

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard T. Gray. *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004. lvi + 453 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8143-3179-3.

Reviewed by Richard Weikart, Department of History, California State University, Stanislaus.
Published by H-German (February, 2005)

Gray's impressive analysis of an intellectual tradition that influenced Nazi racial theory contributes to the discussion over the role of materialism in the construction of racial ideologies in general and Nazi racial theories in particular. Physiognomy, the attempt to identify character traits from facial features, became fashionable in German intellectual circles in the late-eighteenth century and experienced a resurgence during the Weimar period. Gray argues that by the Weimar period two forms of physiognomy converged: a materialist strand emanating from Johann Caspar Lavater, and a non-materialist strand tracing its ancestry to Goethe's thought. During the Weimar period, many leading intellectuals (including Oswald Spengler, Ludwig Klages, and Rudolf Kassner) embraced non-materialist physiognomy, which emphasized intuition rather than scientific objectivity. Under the influence of Hans F. K. Günther, however, the materialist form of physiognomy--which prided itself as being scientific, empirical, and objective--gained preeminence under the Nazi regime.

One of the problems with using the term "materialist" to describe Lavater's physiognomy is that Gray never defines the term, and Lavater was clearly not a philosophical materialist, since he was a Pietist pastor. Nonetheless, Gray shows that despite his Pietist convictions, Lavater ironically promoted physiognomy as a scientific pursuit in line with rationalist Enlightenment ideals. He succeeded in making physiognomy fashionable in intellectual circles in the late-eighteenth century. Many contemporaries, including a few who sympathized with some kind of physiognomy, considered Lavater too speculative, however. Franz Joseph Gall, who fits the materialist label much better, hoped that his phrenology would make more objective and scientific Lavater's key "insight" that exterior traits correspond to moral character. The next key figure in the development

of "materialist" physiognomy was Carl Gustav Carus, who was a disciple of Schelling and thus does not fit the mold of a philosophical materialist. Finally, Günther, whom Gray rightly credits as one of the most influential racial ideologists of the Nazi period, does seem to be a materialist. Gray might be right that Lavater's and Carus's physiognomy has materialist implications, but this matter should have received more explicit discussion.

This work is impressive in scope, beginning in the late-eighteenth century and culminating in Nazi racial theory. However, one of the big problems Gray never really overcomes is the gap between the physiognomy proponents of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and the Weimar period. He claims that the bridge between these two periods was Carus, who published significant works on physiognomy and racial theory in the mid-nineteenth century. However, this claim leaves the crucial period of the late-nineteenth century almost unexamined in this work. As helpful as Gray's analysis is on specific thinkers, this omission is a serious problem in understanding the big picture. Gray never discusses the anthropologists in the late-nineteenth century who continued Lavater's stress on measuring skulls, nor Cesare Lombroso's German disciples and the rise of criminal anthropology, nor the rise of biological determinism, all of which had implications for physiognomy. This problem of neglecting the late-nineteenth-century growth of scientific racism in Germany detracts from Gray's treatment of the influences on Günther's racial theories, which he portrays as a synthesis of Lavater's materialist physiognomy and Gobineau's racial ideas.

Despite these caveats, I think Gray succeeds admirably in establishing one of his main points, which is that physiognomy was not a completely innocent intellectual tradition that was hijacked by Günther and other Nazi racists, but that from the

start it contained elements amenable to Nazi racism. He states that "these ideas *lent themselves to* and even *invited* interpretation along racially discriminatory lines" (p. 331). Sometimes, as in the case of the racial theorist Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, physiognomy even drew on "deeply humanistic traditions, such as the intellectual heritage of German *Lebensphilosophie* and Husserlian phenomenology" (pp. 331-332). This ability to adapt to influential intellectual currents only made physiognomy more sophisticated and subtle. Though Clauss's Husserl-inspired physiognomy ultimately lost out to Günther's materialistic form in the Nazi period, Clauss still helped make racism fashionable.

Citation: Richard Weikart. "Review of Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, H-German, H-Net Reviews, February, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=279911116615300>.

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.