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Review of Marius Turda's and Aaron Gillette, Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective

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Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette

Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective

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“Science, which has transformed the material world, gives man the power of transforming himself. It has unveiled some of the secret mechanisms of his life. It has shown him how to alter their motion, how to mould his body and his soul on patterns born of his wishes. For the first time in history, humanity, helped by science, has become master of its destiny” (238). These words, written in 1935 by Alexis Carrel, a French Nobel Prize winner and eugenicist of the Vichy regime, capture well the essence of eugenics. The vision of human improvement and the transformation of future populations or nations, with the help of scientific knowledge, lie at the core of eugenics. But, united in its ambitions, eugenics was a multiform and diverse worldwide movement, as its contents and the political agenda of its promoters varied enormously, depending on the cultural and historical context. The expanding bibliography over the last two decades has provided us with a much better insight into this complex phenomenon.

This book, by Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette, both experts in the field, attempts to synthesise anew this landscape, focusing on and expanding the concept of Latin eugenics, both in Europe and in the Americas from the end of the nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth centuries. For the authors, there was a Latin culture uniting these countries, based

on “Roman civilisation, linguistic and cultural commonality and Roman Catholicism (in the Romanian case, Christian Orthodoxy)” (1). The will of Latin eugenicists “to modernise the nation-state while preserving its traditional cultural heritage” (8) gives Latin eugenics its particular character, distancing it from other forms of eugenics, such as the Anglo-Saxon or Nordic.

The first chapter examines the precursors to Latin eugenics. The French defeat in 1871 at the hands of Germany had an enormous echo in the Latin world. Writings of English and German anthropologists signalled the inferiority of the *Homo Mediterraneus* to the Aryan *Homo Europaeus*, prompting a racialised response from newly formed professionals in France, Italy and Spain.

Initially, this kind of discourse was a response to the perceived ills of modernity: urbanisation, delinquency, prostitution and alcoholism were framed in terms of degeneracy, while infant mortality and fall of birth rates were viewed as signs of national decline. This pessimistic view was prevalent in Europe as well as in many Latin American nations.

Latin eugenics founded, in response to neo-Lamarckism, a synthesis of Darwinism and Lamarckism centred on “the inheritance of acquired characteristics and progressive adaption” (29). For neo-Lamarckists, better environmental conditions could improve the quality of individuals and nations. Based on neo-Lamarckism, puériculture, advocated by Adolphe Pinard in France, aimed at the betterment of conditions for children and their mothers, and was widespread in the Latin world before the First World War. In Cuba, again, puériculture spawned “homiculture”, “a complex system of social and biological ideas pertaining to human improvement” (37).

The starting point for “early Latin eugenics” was the First International Congress of Eugenics, held in London in 1912. This congress was the stage where the leading eugenicists appeared, serving as a catalyst for the creation of eugenic societies in different countries. It was also here that big differences appeared between French and Italian eugenicists, on the one hand, and American and German, on the other.

Showing the unifying trends existing in Latin Eugenics, the authors claim that before the First World War they lacked the organisational unity of the corresponding German-speaking eugenic organisations. In fact, the Great War, reaffirming racial stereotypes and antagonisms while degrading the social conditions and demographics in the warring countries, spurred eugenics. While the nation was increasingly perceived as an endangered biological organism, politicians turned to eugenicists to promote social and biological revivalism; the latter, in their turn, demanded from governments the application of new health policies. But in this moment of ascendance, attested by the presence of eugenicists in many congresses on public health, sanitation, population, etc, Latin eugenics lacked cohesion; a victim of national antagonisms, mainly between France and Italy, it remained divided throughout the 1920s.

The third chapter focuses on the institutional organisation and the main features of “Latin Eugenics in Interwar Europe”. Separating core (France, Italy) from peripheral countries (Belgium, Romania, Spain, Portugal), the authors emphasise the synergies between eugenics, social hygiene and public health. After an overview of the creation of organisations in Belgium, Romania and Spain, the attention shifts to a big debate inside the movement concerning premarital medical certificates, which some non-Latin countries were already issuing.

The main theme is a conference convened by the French Eugenics Society in 1926; the question of premarital health certificates shows there was dissension on this issue not only inside the French eugenics movement but also in the public sphere in France and elsewhere (Portugal and Belgium). It illustrates the ambitions of Latin eugenicists “to emulate strategies of biological improvement observed elsewhere, while simultaneously modifying these strategies in accordance with ‘Latin’ morality, individualism and religion” (87).

The last section of the chapter is devoted to the relation between fascism and eugenics, where we witness the closest synthesis of science and politics in the European Latin world. After a succinct history of the Italian eugenics movement, in which its conceptual versatility is displayed, the authors analyse the cases of two leading actors, Corrado Gini and Nicola Pende. They insist on the latter’s particular scientific endeavour, biotypology and its spread throughout the Latin countries. Finally, they show how Italian eugenics became an integral part of Mussolini’s programme for national renewal, acquiring a status unparalleled in Europe.

In “Latin Eugenics, Sterilization and Catholicism”, Turda and Gillette examine “the most contentious of all eugenic measures” (104) – sterilisation. This practice was particularly at odds with Christian beliefs, but the different denominations – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox – faced it in different ways.

Focusing on Romania, Italy, France and Spain, the authors review the different aspects of the debate on sterilisation. Engaged between eugenicists inspired by the American model favouring sterilisation, and Catholic eugenicists opposing it, these debates helped shape particular aspects of Latin eugenics in the 1920s and 1930s.

The papal encyclical *Casti Connubii*, promulgated on 31 December 1930, allowed for the existence of a Catholic eugenics while categorically rejecting both abortion and sterilisation. The relation between eugenics and religion came under renewed strain with the promulgation of the Nazi sterilisation law of 1933. In two major congresses at the beginning of the 1930s, then, opposition to the Nazi legislation paved the way for an affirmation of the specificity of Latin eugenics.

The chapter "Eugenics in Interwar Latin America" reviews Latin eugenics in the American continents. Latin American countries offer a diversified spectacle of contrasting influences and transnational networks. For instance, in Argentina, the country "most closely associated with Latin eugenics in South America" (129), we find both French puériculture, Italian biotypology as well as the establishment of a premarital health hygiene law. Here we can also witness the repercussions of evolutions occurring in Europe: for instance, the decline of French influence to the benefit of state-sponsored Italian eugenics in the 1930s.

On the other hand, eugenics in Latin America presents interesting developments, like the advocacy for racial mixing or "mestizophilia" in Brazil and Mexico, or the various stances of each country towards immigration. Furthermore, the particular problems that South American countries faced allowed eugenics to be posited more as a science of general welfare and national stabilisation, as was the case in post-civil war Mexico.

An interesting case is Cuba, where French and American influences coexisted in a very particular form; they both found a proponent in obstetrician Alberto Peralta Ramos. But despite the influence of Anglo-Saxon and German models on Latin American eugenicists,

they remained committed to the promotion of preventive medicine, favouring social welfare, sanitation and puériculture.

"The Latin Eugenics Federation" chapter re-traces the history of the formation of the institution, reassembling the eugenicists of the Latin countries. At the beginning of the 1930s, despite its internal variations, Latin eugenics had shaped an approach of its own, considered more "humane". Following dissent within the International Federation of Eugenics Organisations, key Italian eugenicists, most notably Gini, started to distance their own brand of eugenics from the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic eugenics dominant in the federation. In various congresses from 1927 to 1932, Gini increasingly affirmed his own "regenerative eugenics", insisting more on environmental and hygienic factors and dismissing the omnipotence of genetics in the shaping of the human.

In 1935, following a widening of the ideological divide between Anglo-Saxon and Nordic eugenicists and Latin eugenicists in the World Population Congress in Berlin, the Latin American eugenics societies decided to create their own international organisation. Finally, the Latin International Federation of Eugenic Societies was established in Mexico City in December 1935.

This organisation asserted its version of eugenics in the First Congress of Latin Eugenics, held in Paris in 1937. Opposing the ideas of Nordic superiority, the Latin eugenics movement stepped up its efforts to organise internationally, but they were interrupted by the Second World War.

In the last chapter, the authors promise to explore the relation between "Latin Eugenics and Scientific Racism". Racial ideas, present since the beginnings of Latin eugenics, were

gaining credibility in the 1930s and were becoming prevalent under Nazi hegemony and occupation. Focusing mainly on France, Italy and Romania, the authors distinguish between the French case, where the institutions for the “promotion of the race” finally were embedded in the postwar social state, the Italian case, where the leading eugenicists denied their participation in the German-inspired racial politics of Mussolini, and the Romanian case, where racial politics were used to define an idealised national racial type.

In a sense, the title of the chapter is misleading, as the main focus lies in the various efforts of social and biological engineering undertaken by Latin eugenicists of the wartime period. As it seems, these efforts were crucial for a biological understanding of the nation, as well as for the close collaboration of scientists with politicians that finally resulted in the creation of the postwar social state.

That process is made more explicit in the epilogue, where the authors trace, extremely briefly, some continuities of Latin eugenics up to the 1970s. They show how in Europe, on the one hand, Latin eugenics lies at the foundation of many important postwar institutions, like the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the shaping of population and immigration policies, while on the other, the keyword “eugenics” has disappeared under the weight of its relation to Nazism. In Latin America again, eugenics remained central to the shaping of welfare and immigration policies well into the 1960s.

Based on an impressive mass of archival material, this book renders well the historical complexities of eugenics. Nevertheless, at the analytical level, we can pinpoint the fact that, despite several references to the importance of “motherhood” in nation-states of the Latin

world, a gender perspective is lacking in this work. So the different gendered roles, for example, of the “protector” of the nation or the “macho” man are not examined.

Also, the epilogue concerning the continuity of eugenics in the Latin world poses more questions than answers. It would thus be interesting to see this work continued, to covering the period from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Generally speaking, this book, covering the expansion in Europe of the term Latin eugenics, initially coined for the examination of eugenics in the Americas, shows the complex ramifications of science and politics in a landscape dominated by various overlapping networks at the national, international and transnational levels. So, the presentation of Latin eugenics, as a dynamic constellation of variable and sometimes conflicting ideas, skilfully avoids the pitfalls of reductionism. Shedding new light on the origins of the welfare state, this book is a valuable contribution to the history of eugenics but also to other fields, such as the history of institutions and medicine.