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► **To cite this version:**

Bernhard Kuechenhoff. The psychiatrist Auguste Forel and his attitude to eugenics. *History of Psychiatry*, 2008, 19 (2), pp.215-223. 10.1177/0957154X07080660 . hal-00570902

**HAL Id: hal-00570902**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00570902v1>**

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

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## The psychiatrist Auguste Forel and his attitude to eugenics

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*Until the end of the 20th century Forel (1848–1931) was seen as an important neuroanatomist, a fighter against alcoholism, a researcher on ants and the author of *Die sexuelle Frage*. Forel's racist and eugenic views have been forgotten. Without losing sight of his merits, this article focuses on his attitude to eugenics, and will show that eugenic thinking – based on his main principles – permeated his work.*

**Keywords:** *Auguste Forel; eugenics; psychiatry; racism; Switzerland*

### Introduction

Forel's achievements and activities were highlighted in an exhibition in Zürich in 1986 and in Bern in 1988, each accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue (Meier, 1986, 1988). They were:

- His extensive research on ants, in which he discovered and described over 3000 new species.
- His voluminous work on the anatomy of the brain; he was the first to describe the neuron (and was a contemporary of W. His).
- His deep involvement with and use of hypnosis.
- His fight against alcoholism and extensive activities in the abstinence movement.
- His open debate on the theme of sexuality, and his support in the fight for women's equality and against the discrimination of illegitimate children and their mothers.
- His pacifism.

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In the introduction to the first exhibition catalogue, Pio Caroni, then Head of the University of Bern, wrote:

What characterizes his never-ending social-reform activities is what impresses and appeals to us still today: Forel's theories are deeply rooted in his wish for science to be 'useful', i.e., to find solutions to current political and social problems. Therein, perhaps, lies the secret and immediacy of the message of this great and lonely fighter: he teaches us to be aware of the social duties and responsibilities which arise from such research and which are easily overlooked or which we are sometimes tempted to suppress. (Meier, 1986: 7)

Konrad Akert (who had founded the Institute of Brain Research Zürich in 1962) was Head of the University of Zürich when he wrote in the second catalogue: 'The aim of this exhibition and the catalogue is that Forel's monumental life-work, documented in its entirety, should arise in front of our eyes and remind us of a man who, even today, can act as a role model and whose work still challenges us.' (Meier, 1988: 8).

From today's perspective, this judgement would have to be modified. If certain pointers and remarks in the exhibitions' catalogues are examined more closely, the idea that this is a complete representation of his life must be questioned because Forel's racist and eugenic thoughts and ideas have been ignored. It is therefore necessary to point out his latent racist and eugenic ideas, as well as his appeals for action, so the aim of this article is to draw attention to the various aspects of Forel's work with a particular focus on eugenics. However, even within this framework, it is essential to bear in mind the risk of a biased judgement.

### **Forel's professional development**

Auguste Forel was born in the west of Switzerland in 1848. After his medical studies in Zürich he turned to psychiatry which, at the time, was trying to gain recognition as a branch of medical science. This move towards science, initiated by Wilhelm Griesinger among others, made brain research in German-speaking universities important, and these researchers were appointed to teaching posts in psychiatry at the university.

Forel was also influenced by this change of emphasis. As an assistant, he worked with and did research for the leading psychiatrists and neuroscientists of his time such as Theodor Meyner in Vienna, who supervised his doctorate (1871–72), and Bernhard von Gudden (first Director of Burghölzli, 1870–72) in Munich, with whom he completed his qualification for a professorship (1873–78). His numerous neuro-anatomical and neuro-pathological works are characterized by a terse style and minutely observed detail. In 1887, when Forel published his neuron theory, it appeared almost simultaneously with, but independently from, that of the Basel-born Wilhelm His, then Professor of Anatomy in Leipzig.

In 1879 at the age of only 31, Forel became Professor of Psychiatry in Zürich and Director of Burghölzli. His new clinical duties and lack of additional resources pushed his brain research into the background. In the frequently overcrowded clinic, there were only two or three doctors, including Forel, for over 300 patients. In his autobiography *Rückblick auf mein Leben*, he vividly describes this initial period at Burghölzli, detailing his confrontation with the clinic's regulations such as his fight against alcoholism there; and he also described how he closed the brothels in neighbouring Stephansburg (Forel, 1935).

It is certainly not easy to imagine the circumstances and conditions at that time. In addition to the lack of staff at the clinic, there was a confusing range of names for the different illnesses. Furthermore, due to the lack of therapies, the clinic itself was seen as a therapy. The experience of daily routine, especially with seriously and chronically ill patients, led to the early acceptance of the degeneration theory of the French psychiatrist Morel (1857) with its inheritance paradigm. This theory (i.e., the psychic deterioration from generation to generation) was applied, in the course of time, to almost all psychic illnesses and finally also extended to the many varied forms of erratic behaviour. The acceptance that such illnesses could be inherited helped to relieve the pressure on the psychiatrists, as they could not be expected to cure an illness which had been inherited, and therapeutic treatment had limitations. Consequently, prophylactic measures, i.e., the search for ways to prevent these illnesses, became enormously important and meaningful.

These measures included eugenics which will be discussed in detail below. Forel was also influenced by the method of dealing with alcoholics in the light of this prophylactic thinking. Having become aware that alcoholism could only be conquered by abstinence, Forel adopted this approach with an almost manic intensity and missionary zeal, both during his time as clinic director and afterwards. In addition, with the lack of appropriate therapeutic alternatives, he had learnt hypnosis, the first psychotherapeutic method, with the leading figures of this treatment in France and he used it not only on the patients but also on the carers.

It is remarkable that there are scarcely any written accounts of Forel as a psychiatrist dealing with the most frequent illnesses, known in the terminology of that period as: sanguine moods, fits of rage, madness, idiocy, periodic mental illness and cyclic periods of madness. It is known, however, that he worked extensively and intensively on the psychic consequences of venereal diseases and moral insanity, as well as the problem of alcoholism.

As the clinic's director, Forel was much occupied with organizational and legal matters. As the president of the Zürich Society for the Mentally Ill, he published numerous forensic reports and voiced his support for laws concerning mental illness. In his proposals for such laws (Forel, 1893), he made some remarkable statements, speaking out against the miserable conditions at

that time and making a plea for clarification of the laws concerning admission to and release from the clinic. On the other hand, the same article contains statements which could have led to just this sort of abuse; for example, he writes: ‘Vice versa, an abnormal person can be a veritable horror, possessing the worst criminal characteristics and bringing torment to his surroundings, without coming into conflict with the law. Such a “moral imbecile” belongs in a mental asylum which we recommend.’

Astonishingly, in 1898 at the age of 50, Forel resigned from his post as Professor at the University of Zürich and as the Director of the clinic. He wrote about this in his autobiography:

A voice in my head was screaming to the psychiatrist, ‘come out from behind your walls and tell the public the truth – study abnormalities of the soul outside the mental asylum. You must become an apostle of truth. What is the point then of remaining forever in closed mental institutions looking after the ruins of lost souls, victims of mankind’s misunderstanding, while allowing the cause of such miserable circumstances to continue to flourish? That is cowardice!’ Social hygiene demands a complete reassessment of our attitudes, tackling the problem at its roots and, above all, creating a rational, selective and humane system of reproduction ... It occurred to me that here was a marvellous opening in the field of social hygiene which, under the guise of a false morality, had until now been annexed by various religions and beliefs. (Forel, 1935)

In this context Forel mentions three important issues.

There are still three matters which interest me: first of all women’s issues, the subjugation of women by men, a unique situation in the whole of the animal kingdom. For this cause, I became a zealous apostle of women’s right to vote, of women’s rights in general. Further, the question of a world language, a language which would increase mutual understanding ... Finally, the question of the human race itself. Which race is useful for the continuation of mankind and which is not? And if these lowest races are useless, how we should gradually eliminate them. (Forel, 1935)

### **Forel’s main ideas**

The main points and principles which were central for Forel, to which he held fast and which motivated and formed the structure of his thinking, are as follows.

1. The monistic view, based on the idea of mankind and nature as one, as in the unity of body and soul; as Forel put it, ‘the living brain and the soul are one and the same’ (Forel, 1908). He was also a founding member of the German monistic order; Ernst Haeckel tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to become its president.

2. Determinism: everything is subject to the same law of nature which then determines what follows. From this perspective Forel contested freedom of will and, as a consequence, the sentencing of the guilty. (His standpoint in this matter is very close to that of some of today's neuroscientists.)
3. Darwin's theory of evolution, above all its re-interpretation as social Darwinism, i.e., natural selection – but no longer as meant by Darwin himself – is transferred to human society; social and cultural processes are seen as 'natural'. Biological inequality, i.e., variations within a species, on which natural selection is based, were now, according to social Darwinism, biased and so became: the unequal value of life (Wuketits, 2004).

Forel attempted to summarize these principles into a world-view based on natural science. He turned almost completely against every form of metaphysical thinking, seeing himself as a follower of the Enlightenment – someone who did not wish to show any false consideration or pity. In summary: he stood for an ethic that was monistic or based on natural science, as did Eugen Bleuler (1936).

### **Forel's position on eugenics**

The expression 'eugenics' was coined by Francis Galton (1865). The aim of eugenics was the improvement of the human race, through increasing the number of desired offspring (so-called positive eugenics) or by preventing/avoiding undesirable offspring (so-called negative eugenics). Forel, like many of his contemporaries, had a fear of the degeneration of the cultured races and, according to his fundamental principles, agreement with and support of eugenics were easily understood.

Forel's acceptance of the hereditary theory and his fear that mental illness would spread are already apparent in his lecture of 1880 and during the years following his official appointment at Burghölzli. In the lecture, entitled 'The most important causes of mental illness and its prevention', he puts inheritance first, referring to it as 'the enormity of the hereditary factor', which produces more people who are insane, thus passing on the illness through inheritance and 'resulting in a gradual degeneration of an ever-increasing part of the nation' (Forel, 1880).

He comments vividly on this mental degeneration:

It's rather strange – like one step forward and one step backward. In the Middle Ages those who were insane were tortured and killed, which is undoubtedly cruel. They were regarded as Pariahs, and eradication was seen as cleansing and reducing madness in society, whereas nowadays patients are generally treated with humanity and cared for, so as to cure and sustain them, thus contributing to the increase of madness through inheritance. (Forel, 1880)

A few years later, Forel wrote a report on: 'Why, when and how are the insane kept in a mental asylum? Mental disturbance, the law, morals and the penal institutions', finishing with the following remark:

I will leave open the question of whether it is the best and most humane way to eradicate such disgusting specimens of human brain by painless death. Such as the question of preventing the reproduction of such criminals [*sic*]. These are immature but worthwhile considerations. (Forel, 1885)

In comments such as this, he mentions euthanasia as a possibility. In the same report he mentions a female patient who was hospitalized for having a constant hacking cough which was interpreted as a sign of hysteria. Her treatment was to have her ovaries removed. Forel (1914) mentions this patient, among others, in his publication *Die vereinigten Staaten der Erde*. He writes: 'By 1885, without knowing the work of Galton, I had suggested negative eugenics, sometimes under the pretence of medical reasons, but in reality to prevent those disgusting species of mankind from reproducing.' Forel (1905) points to other eugenic measures in his most successful book *Die sexuelle Frage*:

The most eager and enthusiastic fighters for reform (more recently, Rüdin) who suggested castration in such cases [here referring to alcoholic parents] have provoked screams of outrage. The over-sensitive, cultured man of today cannot think such thoughts, whereas many ancient nations and national leaders kept eunuchs for convenience, to have a harmless servant for their wives, and they would behead or hang anyone without a second thought, as the followers of Islam do nowadays. Even the Pope himself kept castrated men as descant singers for church choirs. For this purpose boys were castrated in their childhood ... Nevertheless, recently and now, castration is regarded as a way of healing all manner of illness in men and women, especially hysteria in women ... I quite openly admit to agreeing to the castration of a disgusting, psychically ill patient in my hospital, who had complained about a pain in his genitals. He himself wanted this castration while I clearly thought of it in terms of preventing him from having children rather than treating his condition. I also allowed the removal of the ovaries of a hysterical 14-year-old girl, whose mother and grandmother were both prostitutes and who gave herself to every boy on the street, because I wished to prevent this misery from being perpetuated. At that time it was the fashion to use castration to cure cases of hysteria, and I used this pretence although, in reality, it was done purely for social reasons.

In 1910 Forel gave a lecture, later published, on 'Malthusianism or eugenics' at a Neo-malthusianism Congress in Holland (Forel, 1911). In dealing with the problem of over-population, Forel gave a critical appraisal of Malthus' thesis and Neo-Malthusianism. This publication contains many important connections between racism and eugenics which were, typically, made by Forel and his contemporaries. Thus, for example, he says:

Mankind, as it is today, has gradually evolved from a natural primitive state following the laws of evolution and the fight for existence. However there are colossal differences. There are peoples among us who appear, zoologically speaking, to belong to the species of *Homo sapiens* because they have mixed with civilized man and produced offspring. These creatures, however, possess such inferior mental faculties that they remain at a lower cultural level. Their brains are much smaller than ours and so on. Two such peoples are the Weddas in Ceylon and Stanley's Pygmies, the Akkas, in the Congo Basin. These are not a danger for our race as they are doomed anyway. Considerably more danger is posed by particular races, above all the negroes, who are physically strong and robust, extraordinarily fertile, but mentally inferior, who have learned to adapt to our culture extremely well. When they have adapted to our culture they corrupt it and our race through sloth, lack of ability and by creating such awful, mixed races as the Mulates. By carefully observing the situation in the southern states of the USA it is easy to be convinced how negatively the negro element, as it increases, affects our culture. (Forel, 1911)

Forel's boundaries concerning race differed from those stated later by the National Socialists, for example, and he did not despise every social mixture; furthermore, for him, the pure Arian race did not exist. For instance, Forel wrote in a letter to Dr Rösler, dated 30 April 1912:

Our cultural nations are an utterly artificial product, created by wars and what the conquerors imposed on the conquered. The Swiss are made up of Germans, Romans, Celts, etc. Similarly Germany and France, etc., not to mention North America, which comprises a collection of all possible races. It is a deeply-rooted, scientific lie when, for example, the German nation defines itself as being 'purely German'. It is full of Celtic, Slavic and mixed blood. Therefore I utterly reject this artificially produced nationalism, not only of the Germans but of all peoples. It is damaging, as it emphasizes what is different and inflames war, hate and self-righteous superiority ... Just as the Swiss 'William Tell' patriotism is questionable ... Of course, one should not misunderstand me. In no way do I doubt true racial differences, according to natural science, nor do I agree with mixing in inferior races such as negroes. However it is not true, in fact absolutely untrue, to speak of natural laws concerning the boundaries of our national cultures. (Forel, 1968)

Forel continued to believe in eugenics or selective human reproduction, to which he referred with pride. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that in 1910, after the discovery of sterilization, Forel (1911) rejected it in some cases: he regarded the procedure as a serious step and pointed out that he had refused many appeals for sterilization by healthy patients, while agreeing in cases where reproduction appeared to have a harmful social effect. Indeed, he emphasized that:

[T]he sterilization of the wretched, the lazy, and the bad in such a society will be the natural codex of social duty ... For the insane and for criminals



there will be a law to enforce such sterilization, even against one's will. Furthermore, it will be possible to separate love and the need for sexual satisfaction from reproduction because it will be seen that the highest of mankind's duties lies in proper eugenic procreation ... There is no need to add that an integral social reform, which cuts off the vital life-giving artery to our present materialism (*Mammonismus*), is necessary in order to allow a sensible, scientific (not dogmatic) social democracy to solve the eugenic problem ... Then a stupid, ignorant, degenerate mental and physical proletariat, which in its unconscious simplicity reproduces like rabbits and thus fouls our society like a harmful pest, will no longer exist. (Forel, 1911)

Clearly, there can be no doubt as to Forel's eugenic ideas and eugenically orientated activities. In spite of seeing himself as a down-to-earth and impartial natural scientist, Forel had no empirical or scientific basis for accepting this idea of hereditary and had certainly done no research whatsoever in this field. Nevertheless, he put forward the degeneration theory and the paradigms of inheritance, as did most of the other psychiatrists of his time.

Furthermore, his idea, which he called the 'Blastophthoria' – that the germ plasma is affected by alcohol, with the corresponding hereditary consequences – was a complete misconception. He boasted about individual castrations and sterilizations, to which he often referred, in various contexts, as mentioned above. In his public lectures and publications Forel supported eugenics and he had a strong effect on his audience and readers. However, in the university and scientific milieu, due to the lack of his own research, he was unimportant, in contrast to Ernst Rüdin. In fact he was not involved in the development of genetics and a scientifically-influenced eugenics, which was the foundation for the enormous number of enforced sterilizations that subsequently took place (Kuechenhoff, 2005).

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