancestral lands. The Nazi prescription for the "conservation of native peoples in their native habitats," which Proctor describes as "conceived as part of a larger design to save the world's vanishing flora and fauna," may seem more benign than, or at least different from, the philosophy of evicting indigenous populations. In practice, however, it is exploitative. Ejected populations must live, with poverty maintained, according to what others define as "traditional" all for the benefit of eco- and ethno-tourists and those who profit from such tourism.

**Extremities**

The more one explores the many issues that Proctor raises, the more similarities one finds between the tenets of Hitler's Nazis and today's romantic, anti-technology convictions. Citing the ethicist Arthur Caplan, Proctor states that "comparisons invoking Nazi medicine must be drawn with care lest we mischaracterize contemporary policies or diminish the genuine extremity of the Nazi experience." This counsel is wise.

But some such comparisons are valid. Cultures are analogous to rivers that have many tributaries. Among the "tributaries" to which large segments of the white Gentile population of Nazi Germany were receptive was a romantic, occultic, anti-technology stream that was separately affecting other Western cultures. In Germany, when such sentiments joined science, public health policies that were progressive at least for certain segments of the population at certain times occasionally resulted; but when they combined with animosity, the consequences were butchery, mayhem, and other atrocities.

Alas, Proctor lumps progressive, semi-progressive, and pseudo-progressive practices and ideals. Some of these, such as tobacco-cancer research, have contributed to human improvement. Others have been contributing to misery and premature death among the world's poorest or most vulnerable populations.

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