

MARTOR



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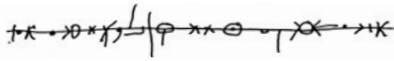
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Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*, Bloomsbury Academic, London & New York, 2014, 306 p.



Reviewed by Călin Cotoi

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The scholarly interest in the social and historical aspects of the biosciences has been increasing constantly during the last years. Various strands of thematic and theoretical visions are coming together in what seems to be an ever-expanding domain.

From neo- or post-Foucauldian interpretations of the politics of life – in the vein of Nikolas Rose, Paul Rabinow, Thomas Osborne or Ian Hacking – to the history of eugenics, demography or racism, a loosely connected field has captured the imagination of scholars and publishing houses worldwide.

Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette are no newcomers to this scholarly area. Both of them have published extensively on eugenics, race, biology, nationalism and the historiography of social sciences and biosciences. This book is part of a large comparative historical endeavor that brings together competences honed during historical research in various parts of the world, and proposes a new theoretical and geographical perspective on eugenics.

Usually, the lay, but also scholarly, understanding of eugenics has a strong bias in favor of German and Anglo-Saxon (British and U.S.) variants. The focus on “Latin eugenics” attempts to break this hegemony and tells a fascinating story of science, politics, degeneration, modernity and frantic attempts at national regeneration and purification. The idea of an international Latin cultural community, which gained strong support during the late nineteenth century and the first half

of the twentieth century, was articulated with eugenics as political, scientific and cultural elites tried to carve a secure place in a rapidly changing world. The benefits of modern medicine, science and technology were becoming central in the projects of individual and collective improvement espoused by the “Latin” countries.

Latin eugenics, which had a strong French and Italian scientific, cultural and political core, was a mixture of projects aimed at improving the biological and social quality of the human population, but, usually, it shied away from radical measures of “negative” eugenics. The importance of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the demographic crisis and the existence of a rather large rural population modulated the eugenic ideal of a powerful state, guided by scientific expertise, intent on controlling family reproductive patterns. Across the world, public hygienists, physicians, biologists, anthropologists, demographers and social scientists from the self-alleged Latin countries created variously shaped alliances, during and after WWI, with political, religious and military elites often attracted to this radical project.

France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Romance-speaking Switzerland, Portugal, Romania, Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela and Chile were all part of a heterogeneous, but still unitary Latin eugenicist community that defined itself more and more against the German and Anglo-Saxon racial hygiene and negative birth-control variants. Latin eugenics sought the biological betterment of the

individual and the community by means of preventive medicine, social hygiene, demographic studies, and public health, rather than genetic engineering, racial selection, and compulsory sterilization (p. 237). Nevertheless, during the interwar and WWII, especially the German eugenics, strongly supported by the state and political elites, became very influential inside the Latin countries.

Neo-Lamarckism was a synthesis of Darwinism and Lamarckism that focused on the inheritance of acquired characteristics and the progressive adaptation of individuals. It had a particularly long life, despite the challenges posed by scientific studies of inheritance and genetic heredity, especially in French medicine. Neo-Lamarckism allowed for a rather optimistic view on the effects of state intervention on population and permitted some kind of accommodation with the views of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches on family life. The eugenicists that embraced Neo-Lamarckism believed that society would become healthier and more productive “if a number of prescriptions were followed, including the improvement of living conditions in urban areas, nationwide programs of vaccination, the criminalization of prostitution and pornography, and so on” (p. 30).

A steep demographic decline in *fin-de-siècle* France triggered a renewed interest in puericulture in the context of pro-natalist policies. Adolphe Pinard, professor of Clinical Obstetrics at the Paris Medical School, promoted a distinct eugenics program “based not on the elimination of the ‘unfit’, but on the promotion of sanitary and public health measures destined to improve the health of the population” (p. 35), centered on pre- and post-natal care and the protection of mothers and infants. In Italy, Corrado Gini and Nicola Pende cautioned against a hasty implementation of eugenics among the population and proposed a self-assumed holistic theory built on the existence of human biotypes that combined

models from the old constitutional medicine, but also from pathology and endocrinology. Each individual has, says Pende, its own biological constitution:

“The constitution is the morphological, physiological and psychological resultant (variable in each individual) of the properties of all cellular and humoral elements of the body and of the combination of these in a special cellular state having a balance and functional output of its own, a given capacity for adaptation and a mode of reaction to its environmental stimuli” (N. Pende, *Constitutional Inadequacies: An Introduction to the Study of Abnormal Constitutions*, Philadelphia, PA: Lea & Febiger, 1928, p. 25 *apud* Turda & Gillette 2014: 92).

Influenced by French puericulture and Italian bio-typology, American eugenicists from Cuba, Eusebio Hernandez and Domingo Ramos, championed a specific theory of eugenic improvement called “homiculture” that combined family protection, child health, public hygiene with a strong belief in the superiority of the European race and culture, and concerns about immigration (p. 150).

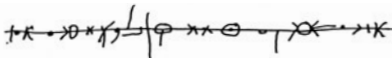
By the mid-1930s, Latin eugenics was constituted around a general model of human improvement that was based on Neo-Lamarckism, puericulture, bio-typology, homiculture, Catholicism, and the opposition to interventionist reproductive practices such as sterilization. Its success as a scientific template for modernization projects sponsored by the state was inconclusive until WWII. By then, “the relationship between the future of the nation and the health of the population was already an established eugenic trope, but the war transformed it into a national obsession” (p. 239). The successful articulation of Latin eugenics with state policies during WWII opened it to influences from the dominant German coercive racial hygiene and foreshadowed its gradual disappearance in the 1950s.

The authors summon eugenicists

from many national and (post)imperial geographies, in a comprehensive comparative picture that carefully takes apart, re-contextualizes, and brings to light conceptual similarities and discrepancies between biological theories, state policies, and modernist theories of national

degeneracy and regeneration. For a moment, all these were brought together, under the banner of an international Latin cultural community, in a collaborative effort to overcome marginality and to energetically modernize the states and populations of a series of European and American countries.

Constantin Bărbulescu, *România medicilor. Medici, țărani și igienă rurală în România de la 1860 la 1910*, București, Humanitas, 2015, 356 p.



Reviewed by Lidia Trăușan-Matu

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Constantin Bărbulescu's volume, *Physicians' Romania. Doctors, Peasants and Rural Hygiene in Romania from 1860 until 1910*, (Humanitas, 2015), is built around the idea of the "degeneration of the Romanian race". This idea appears in the Romanian public space – largely because of the inefficiency of the medical system – in the second half of the nineteenth century and, slowly, until the end of the century, amplifies and acquires sharp contours. Using this theme, along with an enviable critical lucidity and sources lesser-known or lesser-used by researchers, Constantin Bărbulescu analyzes individually the most haunting topics, concerns and fears of the medical elite in Romania regarding the peasant and the rural world, in a time of accelerated modernization, under the reign of King Carol I.

Some of the themes (for example, "The Power of Medical Culture: New Laws for

Old People") are – as stated in the introduction to Bărbulescu's book – previous, older "independent studies". Rewritten as a whole or partially adapted, they complement the new texts, and by their renewed theme, they are written specifically for this book. Together, they breathe life into a complex picture drawn by the medical elite, between 1860 and 1910, in whose forefront shines the rural world and its lifestyle rules. Moreover, the transition of the peasant from the background to the foreground points to the historian's subtle concern for the deconstruction of some stereotypes and deeply-rooted prejudices in Romanian historiography. Finally, the construction, shown as a whole, is new in the literature of Romanian space.

The book opens with a broad and necessary discussion on the sources underlying the research (pp. 27-74). These are regular doctors' reports, be they of the county, regiment or employees in rural