

Marius Turda, *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. X, 343, Science, Technology and Medicine in Modern History

*Eugenics and Nation* by the Oxford-based Romanian historian of science is among those works that, without a doubt, fill a gap in the current state of research. The Hungarian eugenics movement has so far been considered to be of marginal significance, not only in the context of world eugenics, but also as part of the Hungarian history of ideas. Unjustly so. The author of *Eugenics and Nation* argues that in the first two decades of the twentieth century the Hungarian debate about a biological reform of the nation and of society was among the most dynamic in Europe. There is no doubt that it was also foremost in the

region, both when it came to the professional standing and expertise of people exploring the issue, and the number of organizations and publications devoted to it. The strong position of the Hungarian eugenics movement in Europe was a reflection of the place Hungary itself occupied in that period: a state beset by social and ethnic conflicts, but also a grand modernization project, a symbol of which was the capital city Budapest, expanded at the time on an imperial scale.

The author of the book is one of the most active historians of science of recent years and his interest in eugenics goes beyond the territory of the Habsburg Empire.<sup>1</sup> After the publication of the present book he edited an extensive selection of papers from Central and Eastern Europe of key importance to the subject in question.<sup>2</sup> Nor is *Eugenics and Nation* Turda's first work devoted to racial ideas in pre-Trianon Hungary. The topic was the focus of his first monograph published over a decade ago.<sup>3</sup> His experience, confirmed by a long list of publications, has enabled him to develop a characteristic style combining the history of medicine and history of ideas. Turda identifies key points around which crystallize the positions of participants in the discourse, and describes them in detail, using selected examples. Next, having defined the extreme positions, he demonstrates how political events bring some of them into focus or push them to the margins. There are three such decisive moments in *Eugenics and Nation*, moments which changed the existing frame of reference. The first was the introduction of eugenics into intellectual high society in the early twentieth century, the second came during the First World War, while the third was associated with the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. This narrative is accompanied (again: a characteristic of this author, present already, for example, in *The Idea of National Superiority*) by meticulous attention to the international context of the various disputes.

In seven chapters preceded by an introduction and followed by an afterword Marius Turda presents an outline of the history of eugenic ideas in Hungary. A pioneering role in the process was played by people associated with *Huszadik Század*, a sociological journal with a programme for a modern state drawing on positivism, Darwinism and socialism. Discussions inspired by Oszkár Jászi led to the emergence of quite varied views on biological policy, oscillating between the British and the German models. Simplifying these two positions, it could be said that the proponents of the former were more inclined to fight social ills (as well as phenomena they defined as such), while the advocates of German racial hygiene were interested primarily in the place of ethnic Hungarians in the European 'war of the races'. The Hungarian discussions

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, Basingstoke, 2010; idem, *Eugenism și antropologia rașială în România, 1874–1944*, București, 2008; idem and Aaron Gillette, *Latin' Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*, London and New York, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900–1945. Sources and Commentaries*, ed. Marius Turda, London, 2015; the part devoted to Poland was edited by Kamila Uzarczyk.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *The Idea of National Superiority in Central Europe, 1880–1918*, Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter, 2005, the Romanian edition was published in 2015.

from the early twentieth century were characteristically dominated by the first ('social') view among professional doctors, who sometimes held decidedly left-wing views (like, for example, József Madzsar). The topics discussed at the time fully corresponded to the contemporary Western European debate, and included, for example, birth control or anti-alcohol campaigns. Very soon more radical ideas appeared in Hungary, too, ideas encompassing legal regulations protecting the family as well as society against 'degeneracy' and, at the same time, calling on the state to adopt an active eugenic policy (for example, sterilisation of people with hereditary diseases). That period saw the emergence of the first Hungarian-language periodicals devoted to social hygiene, later also racial hygiene, and the first organizations focused on these issues. The institutionalization of the eugenics movement was completed by several great conferences, beginning with the international anti-alcoholic congress held in September 1905 in Budapest.

Although, as Marius Turda argues, the Hungarian discussions about the state's pursuit of a eugenic policy immediately reached the level of those in Western Europe, the most dynamic country in Central and Eastern Europe also had some specific qualities, not really to be found west of Austria-Hungary. Sometimes they stemmed from the speed with which the Hungarian debate about eugenics exploded and then dwindled. The speed blurred the ideological divisions within the movement, boosting at the same time its political effectiveness. The results were sometimes surprising. For example, people with left-wing views were, more often than in Britain, France or Germany, among the supporters of negative eugenics (that is eugenics focused on restricting the reproduction of people considered to be of little biological value). The Hungarian specificity came to the fore also when it came to neo-Malthusianism. Turda cites enthusiastic British opinions about the traditionally low birth rate of families in some ethnically Hungarian regions. In this case the objective which the Western European advocates of a lower rate of natural increase planned to achieve through education and state policy had already been achieved, and in a region that was economically and culturally backward at that.

The face of the Hungarian eugenics movement changed with the outbreak of the First World War. Although linking biological propositions to a right-wing ideology was not a new phenomenon, at that moment it became the predominant stance. Characteristically, the left-wing milieu of *Huszadik Század* was not among the founders of the Eugenics Committee established in 1914. Its president was Pál Teleki, who also headed the Turanian Society the goal of which was to improve the Hungarian race. As a result of consolidation taking place at the time the eugenicists parted ways with the feminists and entered into an alliance with conservative women's organizations. The idea, motivating members of the Eugenics Committee, of a strong and numerous nation could no longer be naturally reconciled with neo-Malthusianism; the dominant stance in the organization would henceforth be pro-natal. On the eve of the war the Hungarian and the German racial hygiene movements were finally brought closer together (the

greatest advocate of this on the Hungarian side was the anthropologist Géza Hoffmann).

The conservative and nationalist turn was consolidated following mobilization and then the horrific human losses and social consequences of the war. In the first phase of the conflict efforts undertaken by the Eugenics Committee focused on protecting motherhood (this was, for example, the objective of community nurses, an institution introduced in 1916), increasing the birth rate and fighting venereal diseases. In addition to huge campaigns, there were also campaigns on a rather smaller scale, like the one promoting breast feeding. In 1916 Hungarian eugenics entered a brief though very intense period of rapid development. The goal of all racial hygiene movements — to gain direct influence on the state's biological policy — was achieved in Transleithania with the establishment of the National Military Welfare Office (Országos Hadigondozó Hivatal) headed by Teleki. Its activity was focused on the period following the end of the war, though some demands, for example to raise taxes for childless families and families with just one child, were put into practice even before the fall of the monarchy. In October 1917 Budapest hosted a large public health congress, which not only marked a symbolic apotheosis of the entire movement, but was also a forum for practical discussions about the state's health and social policies controlled by eugenicists.

Two Hungarian revolutions — liberal-democratic of 1918 and Bolshevik of 1919 — changed the state's policy, emphasising positive eugenics focused on the urban proletariat. In practice this meant a continuation of welfare programmes and continued fight against still spreading venereal diseases, but there were also more significant changes in terms of political declarations. Neither the elitism, nor the nationalism of right-oriented eugenicists could be reconciled with the ideals of democracy or the dictatorship of the proletariat. Although proponents of racial hygiene were not persecuted, they acutely felt the loss of their dominant position in the public debate about society's health. These emotions are cited by the author to explain their subjective conviction that both regimes were hostile to eugenic ideas. It could also be said that during the 'white terror' of the early years of Miklós Horthy's rule to declare oneself to be a victim of communist dictatorship was undoubtedly a manifestation of not just political beliefs but also common sense. The same reasons prompted some advocates of eugenics to join the revisionist campaign, in which a leading role was again played by Teleki.

The pioneering nature of *Eugenics and Nation* also means that the author does not really have a chance to enter into a discussion with his predecessors. Thus Turda mentions only those studies that touched upon the subject of eugenics even if only marginally. What does constitute a research context for him is the historiography — rapidly developing in recent years — devoted to the subject in other peripheral countries of Europe: the Balkan and Baltic countries as well as countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This external perspective has an effect on the nature of his narrative. He approaches the subject with a predefined set of

research questions stemming from studies into other eugenic movements and then proceeds to look for their Hungarian equivalents. Such an approach has many advantages; above all, it makes the story understandable to readers not very familiar with the Hungarian cultural and historical context. On the other hand, the approach keeps potential developmental anomalies out of the author's sight. In order to verify this reservation, other, Hungarian studies into the subject will be needed, however. Their authors will certainly have to refer to Turda's book and hopefully they will not content themselves with just finding several spelling mistakes and questionable translations of Hungarian names that can be encountered here and there in *Eugenics and Nation*.

What seems to be the biggest asset of Marius Turda's book — more than making up for the few errors — is the fact that the author places Hungarian eugenics and eugenics in general in its correct historical context. Fortunately, Turda shies away from facile and quick moral judgements. 'Fortunately' not because the phenomenon does not deserve critical moral judgements, but because moral condemnation is all too often combined with giving up trying to understand its mechanisms. Regardless of the dire consequences of many attempts on the part of states to improve human biology, eugenics did constitute an integral part of the twentieth-century modernization programme. For many physicians, politicians, sociologists and social activists it was as obvious as hygiene or electricity. Rejection of this particular component of the 'modernization package' was a rare and individually motivated attitude. Ideas associated with eugenics inspired both the left and the right, socialists and catholic bishops (for example, Bishop of Székesfehérvár Ottokár Prohászka). Advocates of eugenics, whatever its definition, were, however, divided on account of fundamental differences in their worldviews, differences probably most clearly expressed in the question of whether society or the nation was to be the subject of biological engineering. It was precisely nationalization of racial ideas, very clearly visible in the Hungarian example, that eventually polarized eugenicists. At the same time it was part of a broader phenomenon associated with modernity in just as complicated a manner — the rise of nationalisms in twentieth-century Europe.

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