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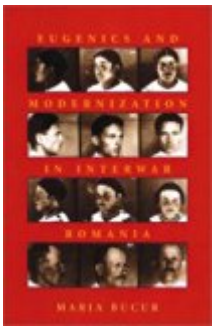

Maria Bucur. *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002. 298 pp. $24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4172-9.

Reviewed by Carol Lilly

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This impressive monograph delineates the ideas and policies associated with the eugenics movement in interwar Romania. While the topic might seem at first glance to deal with a marginal ideological trend in a minor European country, Bucur's skillful contextual and comparative approach gives it a much broader significance, demonstrating its relevance to readers interested in a wide variety of eras, regions, and topics. Beyond its obvious relevance to students of eugenics movements elsewhere, it will certainly intrigue all scholars of Central and East European history and politics for its insights into the complexities of the modernization process and the connections between interwar, wartime, and post WWII political ideologies and structures.

Bucur begins by outlining the various proponents of eugenics in Romania and their ideas. She then discusses how they influenced attitudes about the relationship between the individual and the state, and ideas about class and nation. In the second part of the book, she focuses more directly on the role that the eugenics movement played in shaping interwar legislation concerning health care and education. Finally, she takes the story into the Second World War and beyond to show how eugenic concepts also showed up in socialist Romania. Throughout the monograph, Bucur makes a number of cogent and sophisticated arguments that place the Romanian eugenics movement in its appropriate comparative and local historical context.

The author teases out the similarities and differences between the Romanian version of the eugenics movement and those that developed elsewhere, focusing especially on Germany, France, and the United States. Here Bucur argues that Romania's main proponents of eugenics (with some important exceptions) were generally less inclined to recommend coercive measures like sterilization, relying instead on persuasion and education. Romania's eugenicists, unlike those in Nazi Germany, she explains, were rather less convinced of their own ability to distinguish between those individuals who were hopelessly dysgenic and those, like prostitutes, whose flaws might be linked to environmental ills and who might, therefore, be rehabilitated and rescued for the na-

tion. Nonetheless, Bucur does not absolve Romania's eugenicists of all responsibility for the more coercive eugenics policies applied later during the war, but rather regrets their lack of intellectual integrity in failing to criticize those policies.

This monograph also clearly places the Romanian eugenics movement in its local historical context, connecting it to issues of nationalism, modernization, and Romania's specific class and ethnic structure. In interwar Romania, Bucur explains, eugenics was integrally connected to nationalism. Its proponents spoke urgently and earnestly about the need to establish and maintain the biological health of the Romanian nation. At the same time, however, she notes that the eugenicists' scientific and biological concept of the nation differed substantially from the cultural/linguistic or spiritual one more typical of that time and place. Thus, in one section she cites the efforts of some eugenicists to prove through biological experiments, rather than culture or language, that the Szekler population of Transylvania was really Romanian and not Hungarian.

In addition and very importantly, Bucur discusses the relationship between eugenicists and the increasingly hostile attitudes and policies in interwar Romania toward Hungarians, Jews, and the Roma population. She notes that while most Romanian eugenicists did not explicitly promote exclusionary nationalist politics, their ideas and values indirectly supported and legitimized them.

Interwar Romania was a largely agrarian country just on the threshold of modernization, Bucur reminds us when discussing her work's local historical context. Thus, while Western European and American eugenicists most often saw the movement as a cure for social ills resulting from industrialization and urbanization, Romanian proponents focused on its prophylactic potential. Since most eugenicists were themselves scientists and urban professionals, they certainly did not oppose modernization. On the contrary, they imagined themselves as the appropriate new elite who, with the help of eugenics, could modernize society more carefully and efficiently, preserving the nation's essence while preventing such harmful effects as urban crime, alcoholism, venereal disease, and prostitution.

Romania's underdeveloped status also meant a heavy emphasis among interwar eugenicists on the role of the peasantry as the primary source of national vitality and on the importance of improving educational and health care policies in the village. Ultimately, according to Bucur, Romania's eugenicists sought a synthesis that would achieve the benefits of modernization while maintaining traditional Romanian values. Defining the nation in biological rather than cultural terms, they "offered a new way of constructing identity that accounted for both the need to preserve 'authentic' Romanian traditions and the need to pursue modernization" (p. 65).

Perhaps Bucur's most important and innovative contribution concerns her argument about the role of eugenics in re-framing the relationship between the individual and the state. Romanian interwar eugenicists envisioned a totalitarian state run by experts like themselves--professionals, scientists, and doctors--who would make policy decisions on the basis of promoting the biological health of the nation. Their vision, as Bucur puts it, combined both "authoritarian and welfare notions" (p. 80).

Among the policies the interwar eugenicists promoted were such positive concepts as the state's responsibility for public hygiene and sanitation facilities, an emphasis on preventative health care, and increased education. Yet the movement also had a less attractive, anti-liberal side as it attempted to vastly increase the state's ability to regulate its citizens' private lives. For example, eugenicists called for mandatory pre-nuptial health screenings and consistently sought to control women's reproductive functions. The eugenicists' educational policies were also clearly anti-liberal, advocating careful pre-selection of

students on the basis of class, ethnic, and gender criteria and the tailoring of educational curricula to state and national, not individual, interests.

Bucur clearly connects the interwar eugenics movement with anti-liberal trends as it "shifted the focus from the individual as an agent of free will to the individual as the agent of an intergenerational link of hereditary characteristics" (p. 66) and rejected equality as contrary to the laws of evolution. Ultimately, then, the eugenics movement in interwar Romania contributed to the destabilization of parliamentary politics, while it provided an apparently scientific foundation and legitimacy for the more intrusive policies associated with wartime fascist regimes, like forced sterilization and the public exclusion of "dysgenic" individuals or groups.

Towards her book's conclusion, Bucur takes the story one step further, showing continuities over time. She explains how many of the totalitarian policies advocated by interwar eugenicists reached their fruition under the communist regime, albeit for rather different purposes. While most of the original proponents of eugenics lost their positions of influence (and in some cases their freedom) under the communist regime, a few successfully negotiated the transition and continued to publish works expressing many of the same ideas as before the war, though now cloaked in a more egalitarian class-based language. Significantly, it was the communist regime that put into place just the kind of totalitarian state that interwar eugenicists had dreamed of, using it, just as they had hoped to, to enhance health care, education, and state control over the private lives of Romanian citizens.

As a final note, Bucur points to the disturbing resurgence of "this exclusionary biologizing discourse" (p. 252) in current Romanian political and intellectual debates. Indeed, while the eugenics movement itself was largely discredited by the excesses of the Nazi regime, she is correct in noting that many of its principles remain active. This monograph serves as a valuable reminder of the potential implications of these ideals.

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