
Reviewed by Ferenc Laczó

Published on H-Romania (August, 2017)

Commissioned by R. Chris Davis (Lone Star College - Kingwood)

For over a decade, Marius Turda has been recognized as a pioneer in the modern history of race and medicine in central and eastern Europe and has gradually emerged as a leading proponent of the history of eugenics in its broader European and global contexts. Turda is the author or editor of several seminal volumes such as *Modernity and Eugenics* (2010), *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940* (edited with Paul J. Weindling, 2006), and, more recently, *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900-1945: Sources and Commentaries* (2015). Being connected to the author's early monograph *The Idea of National Superiority in Central Europe, 1880-1918* (2004) in particular, Turda's recent *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary* draws not only on his extensive research experience in the history of eugenics but also on his long-term interest in the history of Hungary to offer a multi-layered interpretative overview of a previously largely overlooked topic.

As Turda argues here, eugenics amounted to a broad conception of public welfare, health care, and social hygiene, as well as a nationalist vision of biological renewal. Even as eugenics aimed to offer a totalizing, progressive, and rational vision of modern society, it still had rather fluid conceptual frontiers and ideological barriers in the early twentieth century. As he rightly highlights, whereas the connections of eugenics to the history of anti-Semitism, nationalism, and racism have, to some extent, already been explored by Hungarian scholars, a more comprehensive and systematic investigation of eugenic ideas in the country, one starting with its genesis but focusing especially on its early evolution and internal contradictions, remained a much-needed area of investigation. *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary* thereby fills a double lacuna, since this complex body of ideas, initiatives, and policies has been largely ignored in the specialist literature on Hungary, while the country itself has been practically ignored within the broader histories of eugenics. This historiographical oversight was a major one...
since, as Turda demonstrates, eugenics played an unusually important role in Hungary; moreover, the country represents a crucially important place in the study of the historical intersection of international eugenics and modern politics.

By exploring eugenics as its Hungarian supporters understood it—be they social reformers, politicians, intellectuals, or artists—Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary offers a combination of comparative and intellectual history, the history of science, and the social history of medicine. A key focus of the book is on individual trajectories and the sense of early excitement and innovation amidst the era's many uncertainties and personal rivalries. Turda’s three major aims are to identify the most important Hungarian eugenicists and to contextualize their arguments, to explain the interconnections between eugenics and nationalism, and to portray eugenics in Hungary as part of an international movement for social and biological improvement. The book skillfully combines an interest in the transmission of ideas (mostly from Britain and Germany, the two major centers of eugenics at the time) with attention to the specific forms of local adaptation (such as the attraction to eugenics of an unusually wide range of intellectuals across the political spectrum).

The structure of the book is essentially chronological. The starting point of Turda’s explorations is the recognition that eugenics entered scientific and popular discourses in Hungary at a moment when various intellectuals and scientists were experimenting with Darwinism, positivism, and a number of emerging sociologies of progress to develop an eclectic theory of human evolution with rather broad appeal. Highlighting the early convergence between the social and medical dimensions of eugenics, and revealing how strongly the modern scientific worldview on eugenics resonated with progressive intellectuals, chapter 1 offers a wide-ranging discussion of the main eugenic theories and their reception in thematically diverse journals. Chapter 2 promises an inventory of the conceptual foundations of the rather flexible eugenic discourse at a time when its emphasis was still on community and society rather than race. Zooming in on a single cultural moment that was the lively public debate surrounding eugenics in 1911, Turda shows how polemical exchanges helped synthetize views on social and biological improvement while contributing to a new conceptualization of desirable social and political transformations. These debates also helped crystallize two dominant viewpoints, one oriented toward public health reforms and medical improvements, and another focused on race protectionism.

In chapter 3, Turda shifts his focus onto a network of connections between various Hungarian societies and between eugenicists in Hungary and abroad. He argues that, as eugenic ideas were further received from abroad and the public’s understanding was facilitated through exhibitions, conferences, congresses, the liberal-progressive eclecticism characterizing the earlier phase gave way to a larger, ascendant biopolitical project that equated national progress with the healthy development of the Hungarian race. The conceptual interaction of nationalism with biological theories of evolution, or, more specifically, the shift from society to nation and from environment to heredity, is indeed one of the main storylines developed in the monograph.

Chapter 4 traces the transformation of eugenics into a national science with its own organization and dedicated membership and with a coherent and applicable program of social and biological improvement. Turda highlights several major implications of the establishment of a eugenic organization in 1914, including the popularization and further biologization of eugenic ideas and a new type of biopolitical agenda advanced by state authorities. Chapter 5 shows how the social and medical arguments eugenicists advanced were increasingly connected to race protectionism and fears about national survival during the First
World War. Concerns about the deterioration of the nation’s health in fact came to dominate the Hungarian government’s social and medical agenda during the carnage of war. According to Turda, the state’s active involvement with ideas of social and biological protection makes it possible to qualify Hungary as “the only country in Europe” where eugenics not only achieved mainstream political status but also “triumphed” before the end of the First World War (p. 162).

Chapter 6, “Eugenics Triumphant,” starts by discussing some of the most important eugenic theories of war proposed in Hungary after 1914. This prepares the ground for a more detailed analysis of the practical measures adopted in 1917 with the establishment of the Hungarian Society for Racial Hygiene and Population Policy. The last chapter, in turn, covers the final year of the war and the ensuing two Hungarian revolutions in 1918–19, when several serious, if ultimately unsuccessful, attempts were made to overcome ideological differences and hold together incompatible versions of eugenics.

Turda’s story of Hungarian eugenics begins in the days of intellectual promise and confidence at the turn of the century and ends in the distressing aftermath of the First World War. This time frame clearly has its narrative logic. Turda’s argument that the original eugenic vision of a modern Hungarian state was “fatally impaired” by 1919 can also be considered sound. However, as the author is clearly aware, many of the ideas originally developed in early twentieth-century Hungary—a nation among the pioneers in politicizing and institutionalizing eugenics—survived the rupture in state building and flourished in even more radical guises through the interwar period and into the Second World War. In this respect, the current book tells the first half of a previously untold major story. The hoped-for sequel promises to be equally important, complex, and nuanced.