

# Challenging National Canons: New Perspectives and the Possibilities of an Anti-Eugenic Future

## *Desafiando os cânones nacionais: novas perspectivas e as possibilidades de um futuro antieugênico*

Marius Turda\*

Pietra Diwan\*\*

After decades of efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic world, it appears that the “old ideas” of eugenics have not gone away. Some of these ideas may have been hiding in the archives, but others were not. They continue to provide terminologies and explanations for a number of issues relating to poverty, education, access to health care, and disability. During the recent Covid pandemic, ideas of economic and social productivity flowed readily from a eugenic vocabulary which, although pruned of its openly racist metaphors nevertheless carried echoes of past practices and patterns of discrimination against individuals based on age, race, and gender. Eugenics, it seemed, could be resurrected as easily by politicians as by ordinary people.

The main aim of this thematic Dossier, published by *Revista Brasileira de História*, is to give visibility to an academic debate that is often seen through the prism of its national traditions. Our shared conviction is that it is necessary for scholars of eugenics to go beyond the confines of their own national canons and engage with collaborative work. More importantly, scholarly engagement with anti-eugenic activism must also be constantly and systematically maintained, as current work on the legacies of eugenics continues to generate new ways of responding to ongoing demands for reproductive, social, and racial justice.

Legacies of eugenics are pervasive and enduring. Racial prejudice, biologi-

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\* Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, United Kingdom. mturda@brookes.ac.uk <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5225-1536>>

\*\* Bluegrass Technical & Community College, Lexington, Kentucky, KY, United States of America. pietra.diwan@kctcs.edu <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0822-9294>>

cal labelling, and chauvinistic descriptions of ethnic, social, and sexual minorities are as effective now as they were in the past. Eugenics continues to shape our lives, whether in the form of forced sterilization based on ethnicity, gender or in the guise of criminal record or immigration restrictions and the application of various prenatal genetic tests for disabilities. It is therefore imperative to understand the implications of eugenic thinking and practice in the world today. Over the past 30 years, scholars from an array of academic disciplines have offered a historically informed account of eugenics. They have charted the ebb and flow of eugenic movements across the world and forced them out of their carapace of institutional protection. In so doing, they have rendered visible what was formerly hidden in many national historiographies.

But to understand eugenics today, we need to probe deeper into the fabric of our societies and investigate institutions and networks of power as well as representations of human bodies as able, valuable, and worthy. Eugenics is not only about controlling reproduction in the name of heredity. It is equally concerned with the pursuit of power, exclusion, and a desire for racial “purity”. Since its emergence in Britain, Europe, and the United States in the 1880s, eugenics aimed to exert control human bodies. By doing so, it shaped attitudes towards race, social behaviour, mental illness, disability, and civilization in the present day.

Various interpretations of eugenics exist in the scientific literature and popular culture, differing from context to context and from country to country. As societies across the world developed and changed, the meaning of eugenics was adapted accordingly. But several common themes remain unchanged, most notably a narrow standard of physical beauty, intellectual ability, and social worth, all based upon aesthetic, cultural, and racist standards produced by prominent eugenicists such as Francis Galton, Alfred Ploetz, Charles Davenport, Adolphe Pinard, Gregorio Marañón, Alfredo M. Saavedra and Renato Khel. The arguments put forward by these authors, and many others, were shared by communities of scientists, religious figures, social reformers, and politicians who adopted the framework of eugenics, and consistently endowed it with meaning and credibility.

From this perspective, this Dossier aims to shed light on different possibilities of interpretation, with the intention of amplifying the Brazilian debate on eugenics. We received many excellent and interesting submissions which could not be included here. Some were out of scope or not yet ready, but our limited space was the predominating reason. We encourage these papers to be published and the research to move forward. The field needs more debate, dif-

ferent perspectives, and an active and inclusive debate on the place eugenics occupies in our national histories. We need to further probe the possibilities for analysis of similar eugenic agendas in different territorialities and temporalities.

Eugenics remains largely absent from official national histories in Europe, as well as in countries in South America. Clearly, it is not enough to merely discuss eugenics as a sub-topic in the history of biology or the history of medicine. It is important that eugenics is brought into debates about national history and that scholars of eugenics propose interpretations and new approaches that are relevant to the ongoing political and cultural transformation of our societies. From its inception, eugenics was seen as an eclectic science. As we see in the image of the tree used as a symbol for the Second International Congress of Eugenics in 1921 – and reprinted widely thereafter – eugenics drew its energies from different academic disciplines; not just genetics and medicine, but also history, philosophy, anthropology, genealogy, and politics.

Over the past decade, but especially since 2021, the field of eugenics has grown in importance. Scholars increasingly recognise that the lasting impact of eugenics cannot be properly explained by historical studies that limit their focus to the pre-World War II era. The roots of the “eugenics tree” remained strongly anchored in politics and society well into the 1970s and 1980s. This new wave of scholarship, while building on older historiographic models, questions historical concepts which do not fully explain the complexities and nuances of global developments in the history of eugenics. One example is the topic of demographic decline centred on allegories of race and “blood”, and equally on negative eugenic measures such as sterilization. In unison with the major figures of the pre-1945 eugenic movement, many influential public figures today profess the belief that biological engineering and selective breeding are necessary for the maintenance of their standard of living and political power.

By diving into the complex history of eugenics, interdisciplinary research can establish a dialogue between fields and thereby generate a more comprehensive view of how eugenics became organised and spread its tendrils through various spheres of society. At its core, eugenics was a project to strengthen and protect individual and collective bodies in the context of the modern nation state. An arsenal of positive (investing) and negative (restricting) interventions were employed to control and influence the lives of individuals in pursuit of this goal. With its objectifying and stigmatising gaze, eugenics distinctly shaped the modern ideal of physical fitness and intellectual

superiority. It demanded the creation of an able society in which those who were seen as different, “unfit” form of humanity, were relegated to institutions, special educational programmes, and marginal social spaces. They were not considered valuable members of the national body politic. Various experts lent their scientific credibility to measures that stigmatised, marginalised and ultimately dehumanised those whose lives they controlled and supervised. As it is to this day, it was tempting to believe that one could solve social problems by declaring some people to be less fit, biologically predisposed to “criminal behaviour”, or innately suited to poverty and promiscuity.

The challenge now is to understand how deep and wide eugenics cut into modern life. To be sure, it affected millions of people. Eugenics fed into welfare systems in countries as politically diverse as the United States, Sweden, Japan, and Czechoslovakia, which continued with their sterilization programmes after World War II. The architects of welfare, health care, and social assistance programs in these countries lamented the inadequacy of educational and environmental solutions to problems that were the product of successive generations of unfortunate “mating choices”. Instead, they continued to look to eugenic solutions such as voluntary and compulsory sterilization. These practices were only recently abandoned in European countries such as Spain, for instance, where the sterilization of disabled women was legal until 2020.

Recognised as a transnational movement, eugenics can be explained through historical experiences that were reciprocally connected and which multiplied according to the peculiarities of each region, country, or city. But even within eugenic societies, associations, and networks, there were divergent or nuanced views and variegated currents of thought, although all would agree that their main objective was to strengthen the hereditary health of a particular group to the detriment of others. Efficiency, body symmetry, segregation, supremacy, and whitening were among some of their goals, in line with the premises of Western modernity.

This Dossier is the result of an invitation to historians of eugenics from Brazil, Britain, and the United States to discuss and problematize the permanencies of eugenic discourses and practices across time and space. Its varied approaches point to an open and ongoing dialogue concerning medical practices, reproductive issues, legislation, religion, education, immigration, and mental health, all mediated by eugenic visions of race, gender, and class.

First is Weber Lopes Góes (Instituto Federal de São Paulo), who reflects on the trajectory of eugenics during the second half of the twentieth century from a Brazilian perspective, paying special attention to the ways in which the

stigma attached to the abnormal intersected with racist ideologies. Next is Richard Cleminson (University of Leeds) who discusses how the Mazdaznan Order, a derivation of Zoroastrianism, promoted eugenics among its members alongside a health regime that included vegetarianism, breathing exercises, and self-regulation. Cleminson is followed by Viviane Borges (Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina) who, using prison records, examines how ideas of inferiority and criminality have coexisted in Brazil since the 1930s.

Guilherme Lemos (Instituto Federal de Brasília), in turn, compares urban development and eugenic utopias in the cities of Brasília and Johannesburg. Echoing this transnational perspective, Miroslava Chavez-Garcia (UC Santa Barbara) focuses on the relationship between the environmental movement, population control, and the mainstreaming of immigration restrictions in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Geandra Denardi Munareto (Universidade Estadual de Maringá) analyses how a specific type of eugenic project, exemplified by the journal *Mankind Quarterly*, spread within the far right across an international network, within which participants from different countries supported the idea of race and scientific racism. Finally, Christopher Donohue (National Human Genome Institute) brings into focus how, after the end of World War II, scientists and bioethicists in the United States advocated a wide variety of eugenic practices alongside advances in medicine and population genetics.

We also included in this Dossier two reviews of recent publications in the field. Andre Mota, director of the Museu Histórico da Faculdade de Medicina reviewed the six volumes of *The Cultural History of Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021) and Natália Maria Gaspar reviewed Fabiola López-Durán's *Eugenics in the Garden: Transatlantic Architecture and the Crafting of Modernity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

This selection of articles and reviews puts the history of eugenics in Brazil into wider perspective, based on works published in languages other than Portuguese. It also highlights the nature of eugenic activities outside the Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo axis and demonstrates the dialogue between different geographical locations and their dynamics. A refreshed look at Brazilian eugenics requires intersectionality (race, ethnicity, gender, and class) and a transnational vision through which epistemic practices and public discourses may be better accessed. Brazil received the most enslaved Africans as a result of the Atlantic Trade, to the detriment of its Native populations. After the abolition of slavery, a large number of immigrants (mainly from white European countries) arrived to be part of the workforce, further marginalizing the Native and

Black populations. At the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of “racial democracy” developed alongside eugenics and, because of this relationship, a “softer”, “milder”, and some may say “preventive” or “neo-Lamarckist” approach to the issue of racial purity was put forward by eugenicists.

Recent studies have challenged this assumption, judging the neo-Lamarckist form of eugenics to have been as intrusive as the so-called Mendelian eugenics; both models condemned segments of the population to a marginalised status. Preventive eugenics was used with the goal of protecting only those who were considered to be worthy, and these individuals were not the indigenous populations, the Quilombolas and the Black population, people with disabilities, and others considered to be dangerous or unproductive. These groups were relegated to second-class citizenship and seen as a “social burden”. Their rights to health, education, and access to basic conditions were outside the Brazilian political agenda until at least 1988 when the Universal Health System (SUS) was established as a constitutional right, at least in theory, of the whole population.

Although neo-Lamarckism and biotypology were the predominant versions of eugenics adopted in Brazil, it is imperative to understand that these too established a hierarchy of people, with the “white male” as the ideal type, and a social structure that defined what was sick/healthy; fit/unfit; normal/abnormal, and so on. Those who were considered “dysgenic” were constantly monitored, incarcerated, and marginalized, such was the danger they were thought to represent to the “Brazilian race” and nation. On the other hand, the groups which were believed to be of “eugenic” value were included as participants in national policies of health and care.

The idea of “challenging national canons” is aligned with some contemporary discussions in Brazil concerning the omission of many honoured intellectuals, doctors, and public personalities from the history of the eugenics movement. The argument that they were “people of their time” needs to be criticised, for in reality these individuals were directly engaged in a project of national regeneration that excluded – or rendered invisible – the groups considered “unfit” groups, which attempted to erase Blackness through the “branqueamento”, and which excluded many other groups. The stories of these “honourable” intellectuals should be the subject of objective discussion based on primary sources, without fruitless debates over a “cancel culture” or emotional attachments, but instead with an awareness of how keeping these national canons untouched perpetuates the legacies of eugenics to this day. For this debate to occur, it is important to show how exclusion was historically produced by poverty, mass incarcer-

ation, control over reproduction, and prejudice justified by the arguments of “worthless lives” and assumed biological inferiority. The myth of Brazilian racial democracy is a fallacy still to be solved, not only in the academic field but beyond it in the public discourse in Brazil and abroad. Sensitive topics demanding public attention include the sterilization of six million women in Brazil between 1960 and 1990; the discussion of reproductive rights beyond the religious argument; the historically produced criminalization of the Black body; and the ways in which positive eugenics invested in and produced a middle class that worships appearance and fitness ideals.

This Dossier relies on an open dialogue with a difficult past, having uncomfortable discussions about social, racial, and gender inequality, and opening new venues of collective understanding upon which to build a future that is both aware of its past and committed to an anti-eugenic agenda. Healing the deep wounds caused by more than a century of eugenics requires public recognition of those who have been wronged in the past and of those who continue to be mistreated in the present. It is a slow process, but progress is being made. Victims of sterilization are finally being recognised, heard, and awarded reparations in the United States, Japan, and the Czech Republic, among other countries. In 2017, Indigenous women in Canada filed a class-action lawsuit seeking to hold the Canadian government, among other parties, responsible for “coerced” or otherwise involuntary sterilization. In Peru, the Association of Peruvian Women Victims of Forced Sterilization (AMPAEF) continue to push for a public reckoning over the Fujimori government’s sterilization programme and to demand justice for the victims.

As importantly, the broader scientific community is speaking up about the legacies of eugenics and its close connections to the history of genetics, evolutionary biology, psychiatry and psychology. Major institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States are now addressing and confronting their eugenic past and building an anti-eugenic future. It is important that similar developments occur in other countries as well. For more than a century, eugenics has depended on the myth that its methods are scientifically and morally sound and that its goals are demonstrably achievable. We continue to challenge this myth with projects such as Confront Eugenics ([www.confront-eugenics.org](http://www.confront-eugenics.org)) and others.

Ultimately, though, this collective effort to combat eugenics rests not just with individuals, but also with major institutions of research, universities, and publishers which together must reject racism and ideas of biological determinism. A lot of work remains to be done before a fair society is achieved.

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