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(doi: 10.1409/90637)

Contemporanea (ISSN 1127-3070)

Fascicolo 3, luglio-settembre 2018

Ente di afferenza:

Università la Sapienza di Roma (Uniroma1)

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The trajectories of eugenics

Emmanuel Betta

Eugenics has long been an area of particular interest for research being a complex historical phenomenon, in which science, ideologies, power and policy dynamics intertwine. Studies have mainly focused on the eugenics' founding stage, ranging between the nineteenth century origins – contained in Galton's studies and in the dynamics of the positivist and evolutionist determinism – and the totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century that in several ways implemented eugenic policies in a dramatic way. In this perspective, emerged a close identification between eugenic and Nazism, following the idea that Nazis experiences were the expression of the real characters of eugenics and, more generally, of modernity. This interpretation arrived to claim a direct link of continuity between Darwin and Hitler, as the title of a famous book of 2004¹. The relationship with the criminal use of medical practices in totalitarian regimes transformed 1945 into a watershed moment in the eugenics history, from a double point of view. From one side it forced science and political cultures to tackle totalitarian experiences and the role played by knowledge and scientists. From the other side, it pushed the idea that after 1945 eugenics ended because this historical experience would have finished in the Nazis laboratories and the concentration camps.

Few years ago, the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* has presented a wide and articulated overview of research on eugenics actually underway, showing that research started to investigate eugenics also after 1945². This rich synthesis let to perceive a variety of cases and experiences at European and extra-European level, which enabled to discuss the close identification between eugenics and the totalitarianism, and to point out how eugenic paths have been defined also without

¹ R. Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler. Evolutionary ethics eugenics and racism in Germany*, London-New York, Palgrave MacMillan 2004.

² A. Bashford, P. Levine (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

making recourse to compulsory forms of intervention on heredity. With the focus on national cases internal forms and differences of the eugenic movement emerged, as well as theoretical-practical diversities between the Lamarckian and Mendelian models in relation to religions and legal arrangements. At the same time, research enabled to discuss the relation between eugenics, birth control policies and – more in general – the policies of healthcare intervention for the protection of the health of a national body³. From this point of view, it emerged the presence of different eugenics perspectives, which forerun and followed the Nazi period, and which were sustained by argument and issue non exclusively inscribed in the Nazi perspective.

Even if historical research has offered many element for a deep comprehension of differences and articulation into the history of eugenics, public opinion and implicitly part of the historical research are still looking at eugenics flattening it to the Nazis experience, which is considered, in this perspective, as the real and deep expression of any scientific approach to the care of the living being, and of the definition of any institutional intervention toward the body of the individual and the community. This interpretation let to give less attention to the history of eugenics after 1945, losing the opportunity to pick continuities and discontinuities between the first founding season of eugenics and the more recent forms that eugenics acquired after 1945. There's to say the period when, according to Paul Weindling, «racial hygiene and eugenics were rebranded as human genetics»⁴. The loss of public legitimation of eugenics, its vocabulary and its instruments and perspectives for population improvement and growth after 1945 and the fall of totalitarian regimes obliged sciences and scientists to adopt different languages, perspectives and methodologies. From this point of view the consciousness of the critical heredity of eugenics was quite wide in the public debates, but from the other side, it appeared focused mainly in the evaluation of eugenics still understood in the terms of Nazi racial hygiene. From this point of view, in many cases, as Regina Wecker underlined, the conception of racial hygiene identified «with violence, forced sterilization, the murder of handicapped people, mass killings»⁵ let to underrate or even to ignore eugenics practices activated in non-totalitarian regimes, in some case for long time into the twentieth century. The relationship between eugenics and democracy emerged in the case of Sweden, where a law approved in 1935 and abolished at the mid of Seventies let the forced sterilization of about 63.000 people, almost all women⁶. In a similar time frame of the Swedish case, is the eugenic

³ J. Kananen, S. Bergenheim, M. Wessel (eds.), *Conceptualising public Health. Historical and Contemporary Struggles over Key Concepts*, London-New York, Routledge, 2018.

⁴ P. Weindling, *Conceptualising eugenics and racial hygiene as public health theory and practice*, in *ibidem*,

⁵ R. Wecker, *Eugenics in Switzerland before and after 1945 – a Continuum?*, «Journal of Modern European History», 2012, 4, p. 519. In the same issue see also the others essays in the section dedicated to “Eugenics after 1945”, edited by Regula Argast and Paul-André Rosental.

⁶ Cfr P.S. Colla, *Per la nazione e per la razza. Cittadini ed esclusi nel modello svedese*, Roma, Carocci, 2000; L. Dotti, *L'utopia eugenetica del welfare state svedese (1934-1975)*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2004.

project organized in the democratic and neutral Switzerland, where from 1924 to 1975 a federal agency provided a project of national re-education of nomad people, in particular the Jenisch community, which was considered degenerated and dangerous for national community. Almost 600 children were taken from their families, given in adoption, with the annulment of any relationship to their families. In many cases this project arrived at the reclusion in prison or psychiatric clinic, with the use of sterilization in several cases as the definitive disciplinary measure. This long standing project started to be criticized at the beginning of the Seventies, even by the public action of the poetess and writer Mariella Mehr, whose life has been harshly marked by this project. Twenty years later she received a honoury degree as a public recognition of giving voice to people who suffered the brutality of this project. At the same time, this honourship was the symbol of a public recognition of the role of knowledge and public institutions in this eugenic project, which had and still have deeply and resistant roots in the savants community, as Mehr told with implacable and lucid words in that *lectio magistralis*, published integrally for the first time in the presents issue. In both the Swedish and the Swiss case, the delay in confronting with the matter of the national eugenic experiences derived mainly by the interpretation of eugenics as expression of a Nazi perspective and, in this sense, considered as distant from a democratic context⁷.

The necessity to study and understand the trajectories of eugenics after the turning point of 1945 is a request even more frequent in historical research. The rich synthesis of research on eugenics offered by the *Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* concluded with a chapter entitle *Epilogue: where did eugenics go?*. Alison Bashford, the author and one of the editor of the volume, claimed that for research it was easy to work on the beginning of this phenomenon and its totalitarian developments, while the end of eugenics was more difficult to identify, because after 1945 eugenics appeared in different forms, practices, words which have still to be studied⁸. Few years later, in the first important attempt to outline the transnational profile of the so called Latin eugenics, Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette remarked the necessity of further research on eugenics after the Second World War, so as to highlight networks, continuities and discontinuities of eugenics in Latin and catholic countries along twentieth century⁹. With a similar attitude, Regina Wecker engaged precisely with the question of continuity of eugenics in the Swiss case before and after 1945¹⁰,

⁷ For the Swedish reaction see G. Broberg, N. Roll Hansen (eds.), *Eugenics and the Welfare State. Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland*, East Lansing, Michigan State University, 2005; for Swiss reaction see R. Wecker, *Eugenics in Switzerland*, cit.

⁸ A. Bashford, *Epilogue: where did eugenics go?*, in A. Bashford, P. Levine (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, cit.

⁹ M. Turda, A. Gillette, *Latin eugenics in comparative perspective*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ R. Wecker, *Eugenics in Switzerland before and after 1945 – a Continuum?*, cit.

and more recently Paul-André Rosental presented a substantial reconstruction of an emblematic case of long persistence of eugenics along twentieth century, the history of the *Jardins Ungemacht*, urbanistic eugenic project founded in Strasburg in 1924 and ended at the end of the Eighties¹¹.

In this perspective research has started studying eugenics following that founding historical period, in order to examine the way through which – in democratic-liberal contexts characterized by egalitarian principles and human rights – eugenic practices and/or theories have found expression and have been legitimized. The relation between the possibility of care and the improvement of the living conditions of the individual and of the community, choices of individuals and collective needs and the intervention of national and supranational institutions was revived but in a scenario that was different from the one of the early nineteenth century, and also from the incredible developments achieved by preventive and genetic medicine that opened up new unthought of possibilities of action on individuals¹². Over the last decades the topic of eugenics presented itself again, intertwining with what has been called the politics of life¹³: topics related to demography, birth rate, relation with migration and more in general to problems concerning public health, in a scenario strongly influenced by the movement of populations and by the development of preventive and genetic techniques applied to fertility and reproduction: prenatal diagnosis, genic therapies, and more broadly the discussion on the relationship between nature and culture, the so called nature-nurture debate¹⁴. In the context of the development of reproductive technologies, emerged a nominal distinction between eugenic in the pre-1945 phase and a so-called *new eugenics*, defined by the use of techniques and genetic advanced knowledge for preventive interventions on generation and the body, on individual and voluntary bases¹⁵.

The present issue of «Contemporanea» aims to confront with the trajectories of continuity and discontinuity in the history of eugenics, before and after the end of the Second World War and the totalitarian regimes, with many aims. The purpose to look for the presence of eugenics in different experiences, discourses, practices in the second part of the twentieth century, will let to discuss the forms of the presence of eugenics after 1945, where, when and in which way eugenics has been theorized,

¹¹ P.-A. Rosental, *Destins de l'eugénisme*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.

¹² See for example M. Connelly, *Fatal misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2008.

¹³ N. Rosen, *The politics of life itself. Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twentieth-first Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007.

¹⁴ See D.B. Paul, *The politics of heredity. Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine and the nature-nurture debate*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998; A. Gillette, *Eugenics and the nature-nurture debate in the twentieth century*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

¹⁵ J. Daar, *The new Eugenics. Selective breeding in an Era of Reproductive technologies*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2017.

practiced and used as a perspective to lead policies and actions in the second half of the twentieth century. From one side the authors show that a direct or indirect reference to eugenics perspective emerged in many fields, when talking about birth control or overpopulation, health or reproduction or preventive therapies. But on the other side, the way in which eugenics is mentioned in these debates put into question the same epistemological profile of eugenics, imposing the question: what are we talking about when we talk about eugenics, mainly in recent times? The essays, selected by a call for papers, have presented different and meaningful eugenics trajectories into the twentieth century, active in different fields as birth control, population control, health policies, sports and physical cultures, anthropology, genetic techniques. From this point of view 1945 did not appear as a clear turning point, because theories, discourses, practices and even the individual careers did not appear modified alongside the decades around the end of the Second World War. Looking at the relationship between eugenics, physical exercise and the body in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, Andrés Reggiani points out the important influence of biotypology, the constitutional medical approach to the improvement of the body defined by the Italian endocrinologist Nicola Pende, one of the architect of the Latin approach to eugenics defined in the fascist period. According to Reggiani biotypological approach to the improvement of the body remained widely influential in public policies in many South American countries even after 1945. Again, the relevance and the persistence of biotypology emerged in the relations between Slovenia and Italy, throughout the decades of the Second World War and after. As Ana Cergol Paradiž shows, scientific interpretations defined in a cultural and political context marked by an eugenics and racist approach, have been adjusted to new political frameworks defined after WWII and during the Cold War. Benedetta Calandra introduces the perspective of the bipolar world and, through the experience of a key figure of the birth control movement as Margaret Sanger, she shows how the policies intersecting *birth control* and *population control* applied in Puerto Rico were widely justified and legitimized by eugenics theories produced in a liberal-democratic perspective of the United States. Again, the relevant role of cultures and actors centered in the United States returns in the history of Greece from the Fifties to the Seventies. As Alexandra Barmpouti shows, the institutionalization of eugenics, intersected with policies on overpopulation and birth control, were defined with a decisive contribution of British and American eugenicist and networks, promoting actions on marriage and reproduction. Megan Leverage presents another long trajectory which pass through the second part of the twentieth century, defining the concept of transhumanism, and which connect Julian Huxley definition in the Fifties, to the transhumanist movement emerged at the end of the twentieth century, seeking the technical cultural improvement of human beings. A process of improvement of human life which is finding expression even in new definition as eugenomics, as shown by Mauro Capocci, in his reviews essay. Long his-

torical trajectories, which went throughout the same eugenics period emerged in the words of Mariella Mehr, who not only gives voices to the people who were subjected to the hardness of the Swiss eugenics project, but presented a very long trajectory of institutional, scientific and political action of discrimination which is deeply rooted not only in the history of eugenics, but in the same history of European citizenship, as the gypsy policies of discrimination.

The ensemble of papers offers a wide and articulated pictures of the trajectories of eugenics, which offers sparks for discussing the epistemological concepts of eugenics in a non totalitarian regime, and from at the same time presents many elements to discuss and criticize the same use of eugenics in different contexts and fields, both in public space and in scientific debate.

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