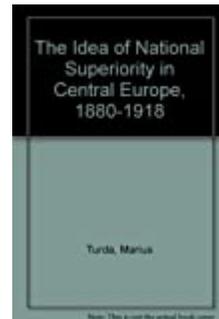




**Marius Turda.** *The Idea of National Superiority in Central Europe: 1880-1918.* Ceredigion: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004. 208 S. \$109.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7734-6180-2.



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## M. Turda: The Idea of National Superiority in Central Europe

Marius Turda is a new and distinct voice in the emerging post-Cold War generation of multiperspective historians who were born on the other side of the Iron Curtain, lived through the historic changes at the time of their adolescence, sought education in the West and, at the threshold of the new millennium, emerged as scholars committed to remove the lasting vestiges of the former fault lines of the once fragmented continent.

Back in the 1990s nationalism was attractive and indeed challenging field to research, both topical and inviting to self-reflection. On the one hand, it kept research open to the debate about the nationalist undercurrents in contemporary politics while, on the other, invited to take a distance from the nationalist issues. Throwing oneself into the study of nationalism was as if to proclaim immunity to a nasty nationalism of the day.

Central European University in Budapest, established by a Hungarian-born American financier to open up the former Communist world to the fruits of Open Society, has been instrumental in challenging the national and trumpeting the universal. Due to its founders unmistakably liberal agenda it became a place where traditional,

national history writing in the region was made a target for post-modern, liberal sharpshooters.

Yet Marius Turda, a graduate of CEU (where he also subsequently tutored) did not choose to go with the flow: instead of taking on target Eastern European nationalism alone, he turned his sharp eye towards unravelling some of the less appealing ideas of the liberal West. Hence, Social Darwinism, an application of Darwins thoughts on social life, became his opening shot. Turda has endeavoured to show how this school of thought had fostered and shaped the racial thinking in Central Europe before 1918.

The theory of Social Darwinism arrived in Europe as an extension of laissez-faire capitalism. It hailed the primacy of the individual over society by ascribing the latter some of the formers anthropomorphic features such as life span and racial character. Herbert Spencer, whose teachings lent coherence to the new theory, maintained, from the questionably moral point of view, that the survival of the fittest was not only the norm but ethically acceptable. Later on, such thoughts would lead to applied eugenics.

By putting together racial theory and Social Darwinism Turda has attempted to show that though these ideas originated in the West it was Eastern Europe which due to its linguistic and ethnic composition had succumbed to them. In his ambitious enterprise Turda has set out to explore those intellectual undercurrents in Western Europe that fed Eastern European thinking about the nation in racist and Social Darwinian terms prior to the interwar period. The results of his erudite study are now available in his pioneering monograph *The Idea of National Superiority in Central Europe, 1880-1918*, which, as the author mentioned to me, is the first volume of the planned trilogy on race, nationalism and eugenics in Central Europe (some of the issues dealt in this review will be addressed in volume 2, as the author assured me after seeing this text).

With Turdas well-written book it is for the first time that an international reader gets an opportunity to explore a set of ideas which beset a number of brilliant if dangerous minds in fin-de-siècle Vienna and other capitals of the Habsburg Monarchy, a hotbed of nationality conflicts, as Professor Robert Evans put it in his preface to the book. Turdas task is to measure the impact of racial thinking and Social Darwinism on various nationalist discourses. How does he go about it? The author uses the idea of national superiority as arguably the most suitable barometer to assess the damage done by high-brow theories to a thinking about national character in the context of competing national claims. The authors whose works are dissected here are unknown outside Hungary and/or Romania (who has ever heard of the likes of Paul Hunfalvy, Mihály Rácz or Aurel Popovici?), but their thoughts are relevant as they echo some of the issues with which other countries also had to grapple, such as the question of the racial character of the nation. Turdas monograph goes well beyond national histories.

It has four chapters. Chapter One discusses theories (racial thinking, the concept of race, theories of Social Darwinism etc.). Chapter Two deals with the two heavyweights, the spiritual fathers of Social Darwinism and racial theories of superiority in Central Europe, namely Ludwig Gumplowicz and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. The following chapter examines cultural and historical theories of national superiority in a larger depth (the author touches upon such intriguing topics as Evolutionary Theory of the Nation, Legal Definition of National Superiority, Racial Spirit etc.). The final chapter wraps up the monograph by discussing nationalist Darwinian theories of superiority in Romanian and Hungarian cases. The list

of the topics and the sub-topics touched upon on less than 180 pages is endless, and Turdas erudition is remarkable.

Instead of going through them, I will mention few details which I found interesting.

The origins are the most interesting and fascinating issue to talk about. Historians are all the time discussing the origins of various phenomena as they analyse them. Turda has uncovered the roots of Social Darwinism in Central Europe in the writings of the the Vienna professor of sociology Ludwig Gumplowicz; a Polish Jew from Krakow. His experience of Polish anti-Jewish milieu and Jewish autonomous position within it should have provided him with enough hard facts to apply the concept of race on a broader and more theoretical context. During 1875 and 1910 Gumplowicz was busy churning out works in which he discussed the theory of racial struggle. He saw racial conflict as central to the functioning of human societies. The worrying part of his argument claimed that the state and all other political institutions originated from the conflict between races and, more importantly, in the conquest of one race by another.

Though Gumplowicz's evolutionary sociology was not unreservedly Darwinian and certainly had racist undertones, yet it did not offer an explanation of the idea of racial domination. When applied on the field of contemporary politics Gumplowicz's thesis made the German and Magyar races appear as the natural rulers of the vast territories administered by the Habsburgs. It is in this attempt to explain the racial conflicts that he linked racial thinking and Social Darwinism with nationalism. Hence he advocated the idea that it was natural that the Poles, Czechs and Slovenes should accept German national superiority while the Romanians, Serbs and Slovaks - the Hungarian one.

Another character who had played a vital role in disseminating racial thinking was Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Chamberlain's racial theory intrinsically asserted the idea of national superiority. For him, the Teutons (die Germanen) were the superior race. But how practically did Chamberlain's racist ravings and Gumplowicz's teachings connect to spreading the idea of national superiority in Central Europe between 1880 and 1918 is not always clear from the book. Turda takes for granted that ideas are like a currency: once you possess it, you can trade it, accumulate, exchange, bequeath, and it never vanishes. Intellectual historians rely on texts as the means through which ideas are being channelled, transferred from one recipient to another, but we rarely see attempts to show how those ideas become appropriated by individuals and

groups.

Turda introduces a number of colourful if strange characters each coming forward with his (always his) understanding of what an ethnic-nation constituted of. But the most interesting case is that of Aurel Popovici, a Romanian from Transylvania, who provided Romanians with a race-based definition of the nation. He studied in Vienna where he became acquainted with Gumplowicz's sociology and Chamberlain's racial thinking. In this case it is not difficult to see how he became exposed to those ideas.

One would wish that other authors described would be more clearly interconnected.

Popovici is an interesting character. In an attempt to find a defensive strategy against the Hungarian thought of racial superiority he made an important equation: national consciousness cannot exist without racial identity; and it was national consciousness that transformed a race into a nation. Popovici thus directly applied Social Darwinian language to explain the cultivation of national consciousness. This led him to believe that the future of the nation stood and fell on the transmission of racial characteristics.

Such racist understanding of nationality was especially strong in the interwar period. This period will be covered in Turda's forthcoming volume, a follow-up to the present monograph.

Having examined a number of similar if slightly differently thinking authors Turda has reached the following conclusions:

There was no simple route for the transmission of racial theories and Social Darwinism in Central Eu-

rope between 1880 and 1918. The presence of Ludwig Gumplowicz and Houston Stewart Chamberlain in cultural centres such as Graz and Vienna played, undoubtedly, an important role in disseminating new ideas about racial thinking and Social Darwinism. In Hungary, however, the dissemination of racial thinking and Social Darwinism was not the work of a handful of intellectuals that had formulated racial discourses, but the product of a multitude of sources embedded within the Hungarian tradition of theorizing about the nation (p.161).

The author thus himself acknowledged that he was dealing with at least two things: ideas which circulated in the academic environment and the ideas which took root in Hungarian politics. Furthermore, he concluded that the idea of national superiority was interpreted in a variety of ways. But perhaps it was not the idea in its singularity that was given different meanings in different political contexts but the multitude of ideas about the nation and its superiority that captured many hot-headed bright minds.

So, perhaps, after all, instead of trying to construct the object of his enquiry in the form of the idea of national superiority as the supreme governing principle of many different strands of thought about the nation in its racial capacity, Turda should have attempted to be a little bit more post-modern (and more faithful to his alma mater) by deconstructing the subject, and thus presenting the reader with a multiple choice of different routes which led many to believe in national superiority, be that for political or scholarly reasons. Yet, apart from these minor, cosmetic issues of structure and method, Turda's book is a superb example of how a non-national history can be done.

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