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Race, blood, and nation: the manifestations of eugenics in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I re-centre accounts of eugenics that have been largely unmarked within the standard narratives of nation formation across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Despite adoption and adaptation of eugenic practices, the region's accounts of eugenics seem unassignable to the global circulation of eugenics developed in Western Europe and the United States. The article highlights the ways in which eugenics has been purposefully integrated into the understandings of race and nation formation across CEE. In doing so, the article signals an argument that the processes and practices of eugenics were not only integral to the West, but also evident in the arrangements of nation formation as a consequence of racial formation in Central and Eastern Europe.

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KEYWORDS biological racism; Central and Eastern Europe; eugenics; minorities; nation formation; race

Introduction

In this article, my commentary focuses on eugenics and nation formation in CEE. For a better understanding of nation formation in the region, it is important to begin with the roles of blood in nation building beyond contemporary CEE. In 1492, the Spanish notion of *Limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) was a justification used for the expulsion and conversion of Muslims and Jews to Catholicism in Andalusia. Since 1492, *Limpieza de sangre* has lingered beyond the Spanish Inquisition. It has been part of the global processes through which European nations are imagined and categorized as a homogeneous territory. The categorization, for the most part, rests on the knowledge of biology as well as heredity that assigns peoples into status of superiority or inferiority (Fitzgerald et al. 2020). This understanding, as part of the processes of nation formation, has much to do with blood purification

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and reproduction through eugenic practices. This obsession with purity is not exactly imprinted on the skin but cautiously constructed within a typology of blood (Gilman 1986; Linke 1997, 560). In practical terms, the emphasis on “blood”, especially in the Nazi Germany and the Nordic nations, was routed through the myth of purification of the nations’ genetic pool. The fundamental assumption here is that the purification of the nations’ genetic pool would help to regain the greatness of their genetically pure forbears (Wikler 1999, 185).

To be clear, the key function of eugenics in the above construction of blood has been to identify *the capable*, *the improvable*, and *the incapable* peoples, with the *improvable* slotted into a permanent position of surveillance and management, and the *incapable* often placed far outside the borders of the *capable*. Several apparatuses of race facilitate the ways in which eugenics is entangled with this process of identification, they rest on a shared common blood and physiognomic features that are often reduced to similarity or differences in blood-types. The use of eugenics here has been to emphasize the singularity, un-mixed, and undiluted nature of a particular group of people. It signals an understanding of a group as a “clean” autonomous entity that is formed outside of any external stimulus. The purpose of such an understanding is mainly to point out the distinctiveness of its “native” and the imaginaries of the Other that is presumed “non-native”. It is through these vocabularies of blood and nation that eugenics bleeds into nation formation and racial formation.

In this regard, as Lentin (2016) has argued, “racial and ethnic studies, and race critical approaches in particular, are forced again and again to contend with the mainstream assumption that a focus on race derails ‘serious’ sociological analysis” (383–384). Such sociological analysis would include the histories and operations of eugenics that, so far, have been relegated to the “mainline eugenics” – the emergence of eugenics in Britain, the influence of the American Eugenics Society, and the orientations of the German *Rassenhygiene* (racial hygiene) as a policy embraced by the Nazi Germany (Weindling 1989). However, if we are to engage with the operations of eugenics globally, the conceptual frameworks of this “mainline eugenics” would require a reconstruction that builds on the existence of various eugenic movements (see Angelique Richardson; Maria Sophia Quine; Richard Cleminson in this symposium), their modes of eugenic operations, and importantly their eugenics-inspired interactions outside Western Europe and the United States. To this end, it is essential to draw attention to the ways in which the standards set by the “mainline eugenics” have manifested in the production of the ideal national type in CEE – a region that has so far not been paid sufficient attention in terms of its roles in the global circulation of eugenics.

Eugenics in Central and Eastern Europe

Participating in this symposium as a sociologist, I was struck by the overlap between eugenics and sociology, as Renwick (2011, 2012, 123) has pointed out, the very foundation of British sociology was underpinned by Galtonian eugenics. Yet the absence of eugenics within the mainstream sociological research in CEE remains striking. Apparently, scholarly assessments of eugenics in the region only started to emerge recently with the publication of *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and South-east Europe, 1900–40* in 2007; followed by *Health, Hygiene and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945* in 2011; and *The History of Eugenics in East-Central Europe, 1900–45* in 2015, all edited and authored by Marius Turda and others (see Turda and Weindling 2007; Promitzer, Trubeta, and Turda 2011; Turda 2015). The most impressive aspects of these volumes is the insight into the key events that shaped eugenics in CEE. In doing so, the volumes add to our understandings of the ways in which scientific racism intertwined with nation formation in the Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Romania in the early twentieth century. Together, the three volumes present geographical case studies that linked eugenics to racialized mechanisms that were routed through bio-power and bio-politics. Indeed, much of eugenics practices in Western Europe resonate sturdily with nations in CEE with their own Eugenics Societies that appear to rehearse and reproduce the mantra of eugenics dictated by Galtonian eugenics.

Engaging with eugenics in this way is a useful means of illuminating many contemporary discourses on race and racism in CEE. Doing so enables a view that eugenics has a global context to its formation and since the European Eugenics Congress in 1912, eugenics continues to have tremendous effects beyond the West. As MacMaster (2001, 49) has observed, the trajectory of eugenics in Europe, as a way of improving national efficiency, was much broader than often acknowledged. For example, in CEE, there is still a shortage of works on eugenics within academia and certainly information related to the topic is hardly in public domain (with exception of Marius Turda's recent Eugenics Exhibition in Bucharest and Warsaw). There is a silence within the standard historical accounts of nation formation across CEE to acknowledge the region's connections to eugenics. Without these connections, it remains difficult to fully grasp the ways in which accounts of nations were constructed around racialized systems of domination. This points to the ways in which race, often assumed to be absent in CEE, comes to provide the justification for hierarchies and inequalities channelled through eugenics.

Here lies the heart of an understanding of race in CEE. Anyone interested in the genealogy of race in the region must pay attention to not only to the

origins of sociology, but the connections between biology and society. For the most part, race in CEE has biological origins that have been enhanced by practices of eugenics. Until recently, the close relationship between the histories of biology and the emergence of eugenics was never considered significant in CEE (Turda 2010). Therefore, eugenics did not receive much acknowledgement from the local historians, despite a massive increase in, for example, the Polish eugenics membership in the 1930s, as the largest eugenic society in the world (Uzarczyk 2015, 80). These silenced histories of biological science emerged around the same time as the start of contemporary nation formation across CEE, but foreclosed eugenics as a biological root of its racial formation.

For decades, biology, especially some areas that involved Eastern European physicians' participation in the Holocaust, as Turda (2010) has pointed out, was unapproachable. Importantly, the emergence of traditional hygiene in the region, provided a new category of professionals trained in modern medicine. This eventually paved the way for eugenics as "one of the intellectual discourses through which practitioners in aspiring new professional and intellectual disciplines sought to situate themselves alongside their Western European peers, as partners in creating a better European society, a goal they understood as Biological" (Bucur 2010, 399).

Indeed, the echoes of biological racism are unmistakable here. The adoption and adaptation of biological racism are not completely devoid of problems of eugenics that have manifested in the arguments presented by members of Polish Eugenics Society in the 1930s. For example, in Poland, it was not uncommon for members of the Polish Eugenics Society to describe the presence of Polish Jews in Poland as the introduction of alien racial characteristics into the Polish population that may "transform the physiognomy of the Polish nation, most notably its higher strata" (Stojanowski 1927, 67). With this well-circulated point of view about the Polish Jews, it was only a matter of time before eugenics started shifting from intellectual disciplines to national discourse in order to address the problems of impurity. Symbolic in this respect was Poland's attempt to achieve a "near-perfect" nation formation that is "un-mixed" and "undiluted". To do this effectively, Polish eugenicists, similar to their Western peers, were attracted to the idea of blood type, craniological and body measurement based on biological determinism (Weindling 2013). This fixation with human body is an important aspect of eugenics that I shall return to momentarily.

Eugenics is an important mechanism through which race and racism have been reproduced in CEE. As a national project, eugenics has been tried and perfected through processes of domination and exclusion. Similar to race, the overarching aim of eugenic projects has been the exploitation of the minority constructed as racially inferior. The understanding of *eugenics redux* identified here links neatly to an understanding of race in CEE, as a

technology for the management of human differences and one that is better described as a “Backdoor to Eugenics” (Duster 2003). In the region, eugenic programme was considered an important aspect of nation formation often a shift between national discourse and science of improvement that was apparent in nearly all nations in CEE. For example, eugenics in *Russia* was not just an intellectual exercise, as part of the processes of nation formation in the 1920s, eugenics was aimed at a specific composition of the Russian nation and “races” (Rudling 2014). Also, the construction of *Belarusian* nation was based on the eugenic activities already established in Germany and Soviet Russia. Similar examples could be found in the sterilization programmes in the *Czech Republic* (Shmidt 2020). In *Ukraine*, racial configuration was modelled on eugenic ideology (Rudling 2019). In *Bulgaria*, the ultimate aim of eugenics programmes was to engineer a new national identity through an endorsement of an ideal Bulgarian “race”. In *Hungary*, it was a popular belief that eugenics would add to the social transformation of the Hungarian nation. Similar cases could be found in *Romania*, where eugenic sterilization programmes were “geared towards the political engineering of a biologically defined community” (Turda 2009, 78). Within these examples of selective breeding across the nations in CEE, “Race’, and racialized bodies”, as Cleminson (2022, 156) has argued, “become infused with deep cultural concerns about the appropriateness of certain mixtures between different types of human being and are employed as resources to quell certain desires, particularly same-sex practices and non-reproductive heterosexuality”.

The standard understandings of nations in CEE rarely address the processes of their nation formation as a consequence of earlier eugenic endeavours. The point that needs to be emphasized here is that, during the processes of nation formation, most nations in CEE adopted many racial theories already developed and tried in Western Europe. Such adaptation and advancing of eugenic practices served as “an explicit revival of imperial attention to both biological and genealogical propriety, marked by racial and national hierarchy as an ordering mechanism” (Fitzgerald et al. 2020, 1171). Therefore, *eugenics redux* routed through race has been crucial in the establishment of hierarchy of peoples in CEE. This process of management is better understood when examined through the question of minorities in the region.

Now I return to the fixation with human body as an essential aspect of eugenics. An account of eugenics in Poland, where the rights of a small number of people are assumed to be less important or threaten the dominant view, is a good illustrative case study of the arguments that I am putting forward here. Historically, in Poland, Jewish and Romani populations are bodies that have faced the pressure to conform and being managed over time (Jaskułowski, Majewski, and Surmiak 2022). However, the biological racialization of these “non-Polish bodies” should not obscure the multiple

routes through which race and racism could be understood. Beyond this, the contemporary encounters of racism experienced by Jewish Romani communities formed the baseline through which “the Other” is racialized and managed in Poland. Therefore, being a member of any *groups that appear not to conform* to the ideal Polish type (Balogun 2020; Piela 2020; Grzymala-Kazłowska 2021; Omolo 2017); being *gay* (Szulc 2022), being a *woman* (Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr 2017; Koralewska and Zielińska 2022; Graff and Korolczuk 2022); and being *disabled* are viewed as threats to the socially acceptable conventions of Polishness, all geared towards the identification of the idea-eugenic type.

It needs to be reiterated that the accounts of eugenics in this symposium, as part of the global accounts, cannot be reduced to histories. In order to lay bare the ways in which race and racism are reproduced locally and globally, the above accounts of eugenics need to be brought into conversations with mainstream sociological studies in CEE.

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