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DEBATE

Colonialism, eugenics and ‘race’ in Central and Eastern Europe

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The legacies of eugenics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and their connections to global colonialism remain uncharted. Therefore, it is worth pondering over this relationship, which requires a historical perspective and a repositioning of the recent postcolonial ‘turn’ in CEE to include the history of eugenics. For the most part of the 20th century, eugenics took shape within both colonial and nation-building projects. Eugenic strategies devised to preserve the colonial system outside Europe have always coexisted with programmes designed to improve the well-being of nations within Europe. This convergence between colonial, racial and national dimensions of eugenics requires a critical rethought. While this key line of inquiry has been a major focus in Western Europe and the US, it remains under-theorised in CEE. By highlighting the colonial implications of nation-building in the region, we attempt to destabilise the all-too-pervasive historiographic misconception that CEE nations are largely untouched by the global circulation of eugenics and scientific racism.

Key words Central and Eastern Europe • eugenics • colonialism • racism • nationalism

Key messages

- The histories of eugenics in CEE need to be connected to the broader intra- and extra-European colonial arrangements.
- Modern eugenics, rather than being incidental to nationalism, is an integral part of nation-building projects across CEE.
- Eugenic processes of inclusion and exclusion solidified a nationalising process according to which ethnic belonging was explained in racial terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.
- Scholarship on whiteness and coloniality in CEE needs to incorporate eugenics as a key unit of analysis for the understanding of the history of racism in the region.

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Introduction

The second half of the 19th century was a period of colonial expansion and scientific ambitions. The global dominance of Britain, Europe and the US was believed to be the result of centuries of Western advancement in culture, science and industry. This narrative of entitlement, cemented by the Enlightenment (Eze, 1997), was further bolstered by an unyielding belief in ‘race’ as an ordering principle of the world (Bernasconi, 2001). Such a belief placed white peoples at the top of the hierarchy based on the assumed moral and intellectual superiority, while viewing non-white peoples as predominantly inferior. Emerging around the same period was the growing concern over the perceived demographic ‘decline’ of certain white peoples: the so-called ‘Nordic’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (Gobineau, 1855; Chamberlain, 1899; Grant, 1916). This intersected with an assumed loss of their biological vitality due to miscegenation and self-inflicted degeneration associated with alcoholism, prostitution and poverty, as a threat to the long-term sustainability of the racial ordering of the world (Lankester, 1880). Inspired by Thomas Malthus’s pessimistic overpopulation controls; Herbert Spencer’s social philosophy of competition and the ‘survival of the fittest’; and Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, a defensive strategy emerged in the 1880s, whose purpose was to protect the ‘well-bred stock’, often perceived as ‘more civilized races’ (Tylor, 1871: 1–22), against further decline.

In an attempt to define that defensive strategy, Francis Galton, the Victorian polymath, introduced the term *eugenics*. Known for his interest in ‘the central topics of Heredity and the possible improvement of the Human Race’ (Galton, 1909: 288), Galton believed that the solution to the modern society’s problems was a rational planning of the population through reproductive control. In so doing, he only endorsed marriages between those who, he erroneously assumed, ‘possessed the finest and most suitable natures, mental, moral, and physical’ (Galton, 1865: 165). He argued that people perceived to be socially, culturally, intellectually and racially below the average should not have children. Otherwise, if this group ‘continued to procreate’, Galton claimed, ‘a time may come when such persons would be considered as enemies of the State’ (Galton, 1873: 129). For these individuals, Galton’s vision was a language of doom, but for a selected few, especially those assumed to be hereditarily endowed with superior intellectual traits, it was one of promise.

By the early 1900s, eugenics had quickly become a fashionable social and scientific movement, conjuring a diversity of connotation and attendant narratives of belonging. Launched from Britain, eugenics travelled fast and wide, as it quickly found hospitable environments in nations across the world (Turda and Balogun, 2022). It was received, welcomed and fully embraced by many learned societies, particularly by physicians, anthropologists, biologists, sociologists, public health practitioners, and educators. But its implementation was as not a mere imitation, as eugenic movements in the US, Sweden, France, Canada, Mexico and Italy drew heavily from many local traditions (Kevles, 1985; Schneider, 1990; McLaren, 1990; Stepan, 1991; Broberg and Roll-Hansen, 1997). These included not only animal breeding, but also modern approaches to medicine, hygiene and public health, anthropology, statistics, sociology and, most importantly, political efforts to restrict immigration and prevent ‘racial mixing’. For example, in Germany, physician Wilhelm Schallmayer was among the first to formulate a theory of eugenics based on the idea of *Vererbungshygiene* (‘hereditary hygiene’). Another complementary concept, termed *Rassenhygiene* (‘racial hygiene’), was formulated by physician Alfred Ploetz. In 1904, Ploetz launched the periodical, *Archiv für Rassen-*

und Gesellschaftsbiologie, quickly followed by the establishment of a Society for Racial Hygiene in Berlin, the world's first eugenics-based organisation (Weindling, 1989).

By the early 1910s, there was enough political and scientific support to organise the First International Eugenics Congress. At the end of July 1912, at the initiative of the Eugenics Education Society (established in 1907), more than 400 delegates from several European countries (France, Germany, Italy and Belgium) and the US met in London. The Congress attracted global press coverage, from Romania and Hungary to Argentina and Canada, with leading politicians in attendance. By then, American eugenicists were starting to put theories of heredity into practice, as the world's first sterilisation law was enacted in Indiana in 1907. Other states quickly imitated Indiana's example by enacting their own sterilisation laws (Hansen and King, 2014). The specificities of eugenics identified here is not only in relation to a racialised nation-building project, but also related to gender. Eugenics had important gendered implications, most notably in countries where women accounted for most of compulsory sterilisations (Broberg and Roll-Hansen, 1997; Stern, 2005).

The histories of eugenics in Western Europe and the US are now widely acknowledged. Accounting for the presence of eugenics in other parts of the world, especially the regions of Europe that are often considered peripheral, has been rather slow (Bucur, 2002; Gawin, 2003; Turda and Weindling, 2007; Promitzer et al, 2011; Turda, 2015; Varsa, 2021). It is for this reason that this exploratory article argues for the need to consider eugenics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE¹) and its colonial implications as complementary to the normative examples provided by countries such as Britain, Germany and the US. Accepting the historical importance of eugenics in relation to nation-building projects across CEE requires us to challenge 'the colonial amnesia of European historiography' and the corresponding assumption that national traditions in CEE are 'raceless' (Bjelić, 2022: 239–62). There is now a growing body of research that deals with these challenges in the region, particularly during the socialist and post-socialist periods (Baker, 2018; Todorova, 2021; Rexhepi, 2022). This is in addition to the conceptualisation of whiteness (Imre, 2005; Böröcz, 2021; Kalmar, 2023) as well as coloniality and inter-imperiality in the region (Parvulescu and Boatcă, 2022). In line with these studies, we argue that eugenics in CEE should be understood not only as a strategy for the preservation of white modernity, but also as an intrinsic and clearly articulated component of the nation-building project and its accompanying project of racial regeneration (Turda, 2010).

The colonial legacies of eugenics

The emergence of modern eugenics cannot be fully comprehended without its colonial origins that were largely shaped by Britain's specific colonial arrangements as a global empire (Campbell, 2007; Paul et al, 2018). This was evident in the discussion about 'national efficiency' (White, 1909: 105–11) and in the suggestion that Britain's Colonial Office needed to consider 'the selection of types of emigrants who are suitable for different colonies' (Gotto, 1919: 133). Within these proposed measures, intermarriage between white people from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Britain were seen as 'a very important eugenic step forward for the Dominions' (Gotto, 1919: 133), while shaping an extreme interpretation of racial differentiation in Africa (Campbell, 2007). Racial mixing with Indigenous populations was to be avoided if white British domination in the colonies was to be maintained. Other

European states with imperial and colonial ambitions harboured similar racial and eugenic endeavours. For example, Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium and Italy had colonies that absorbed ideas of race and various eugenic methodologies developed for the preservation of the metropole (Robertson, 1998; Cassata, 2011; Cleminson, 2014; Turda and Gillette, 2014).

Similar colonial-inspired ideologies were put to use in the Scandinavian countries (Naum and Nordin, 2013; Höglund and Burnett, 2019; Merivirta et al, 2021). The pursuit of ethnic homogenisation in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland took a distinctively eugenic turn, as attention was fixed on the alleged source of national degeneration posed by the Indigenous Sámi and other nomadic groups such as the Roma. The work of prominent Swedish and Norwegian eugenicists such as Herman Lundborg and Jon Mjøen was firmly embedded within a colonial framework, according to which the 'Nordic' European Swedes and Danes were seen as 'white' and culturally superior and then contrasted and opposed to the 'dark skinned' Sámi (Svalastog, 2013; Marttinen, 2022). This racial vision of whiteness was invoked to justify a variety of eugenic acts against Indigenous people who were continuously marginalised and mistreated. This sense of differentiation was repeatedly reinforced through state-sanctioned eugenic policies of institutionalisation, segregation and stigmatisation.

To this end, it was common to see European and American eugenicists travelling to colonial settlements outside Europe to examine the effects of intermarriage and racial crossing between people identified as various 'races' (Salesa, 2011; Sysling, 2016). For example, in the early 1900s, German eugenicist and racial anthropologist Eugen Fischer went to south-west Africa to study the Rehobothers (the offspring of Boer and German men and Nama women racialised as *bastaard* (crossbreed)). Using Mendelian genetics, Fischer claimed to have demonstrated that the Rehobothers were a prime example of the 'negative impact' of miscegenation between white and black 'races' (Fischer, 1913). A similar research agenda was pursued by the American eugenicist Charles Davenport in his genetic study on race crossing in Jamaica (Davenport, 1929). The consequences of these interrelated colonial endeavours were however felt back in Germany and the US: Fischer's research was used to justify Nazi racial laws forbidding marriage between Jews and 'Aryans', while Davenport's racial research strengthened the widespread eugenic perception that races differed in moral capacities and that mixed-race individuals were prone to mental and physical degeneration. The eugenic construction of different psychopathologies associated with various 'races' thus served to legitimise and justify both European colonial rule abroad and their political projects at home.

Eugenics has always been about power and control, about preserving the rights of racially privileged white Europeans or those of European descent, while affirming their superiority over others. Although the colonial underpinnings of global eugenics and their racial imperatives embedded in the strategies of nation-building are now problematised, their representations in CEE are yet to receive a deserving attention within the scholarship on eugenics.

Eugenics and peripherality

Eugenics drew its energies from, and in turn, reinforced political beliefs inhabiting many national projects. With this, CEE countries with assumed peripheral status did

not hesitate to embrace the scientist ethos purported by eugenics and to align it with visions of the nation reborn from the ashes of disintegrating empires. Unwaveringly, nationalists in these countries promoted eugenics whenever it served the purpose of forging a strong and 'well-bred' nation. As previously indicated, it was not just the British and the Germans who fashioned themselves as an 'imperial race'. The Poles and the Romanians too fantasised about empire, colonies and 'race' (Balogun, 2018; 2022a; Solonari, 2019; Ureña Valerio, 2019).

Indeed, peripherality brings us closer to the emergency of eugenics in CEE, before and during the First World War (Zamoiski, 2016). The so-called 'peripheral' nations in CEE perceived eugenics as a persuasive strategy meant to protect the dominant ethnic nations from a disappointing and 'unjust' past. Beyond this, eugenics was meant to guide these nascent nations into a rewarding future, leading to self-determination and independence. For example, after 1918, these nations were reconceived as a modern laboratory of social and biological engineering, not just as successor states but also as outcomes of European internal colonialism (Iordachi, 2019). In a similar vein, the 'civilising mission' of the Austro-Hungarians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and of the Romanians in Dobrudja during the 1880s and 1890s, or that of the Czechs and Slovaks in Subcarpathian Ruthenia during the 1920s and 1930s, all bear the imprint of the European colonial mind. Increasingly, during the interwar period, eugenics gravitated towards new nationalist agendas, contributing to 'the political engineering of a biologically defined community' (Turda, 2009: 78). This was particularly evident in the early 1940s, when countries such as Romania, Hungary and the Independent State of Croatia pursued policies of ethnic purification (Solonari, 2010; Weiss-Wendt and Yeomans, 2013).

The establishment of eugenics societies in CEE occurred as early as 1914, with Hungarians, Austrians and the Czechs organising public debates and attending international conferences on eugenics (Turda, 2014). However, eugenics did not gain major traction in the region until after the First World War, when newly independent states, Czechoslovakia and Poland among others, began to harness both the demographic calculations and the enthusiasm of scientific elites to pursue eugenic and biopolitical agendas (Bucur, 2002; Gawin, 2003; Turda, 2015; Balogun, 2022b). Their main aim was to preserve the racial quality of these nations, to strengthen their ethnic defence and to instil eugenic responsibility for future generations. Similar developments can be observed across Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic states (Krementsov, 2018; Rudling, 2019). For example, the Estonian Eugenics Society (founded in 1924) embraced several processes of racialisation as a way of producing core 'Estonian-ness' channelled through the stigmatisation of people deemed 'biologically unfit' (Kalling, 2007: 253). In Latvia, eugenics contributed to the idea that Latvians belonged to the 'superior' European 'races' through a link to the so-called 'Aryan race', while in Lithuania, eugenicists favoured the introduction of genetic counselling and prenuptial certification (Felder and Weindling, 2013).

Eugenicists in CEE recurrently spoke of 'national eugenics' (Růžička, 1923; Moldovan, 1925), favouring their ethnic community above others. In setting forth a new set of well-defined national goals, these nations sought modernity through the adoption of eugenic practices applied by Western nations at home and in their colonies (Campbell, 2007). What needs to be emphasised here is that the racial ideology that drove many practices of eugenics across CEE was more or less similar with the dogma of white domination that enabled colonial functionality elsewhere.

In so doing, it allowed each nation in CEE to deal with its anxieties regarding ethnic minorities in a similar and divergent racialised ways. Beyond this, the interwoven language of national efficiency and eugenic proficiency portrayed some members of the society – the Roma minority, for example – as a less developed or civilised group (Shmidt and Jaworsky, 2021). Throughout the 20th century, the Roma were subjected to state's colonial *projects*, reflecting both a form of eugenic paternalism and a racially encoded division in the society.

In this regard, contemporary scholars who are keen to apply 'the colonial matrix of power' (Quijano and Ennis, 2000) to CEE need to equally consider the web and flow of eugenic projects that have been embedded in the matrix of nation-building in the region. For some, CEE remains peripheral or semi-peripheral to Western Europe. This dislodgement of the legacies of eugenics from the accounts of nation-building in CEE has also meant the exclusion of the colonial and imperial narratives within which eugenics had emerged and developed in the region since the 19th century. Perhaps we need another term of analysis that better explains the relationship between 'the core and the periphery', should these binary descriptions refuse to go away (Doyle, 2014: 161). Eugenics provides the opportunity for such analysis that does not constrain the logic of 'race' to peripherality – a terminology that oversimplifies racism's global dynamics and circulation. The emergence and uses of eugenics in CEE during the first half of the 20th century could help revisit the notion of peripherality.

Hence, we argue, in the critical rethought of CEE, that the region occupied not a peripheral position but a strategic location where eugenics was very much embraced as much as in the West. The peripherality or partial participation of the CEE nations in different colonial settlement endeavours is an indication of their long-standing desire to be European (Balogun, 2018). Perhaps, it is useful here to think about eugenics in hybridity – a mixture of different and similar eugenic components that have provided the categorisation of people around the world. To be sure, eugenics provided several ways through which the racialisation and the biologisation of individuals and groups were made possible across the region. Therefore, it is time to bring forth the eugenic narratives circulating within the Western colonial projections of 'race' into conversation with the colonial narratives in CEE. The task here is not simply to add eugenics to mainstream debates about the national past, but to show how eugenics has been an integral component of modernity, structuring and transforming societies in a region that is often assumed to be post-racial, especially in relation to questions of social injustice, racial and gender inequalities, yet not colonial. If nationalism and racism ultimately determined who belonged to the nation, eugenics defined the social and biological value of that membership.

Indeed, 'sciences of race' in CEE were shaped not just by the imperial/colonial influences from outside the region, but also by the very dynamic of their own nation-building projects. Despite the emerging studies on the region's colonial and racist entanglements, histories of eugenics and their imperial/colonial underpinnings still require further scrutinising. The legacies of eugenics that we are confronting in our societies are best understood at the interstices between the 'postcolonial present' and the 'colonial global' (Bhambra, 2022: 8; see also Benson, 2021). For the purpose of such recognition, eugenics needs to be articulated outside the history of genetics and medicine and placed alongside nationalism and racism within broader historical processes of colonial and racial transformation that led to the making of the modern world.

A way forward

The abbreviated account of eugenics in CEE given in this paper is not sufficient on its own but requires a connection to debates that must begin with an understanding that 'Europe is intrinsically a product of its colonial and imperial legacies' (Rodríguez et al, 2016: 6). Decolonising national traditions in CEE, alongside the decentring of Europe, is a major task here. Such decolonial strategy requires confronting European colonialism, its knowledge production and, most importantly, the complex societal-eugenic arrangements that succeeded in relabelling multi-ethnic societies in racial terms. Yet, eugenics is often located outside the national histories produced in CEE.

Given this overlap, there is a need to rethink national historiographic traditions in CEE and other peripheral parts of Europe where post/colonial and decolonial logics are often underplayed or considered irrelevant to social configurations. Such a repositioning requires drawing attention to the neglected colonial imagination routed through various manifestations of eugenics and 'race'. In so doing, the ways in which eugenics had functioned as a racialised colonial mechanism of exclusion and inclusion, and how national and social realities continue to be indebted to eugenic concepts developed during the interwar period and under communism are brought to the fore. This attention to the margin, we anticipate, would transform the understanding of national realities, at least, in a region that is yet to come to terms with and confront its eugenic composition.

Although not offering easy answers, here we propose an integration of the histories of eugenics in CEE into global colonial modernity. As a topic of debate that continues to be marginalised in CEE's public sphere, including academic scholarship, eugenics needs be recalled from the margin and be integrated within the mainstream debates about national identity and nation-building. Central to this attempt is the need to encourage the growing literature on whiteness, migration studies, coloniality and postcoloniality in CEE to not only 'see' 'race' but also eugenics as key units of analysis for the understanding of racism in the region.

Note

- ¹ Our usage of CEE is limited to the successor countries from the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, German, Ottoman and Soviet Empires, mainly Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland (though not identified as a CEE country), Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia, often identified as nations without colonies or colonial ambitions.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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