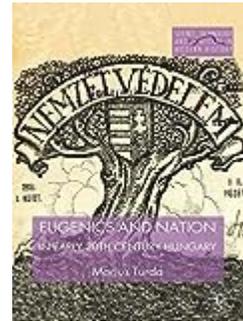


Marius Turda. *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 343 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-137-29352-7.



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In this volume, Marius Turda provides a comprehensive account of the formation of a specifically Hungarian nationalist culture of eugenics, integrated within the broader framework of international eugenics, but adapted to local needs and concerns. The book focuses on the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Hungary achieved cultural dominance in Central East Europe and experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization. However, these developments also generated growing fears of degeneration and decline. The same period also saw the growing institutionalization of eugenics globally, with increasing support from cultural and political elites, who called for “practical eugenics,” such as sterilization, but also social reform in response to industrialization and urbanization. Turda argues that Hungarian eugenics formed part of Europe-wide hopes to achieve biological transformation of the modern state. At the same time, he offers Hungarian eugenics as an example of how “seemingly universal eugenics ideas of social and biological improvement were nationalized through a convoluted process of negotiation, refutation and appropriation” (p. 11).

Turda sets for himself three aims: to identify the most important Hungarian eugenicists and contextualize them within their corresponding discursive cultures;

to explore interconnections of eugenics and nationalism, and therefore present how ideas of health and hygiene were understood in eugenic idioms; and to portray eugenics in Hungary as part of an international movement, and restore it to its place within the broader European context, thereby better understanding the relationship of politics and science. This book succeeds admirably, providing a comprehensive account of Hungarian eugenicists both major and minor, tracing the development of an increasingly Hungarian eugenics movement specifically adapted to local national anxieties, and highlighting Hungary’s place in the international eugenics movement.

Chapter 1 charts the early engagement of individuals from a wide range of professional backgrounds, including medicine, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, social work, and economics, with the main European theories of eugenics, and their efforts to adapt eugenic principles to Hungary. Chapter 2 shows the dissemination of eugenic ideas among intellectuals, scientists, and cultural elites through journals and conferences, creating an environment auspicious for eugenics to interact with other disciplines, and generating a variety of responses, reworking or condemning eugenics in a Hungarian context. Turda charts the early split between

those seeing eugenics as a proscription for active positive and negative eugenics measures, including the segregation of the degenerative to prevent breeding, and those favoring eugenics as broader justification for social reform, welfare, and education methods. Both approaches, he argues, presented eugenics as a “scientific” answer to the challenges presented by modernity and degeneration. These two chapters highlight the sophistication of Hungarian responses to eugenics and the efforts taken to adapt eugenic theories innovatively to specifically Hungarian needs. In particular, Turda emphasizes, Hungarian eugenicists sought to decode the social and biological predicaments of modernity (as they saw them), rather than of race.

Chapter 3 charts the efforts to disseminate to the general population public hygiene and eugenic ideas through public lectures and traveling exhibitions, and the contested position of eugenics alongside other ideas for social and biological reform, such as neo-Malthusianism. Turda highlights the growing tensions between left-wing social reformers for whom eugenics legitimized economic reform and female emancipation, and conservatives for whom biological eugenics reinforced the existing order. Chapter 3 then traces the internationalization of Hungarian eugenics, as Hungarians participated in international conferences and panels on public hygiene and eugenics. These events helped to legitimize Hungarian eugenics at home. This institutionalized communication through conferences, journals, and so on fostered the professional exchange of eugenics ideas, leading ultimately to the emergence of an international culture of eugenics. Despite the international context of these conferences, however, Hungarian contributions remained firmly fixed on *national* imperatives of social and biological improvement.

Chapter 4 traces the formation of the Eugenic Committee of Hungarian Societies in January 1914, predominantly at the initiative of Hungary’s two leading prewar eugenicists: Darwinian/neo-Mendelian István Arpáthy, who favored a specifically Hungarian eugenics program, and Geza Hoffmann, who passionately supported practical eugenics on the American, and later German racial hygiene, models. Turda traces the correspondence and interactions between the two eugenicists in impressive detail, laying down for the first time a clear account of the committee’s foundation. The Eugenic Committee brought together supporters of eugenics from a wide range of professional backgrounds, representing numerous scientific, medical, public health, and child protection organizations, and conservative wom-

en’s groups and cultural bodies, as well as representatives of government ministries. The committee presented a bold eugenics program rooted in Hungarian nationalism, with an emphasis on both positive and negative measures tailored for Hungarian conditions.

Created so shortly before the outbreak of war, the significance of the committee does not rest with its practical achievements; as Turda notes in chapter 5, it was moribund by 1916. Even so, Turda considers the first two years of the war the turning point for Hungarian eugenics, leading to widespread concerns about the long-term degenerative impact of the war on the health and racial quality of the nation. Consequently, politicians increasingly embraced the state’s responsibility for the racial health of the nation, and eugenicists shifted their focus from social and medical reform to race protection and national survival. Two new organizations in particular reflected this new interest and attempted to implement policies in national and racial health: the Stefánia Association for the Protection of Mothers and Infants and the Association of National Protection against venereal disease.

Such was the rise in concern about degeneration, Turda argues, that the final two years of the war marked the triumph of eugenics in Hungary, gaining acceptance as a state responsibility throughout the political elite and widespread support in popular society. Chapter 6 traces the formation in 1917 of a new collective eugenics body, the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy, presenting a specifically Hungarian nationalist eugenics philosophy, legitimizing a broad range of positive and negative eugenics policies, both social and biological. Turda also traces an increasing shift toward social conservatism in Hungarian eugenics, the growing influence of German racial hygiene, and an emphasis on biological over social eugenics.

Turda traces the participation of Hungarian eugenicists in a series of joint German, Austrian, and Hungarian eugenics conferences, underlining that even as Hungarian eugenics became more nationalist, it continued to draw from and contribute to an international culture of eugenics. The final chapter also briefly addresses eugenics after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, refuting the claims of Communist-era Hungarian scholarship that eugenics was the preserve of the right. Mihály Károlyi’s Democratic Republic and Béla Kun’s socialist regimes, both short-lived, embraced eugenics to legitimize their proposed social reforms. Turda also notes the conservative backlash and turn to an increasingly exclusionary bi-

ological eugenics following the fall of Kunâs government and the Treaty of Trianon.

Despite the impressive scope of this volume, several areas invite further research. Turda emphasizes intellectual and cultural history over the social impact of eugenics, in part perhaps because in an atmosphere of world war and revolution, many of these eugenics initiatives may have had few practical outcomes. However, it would be fascinating to know to what degree eugenics rhetoric shaped, for example, the provision of social services at the local level. Similarly, it would be insightful to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of eugenics on Hungaryâs ethnic minorities. Turda makes a compelling case that, at least until the First World War, while Hungarian eugenicists biologized national belonging, most took an approach supportive of the assimilation, rather than exclusion, of Hungaryâs minorities. However, it is not always clear what eugenicists intended this to mean in practice for Hungaryâs minorities, possibly because the

eugenicists were not always clear themselves.

That having been said, this volume already canvasses an impressive array of material (so much so that the author was obliged to exclude secondary sources from the bibliography in order to reduce length); these are areas for further inquiry rather than faults with the volume. Overall, Turda has produced an extremely detailed account of the development of eugenics in Hungary, highlighting the independent and innovative approach Hungarian eugenicists took to adapting international eugenics ideas to local concerns and demonstrating the importance of eugenics to Hungarian history. The study also provides a significant example of the nationalization of science in Central Europe, with careful charting of the role of personal and professional contacts, conferences, journals, and institutions in the dissemination of ideas. The book successfully demonstrates the contributions of Hungary to the broader international culture of eugenics and provides a valuable point of comparison in that area.

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