

KONRAD LORENZ AND THE NATIONAL SOCIALISTS: ON THE POLITICS OF ETHOLOGY

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The observation that science is influenced by politics has often been noted, but the details as to how, by whom, and to what ends, differ so much from case to case that the theme remains interesting. During the cold war it was, usually, physics and chemistry, occasionally mathematics, whose directions were thought to be influenced by political pressures (Snow, 1961). Biology came into prominence with the Vietnam War, and interest in an array of biological weapons, from defoliants to nerve gases likewise influenced a great deal of research. If one's memory goes back to earlier times, one also recalls the relations that developed between psychology and the politics of immigration and education, which had a lasting impact on developments in the study of intelligence (Gould, 1981). Nor have the politics of religion been irrelevant (Durant, 1985).

I want here to provide details concerning the origins of modern ethology, or, as Lorenz termed it, the "objectivistic study of instinct" (1956). My study of the history of ethology has persuaded me that its principal tenets came equally from the observations of the animals Konrad Lorenz grew up with, as with Lorenz's enthusiasm for the doctrines of the National Socialists of Germany in the 1930s. Not that ethology was a Nazi plot; how could it be with Tinbergen, a Resistance fighter, and Von Frisch, a consistent if quiet opponent of the Nazis, as co-founders? But, it was Lorenz, in the 1940s, who principally defined the fundamentals of ethology, and it is the source of his ideas that we now have reason to believe were corrupt.

Ethology, as a coherent discipline, received a *post facto* baptism (or was it a confirmation?) with the award, in 1973, of the Nobel Prize to Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, and Karl Von Frisch. The award followed four decades of research, by Von Frisch upon the complex system

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of communication among honey bees, by Tinbergen on the hierarchical structure of instinctive behavior, *inter alia*, and by Lorenz on the mechanisms that underlie instinctive behavior. It is upon these that I wish to focus, for it was the concept of the Releaser and its associated Innate Releasing Mechanism which for nearly 40 years dominated the ethological landscape and influenced the directions and content of ethological research and theory.

Lorenz, in his Nobel address (1974) (and elsewhere) claimed that his primary motive was systematics: he wished to use behavior as an anatomist did bones in order to both reconstruct phylogenies and to infer the functional significance of stereotyped movements (cf Podos, 1993). His observations focused especially upon waterfowl, and particularly courtship rituals. In the course of these observations, he noted that displays sometimes occurred when the usual eliciting stimulus was absent, or present in a distorted form. He concluded that the threshold for the elicitation of some stereotyped behavior patterns or displays must fluctuate. The model he devised to account for this is now enshrined as the hydraulic or toilet bowl model. I have not tried to estimate what percentage of the pages in *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie*, or the venerable *Journal of the British Association for Animal Behavior*, and *Behaviour*, the three main outlets for early ethologists, were devoted to studies of these purported mechanisms. It was surely significant. Nor could we describe the content of ethology without reference to IRMs, RMs, SAPs, FAPs, and other acronyms that refer to attributes of the model (for details of the model, see Klopfer, 1974).

The resistance to the analysis of behavior in terms of the hydraulic model was galvanized by a critique by Dan Lehrman, published in 1953 in the *Quarterly Review of Biology*. In his arguments, Lehrman, along with cogent criticisms of Lorenz's methodology, hinted at other than empirical influences at play in the construction of the model. Director of Rutgers' prestigious Institute for Animal Behavior, Lehrman, and his associates, particularly the American Museum of Natural History's T.C. Schneirla, also openly resented Lorenz's alleged Nazi sympathies, these having been revealed in two articles which were not listed in Lorenz's bibliographies for many years. These were "Die angeborenen Formen möglicher Erfahrungen" (1943) and "Durch Domestikation Verursachte Störungen" (1940). In them, Lorenz justifies the Nazi efforts to prevent interbreeding of persons of different so-called races (it must be noted that the German concept of race bore little relation to what most anthropologists, and certainly biologists, understand by the term). Basically, Lorenz's argument was that since displays of waterfowl are species-specific, hybridization destroys the integrity of the releaser mechanism and leads to the

destruction of the species. By analogy, humans are believed to possess releasers for ethical and esthetic values which are lost with "hybridization". The lack of vigorous selection under conditions of domestication also allows the proliferation of the "Minderwertig" (inferior) who ought to be "ruthlessly extirpated" (ibid).

After the war, Lorenz emphatically denied he'd had Nazi sympathies, and explained the offending articles as a naive effort to obtain and then retain an academic post in difficult times. By 1943, when the second article appeared (and partly because of it, cf Deichmann, 1992), he had become Professor at Königsberg. Wieck (1990) has pointed out that at that time and place, no one, certainly not Lorenz, could have been unaware of the policy of "euthanasia" of the physically and mentally infirm which the Nazis had initiated even before the establishment of their death camps, and which his 1940 papers urged. Yet, Tinbergen, imprisoned by the Gestapo for his role in the Dutch resistance, and Von Frisch, himself once the target of the Nazis (he was spared, it is claimed, by virtue of the economic importance of his research on a virus that infected and destroyed bees) were after the war, reconciled with Lorenz. Discussion of the matter was dropped.

I must now add a personal note. I knew Lorenz well. He was a guest in my house, and I in his. While I was often privy to the anti-semitic jokes common to Bavarians and Austrians, and there were many in Lorenz's entourage, I never heard Lorenz himself participate, nor had I any other reasons to doubt his disavowal of a Nazi past (and cf Krebs and Sjölander, 1992).

You may, therefore, imagine my surprise when anthropologist Thomas Sebeok displayed to me a letter he had found while preparing a biography of Karl Bühler, the Austrian psychologist. In the Spring of 1938, Bühler had been arrested by the Gestapo and held for several weeks before being released without charges. The letter in question was the copy of a craven note he had written to the authorities, thanking them for the opportunity they'd provided for him to reflect upon and reform his ways. Heretofore his work had been apolitical, Bühler wrote, in future it would advance the goals of the Reich. In his defense, he added, he had, though himself apolitical, shielded from prosecution many of his co-workers who had been early members of the Party in Vienna. Konrad Lorenz was among those listed. Shortly after, Bühler fled to the U.S. (Sebeok, 1981).

This letter, which seemed to contradict Lorenz's claims, prompted me to examine some of Lorenz's pre-war correspondence, especially that between him and his mentor, Oskar Heinroth, world renowned ornithologist and Director of the Berlin Zoo. Heinroth was evidently no friend of the Nazis. His letters betray no sympathy for the Third Reich and

I never saw a letter ended by him with the then customary salutation, "Heil Hitler". I think the tone of Lorenz's letters to Heinroth becomes even more significant in the light of Heinroth's own character.

Those letters deal mostly with the behavior of the ducks and geese the two friends, Heinroth and Lorenz, were regularly exchanging and studying. Interspersed (and conspicuously absent from the published collection of these letters, Koenig, 1988) are political asides: references to Lorenz's impatience for a war with England so that "that arrogant race can be taught a lesson" (18 Dec., 1939, Nachlass 137, Ordner 27; see Koenig, 1988, for full catalogue reference); anti-semitic jibes, as when Lorenz describes the shoveler duck with its "ugly Jewish nose" (21 Jan. 1939, *ibid*). More significant, however, was the correspondence that preceded the publication of the two articles to which Lehrman had in 1953 first called attention: Lorenz, as various of the letters show, clearly knew that, different Releasers or not, viable duck hybrids between species (and even genera) could be formed. One must recall that the hydraulic model, which formed the basis of Lorenz's theory of instinct, depended on the specificity of the Innate Releasing Mechanism, the lock which only a specific key, or Releaser, could open. Lorenz's speculations on different human physiognomies and standards for beauty and ugliness, his association of the proud and the beautiful with aryan ideals and the inferior with urban Jews and gypsies and other decadent products of domestication are repeatedly voiced in manuscripts or letters to Heinroth in 1938, 1939, and 1940. Occasionally, the arguments on *racial* standards of beauty are transmuted to discussions of *species'* preferences. The impression I received from these letters, however, was that the application of the Releaser concept to explanations of animal behavior was almost an afterthought.

Of course, every scientific theory is probably inflated by the personal biases of the scientist who framed it (cf Pickering, 1992), but Lorenz's speculations strike one as more careless of the truth than most. Krebs and Sjölander (1992) quote F. Schutz, a student and colleague of Lorenz's at Seewiesen as once asking (during a seminar) "is that something that actually happens or is it just something you saw?" (pg. 214). In short, I believe the ostensible breakdowns resulting from hybridizations were postulated *post-facto* on the basis of observations of human behavior, observations made through the lens of Aryan science. It was this science that I believe helped shape Lorenz's interpretations of waterfowl behavior.

A word about Biology in the Third Reich is in order here. It was accorded a higher priority in the schools than all other sciences. Bäumer-Schleinkofer (1992) has documented the Nazi belief that indoctrination through biology and its concepts could be more readily achieved than

through another discipline. "Es ist auf die Dauer unmöglich, ein Volk erfolgreich zu führen, wenn nicht über die wesentliche...Lebensgestze einmütige Auffassung herrscht" (Hitler, cited by Bäumer, 1989, p. 9. 76; "it's impossible to consistently lead a folk that doesn't have consensus on the prevailing laws of life"). "Biology teaches those, who can learn anything, to think holistically, organically, and thus is in the best sense a politicized science, as all science should be" (ibid, translated by PK).

Under a fervent Nazi pedagogue, Ferdinand Rossner, the new NS biology became a central theme in all German schools, and was accorded time taken from other fields, especially foreign language and mathematics. New texts were quickly introduced to these developments, a fact only now, in 1993, revealed to the English-speaking public (Bäumer-Schleinkofer, 1992). Lorenz enthusiastically supported Rossner's view of the importance of evolutionary theory (as he saw it) to National Socialism.

The ranks of biologists were not as badly contaminated by non-aryans as, for instance, was true in physics, mathematics, or art. Hence it is reasonable that an aspiring academic biologist, wanting to ingratiate himself with the authorities, would develop a behavioral mechanism that explained and justified so-called racial purity, stereotyped sex roles, and the many other features of the NS State.

At the same time, it must be noted, as documented by Deichmann (1992), and also a revelation to most western scientists, such an allegiance was not required: a significant proportion of German biologists of this period remained professionally active, their research supported, without adopting the stance of Lorenz. Such posturing was not a political necessity, even if advantageous.

Finally, there is the monumental and meticulously documented study by the German historian, Ute Deichmann, on all "habilitated" German biologists during the NS years (1992). She has succeeded in filling-in the period between Lorenz's induction into the army medical corps and his becoming a Russian prisoner of war. Contrary to Lorenz's previous assertions, we now know that he did not go directly to the Eastern front but first served (1942) in Posen as psychologist with an SS unit assigned to perform tests that would allow distinctions to be made between Poles and Polish-German "hybrids". He was a member of the "Rassenpolitischen Amtes", with specific privileges as a result, and this alone contradicts his claim to have been naive. All of this was in the context of the Nazi's declared policy to assure racial purity by every means available. Lorenz's own words, written at that time, leave little doubt as to what he knew and what he believed, and what he wrote is consistent with NS extermination policies (Wieck, 1190, Deichmann, 1992).

In sum, the ideology of the NS State required biological

substantiation, and this Lorenz provided in greater measure than most other biologists of note. His motivational model and its application, I suggest, appears to be derived as much from this ideology as it does from his studies of animals. Indeed, many of the observations he submits to Heinroth's criticisms, even contradict the predictions of the model. However, the popularity of his books, and the charisma of the man himself, diverted attention from his past, and he became widely loved and honored, his work, until very recently, generally accepted (but see Zippelius, 1992, who claims that the results of many of his studies were "fudged" to fit Lorenz's preconceptions).

The ironies of this tale are many. At Lorenz's death, despite the subtle resurrection of Nazi themes in this final books, he had become the darling of the Greens because of his opposition to a nuclear plant. The concept of the Releasor and its associated baggage, has proven to be a heuristic of inestimable utility. Would we have had it, absent Lorenz's commitment to the Third Reich?

P.S. It would be remiss to neglect recognizing a wealth of scholarly studies on the relation between Naziism and science and in particular Lorenz's role. The best known of these studies, which offer a breadth and detailed analysis this more personal note makes no pretense of providing, include Kalikow (1983), Lerner (1992), Müller-Hill (1988), Proctor (1988), Renneberg and Walker (1994) and Richards (1987).

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