

note  
new address,  
at end of letter

Waldinger

JUN 27 1975

61 Columbia Street  
Brookline, Massachusetts  
18 June 1975

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics  
Stanford University School of Medicine  
Department of Genetics  
Stanford  
California 94305

Dear Dr. Lederberg,

It has been more than two months since I received your comments concerning my paper on "Perspectives on Nazi Racism." A long bout with mononucleosis turned my life upside down this spring, and I trust you will understand why it has taken me so long to acknowledge your letter. My intention was to reply immediately.

I was, of course, quite happy to hear that you found my paper acceptable. But above all, I was very excited by your comments and criticisms. In fact, I cannot remember ever receiving an evaluation that was so informative or did so much to make the work itself seem worthwhile.

I have also never before received criticism that made me think so carefully about the act of studying history. Your first-hand knowledge of my subject matter is exactly the sort of historical criticism that one hopes for but secretly dreads. I worry constantly about whether my work on any given period of history even roughly approximates the way things really were. It seems far too easy to construct artificial historical frameworks and then to disfigure the facts beyond all recognition in an effort to squeeze them into those frameworks. My fear is that I was guilty of this error several times in my paper.

I was particularly concerned with the false impression that I had of J.B.S Haldane. I certainly called that one wrong! I took a brief look at the biography, The Truth Will Out, as you suggested, and it became clear that I had based my portrait of Haldane on sketchy material. This sort of error in historical judgment is what I find so frightening because it is an easy trap to fall into.

Equally disconcerting was my recent discovery that Franz Boas, the unsung hero of my paper, was far more racist in some respects than I believed him to be. A friend in the Harvard Anthropology Department has done some work on Boas and found many of his more academic writings to be filled with race prejudice. My friend assures me that such prejudice is never found in Boas' popular anti-Nazi writings which I surveyed. Nevertheless, I find myself much more suspicious of everything I set down on paper these days!

6/18/75

As you can see, you've set me to criticizing my work and my general approach to the history of science. Such re-evaluation should be going on all the time, but this had an especially great impact on me.

My commitment to the study of the history of science has grown much stronger in recent months, beginning with my time at Stanford. I had a very rewarding teaching experience at Harvard this spring, and I am toying with the idea of pursuing a graduate degree in addition to my M.D. If I did that, I would try to obtain funds to return to Germany and finish my work on German medicine in the pre-Nazi era.

My undergraduate thesis on Weimar medicine has attracted the attention of Jon Beckwith (of XYY fame) and several of his colleagues who would like to use my material to assign some of the responsibility for Nazi "eugenic" atrocities to the American eugenics movement. I have asked them not to use my material in this way because it is, as of now, unfinished. This sensitive area of the history of medicine has tremendous potential, and I hope to be able to go back and research the topic thoroughly before someone else exploits it for solely political purposes. I feel very strongly that this is work which needs to be done.

Should I actually find myself able to carry out this project, I would very much appreciate your comments on my work. Your advice on matters historical and scientific has proved invaluable. Your careful attention to my work of last January has certainly made that month's study rewarding for me.

Again, my thanks to you for taking the time to discuss my paper in such depth, and my apologies for so late a reply. I will certainly do my best to keep in touch with you on matters of mutual interest.

With very best regards,

*Bob*

Bob Waldinger

As of July 1st, my permanent address will be:

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