

Biological Studies and *Völkisch* Education (1933)

Abstract

One of the fundamental characteristics of National Socialism was its vehement rejection of rationality and reason in science. The movement sought to foster a culture of ethnic nationalism that relied more on emotion than measured investigation and debates of facts. In part, this anti-intellectualism targeted the sciences, rejecting the existing means of investigation and accepted interpretations of what the Nazis and their supporters viewed as a discipline overrun by Jews and cultural elites. Yet, there were several scientific fields that the Nazis recognized had the potential to help them further their ideological aims. Science, so the Nazis believed, ought to focus on “natural laws” that governed the biological make-up of the world, including the natural division of humans into a “racial” hierarchy. This educational guide from 1933 discusses the field of anthropology as a vehicle through which to link the study of biology and physiology to Nazi concepts such as “racial hygiene.” Of central importance to this discussion was the concept of “totality,” that is: understanding the interconnections between plants or animals living in a biological *community*. Organisms were not connected to one another through a “mechanical system” (for example, the food chain), but rather, it was their *living space* that determined the nature of their interaction and relationship to one another. This pedagogy appealed to the emotions of each student, so that they would view Germany as their personal living space and would see themselves as a link in the German biotic community. In turn, this curriculum would instill in pupils a commitment to practical action that contributed to the expansion and strengthening of that biotic community: forestry, agriculture, etc. This appeal to the emotional represented a key move in the politicization of science.

Source

The significance of emphasizing physiological ideas in the teaching of botany and zoology is also to be found in the fact that it serves to pave the way for developing the emerging field of *anthropology*. The physiological processes in plants and animals with which the student becomes acquainted create a basis for an understanding of the corresponding processes in man. In the actual teaching of anthropology, however, a strong emphasis on physiology is necessary because it prepares the way for teaching hygiene, and it certainly is a task of this branch of instruction in biology to provide a guide for a rational way of life. *Personal hygiene*, then, is in turn the prerequisite to the ever so significant *racial hygiene*. Thus the study of physiology is likewise connected with this problem. It can, however, only be successfully utilized on the basis of a totalizing perspective, which must be introduced into all branches of the teaching of biology.

The concept of the totality will come to the fore in the study of living plant or animal *communities* more than it will in any other branch of biology instruction. [...] Unfortunately, this idea has been understood by many methodologists in a purely external way as a principle of the organization of matter. It is more than that. Behind it stands a repudiation of an outmoded tendency in research; the aim should be to present a view of the totality, to apply methods of instruction relevant to the subject matter, to arrive at a national formulation of biology teaching and the discovery of internal interconnections in the occurrences of life. The metabolic changes in a closed biotic community reveal to the students a meaningful plan in the greater occurrences of nature, and when we come to understand that the whole world is a living space for one biotic community, we can then discover ultimate interconnections and finally arrive at a concept of nature that does not conflict with religious experience, whereas this was necessarily the case with the former purely mechanistic attitude.

Introducing the student to this mode of observation is in the spirit of a *völkisch* education. On the basis of an elaboration of biological laws we appeal to the emotional life of the student: he must come to see Germany as his “living space” and himself as a link in the German biotic community and the German destiny; and he must regard all Germans as his blood relations, his brothers. If we reach this goal, then all party and class divisions sink into nothingness and more is accomplished for education in citizenship than is done by studying governmental and administrative structures.

For the very reason that the theory of the biotic community is so important for the development of biological knowledge and for education in organic *völkisch* thinking, it would be expedient to base the school curriculum on this idea. When we go into the free, open spaces, we always come upon animals and plants in their specific living space in which they form biotic communities. It is not a mechanical system that orders the natural arrangement of organisms, but the living space. This living space not only presents an external frame of community but also links its inhabitants to each other with indissoluble bonds. Whoever, in teaching the concept of the biotic community, utilizes it only as a principle of the organization of matter has not grasped the deeper meaning of bionomics. He stands, as it were, in front of a deep well of precious water and draws nothing from it although his companions are dying of thirst. Thus it is a question of opening up *völkisch* values to the students.

At the same time, this produces effects that, from a didactic point of view, are not to be scorned. For one thing, instruction along the lines of the concept of the living community compels the teacher to take his students on frequent trips outside the classroom and to collect observations for later evaluation. Thus a true teaching of life is striven for, not just an accumulation of knowledge acquired by studying “animal skeletons and dead bones.” There is little justification for “museum biology” in the instruction that we are striving to establish. Even the illustrative specimens, which in many school lessons still must serve as a substitute for nature, can be dispensed with in most cases. They may still serve as a supplement to what has been seen in a living context, but they can no longer be the source for the formation of views.

It is not enough to make one visit to a biotic community, such as a beech wood. Rather, it must be visited at least once every season. How different is the effect which a beech wood, for example, makes on us in early spring, when the ground is covered with a carpet of anemones, from that which it makes on us in midsummer, when a mysterious penumbra prevails, when it looks to us like a cathedral with high, slender columns! Anyone who absorbs the atmosphere of the landscape, its soul, begins to love his homeland, and it is precisely love of the homeland which we want to arouse and can arouse with the help of the concept of the biotic community. It is almost self-evident that educational hikes to the biotic communities in his regional environment provide the student with a knowledge that is not limited to the field of biology but includes knowledge about the homeland. [...]

Beyond and above this, the place of man vis-à-vis nature must constantly be discussed in the teaching of biology. This is made easy precisely by arranging the subject matter and the insights deriving from it in terms of a biotic-community approach. Since our concept of biotic community is a broad one, we would begin with the domain of “house and home.” In it, man is the master; he has taken into his household the animals and plants which he keeps either for his use or for his pleasure. He gives them shelter, food, and care; he has changed them through breeding and he holds their lives in his hands. Without him, most of the organisms he keeps as domestic animals or indoor plants would perish. At this point we can discuss in an elementary way the attitude of man toward nature. In this biotic community we meet first and foremost the will to rule over nature, the viewpoint of utilitarianism, which is, however, accompanied by the joy in the beauty of the things of nature and love of nature itself. Similar discussions will come up in the study of biotic communities in the garden, field, and meadow.

It might be thought that with the “anthropological idea,” as I should like to designate the emphasis on anthropology in biology teachings our aim is to return to the anthropocentric point of view that has been justifiably attacked, or that we wish to foster a utilitarian pedagogy by discussing more thoroughly than

was done in the past with regard to domestic animals, useful plants and their parasites, and eugenics from the viewpoint of individual and racial hygiene. It is anthropocentric if it is assumed that nature has been created only for man. We firmly reject this attitude. According to our conception of nature, man is a link in the chain of living nature just as any other organism. On the other hand, it is a fact that man has made himself master of nature, and that he will increasingly aim to widen this mastery. The teaching of natural history must contribute to this. Thus its task is not merely to transmit theoretical knowledge, to foster joy in nature, to arouse love of one's homeland and one's country; it has, in addition, practical aims. One may call this a *utilitarian pedagogy* if one so pleases. But in our view, any instruction in biology that does not take the problems of agriculture, forestry, gardening, and fishing into consideration is a failure; it is a form of teaching that is alien to the practical life of our people. School is not a research laboratory but an institution that aims to educate Germans, and these should stand at their posts in the life of the German *Volk*. We are as far removed from a one-sided utilitarian viewpoint as we are from pedagogy that is alien to life. [...]

Still more important, it seems to me, is the fact that the task of biology instruction, briefly referred to above, can be fulfilled by an orientation toward the concept of the biotic community. It must be grasped here once more on the basis of another idea. We have stated that the student must be led to the conception that Germany is his living space to which he is linked by the bond of blood. We have explained in detail that the bionomic approach teaches that the organisms within a living space are dependent on each other as well as dependent upon the whole, and that each link must perform an indispensable function in the total accomplishment. When this insight is applied to the human biotic community, when the future German racial comrade feels himself to be a link in the German biotic community, and when he is imbued with the idea of the blood relationship of all Germans, then class differences and class hatred cannot assume the extreme forms they often did in the past due to a misunderstanding of the actual bond that unites all estates together. Once every German regards Germany as his living space and feels himself to be a link in the German biotic community, he will be fully conscious of the fact that every individual within the metabolism of the biotic community into which he was born must fulfill his own important task. Thus a supra-individualistic attitude is created, which constitutes the best possible foundation for training in citizenship. Indeed, it can be said that it has achieved its deepest fulfillment once this attitude is transformed into action.

The notion of racial hygiene works in the same way, namely, to direct the education of the student toward nationalism. Although it constitutes the finishing touch of biology instruction, its concepts should from the very beginning permeate all biological instruction in all types of schools and not be left for discussion in anthropology, which concludes the study of biology. It should be repeatedly emphasized that the biological laws operative in animals and plants apply also to man; for example, that the knowledge acquired from studying the genetics of these organisms can, in a general way, be applied to man. Thus the teaching of animal breeding and plant cultivation can effectively prepare the way for conceptions of racial biology. Naturally, a more systematic discussion of these questions will first take place in the teaching of anthropology.

It is not so much a matter of making the student knowledgeable on all questions of eugenics, but of creating motives for his action. Racial hygiene is particularly valuable for school because of its educational significance. If the emphasis on the ideology of the biotic community creates a feeling of belonging to our people and state, then racial hygiene generates the will to struggle, body and soul, for the growth and health of this biotic community.

This is also the place for discussing, from a biological viewpoint, the value of family and the improvement of the sense of family, which has been sorely neglected by many modern pedagogues. The family, after all, is the smallest biotic community since it forms the germ cell of the state. When we take up these questions, matters of individual and racial hygiene, of genetics and sex education, combine to form a meaningful unit, just as, generally, the teaching of biology, which in the past was fragmented into many

unrelated individual fields, will be fused into a unified whole once our efforts reach fruition. In these discussions on the family we are less concerned with the student's enlarging his knowledge and more with the aim that he be imbued with a sense of responsibility, that he begin to sense that the deepest meaning of human life is to grow beyond himself in his children, and that nothing he could leave to them would be more valuable than the German heritage that he has received from his ancestors, and that, through race mixing, he could taint and impair his progeny in a most unfavorable way.

[...]

Source of English translation: George L. Mosse, ed. and trans., *Nazi Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1966, pp. 81-89; reprinted as Paul Brohmer, "Biological Studies and Völkisch Education" (1933) in Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, eds. *The Third Reich Sourcebook*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, pp. 163-66. Republished with permission from University of California Press.

Source of original German text: Paul Brohmer, *Biologieunterricht und völkische Erziehung*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1933, pp. 8-10, 68-72, 74-80.

Recommended Citation: Biological Studies and Völkisch Education (1933), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5202>> [May 14, 2025].